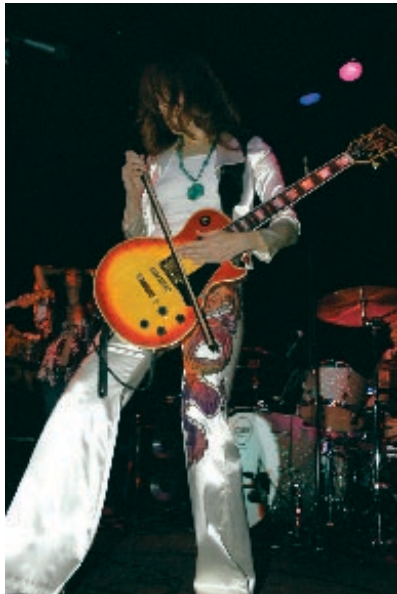


# Hammer of the goddesses

Lez Zeppelin gender-bends the idea of a rock tribute **By Antonia Simigis**

As far as rock star demands go, Lez Zeppelin's hospitality rider seems relatively innocuous. Sure, there are required bottles of Absolut and Johnnie Walker Black—right alongside fruit juice and a six-pack of Diet Pepsi. Not exactly what you'd expect Bonzo and Pagey to guzzle backstage in Zep's heyday.



**TURNING THE PAGE** Steph Paynes reinterprets Jimmy Page's bow solo.

But then, Lez Zeppelin isn't interested in living the same hedonistic lifestyle you might expect from a Led Zeppelin tribute band. The group's never even tried to contact the real Zeppelin. "I doubt they even know we exist," says singer Sarah McLellan, a soft-spoken Australian whose dialect is an effective substitute for Robert Plant's British accent. "It just doesn't matter."

The idea of an all-female tribute band isn't particularly revelatory—groups like the Ramonas, AC/DShe and Cheap Chick have been around for a while. What is

different about these four New Yorkers is how completely serious they are about re-creating the Zeppelin performance: Think bow solos, "Moby Dick," the works. The group's even in the process of recording its own versions of Zeppelin songs in the studio. "We basically want to rewrite all the rules about what it means to be a tribute band," explains drummer Helen Destroy. "We're different than a tribute, because we've taken it on and made it our own."

"We do what they did, in the spirit of what they did," adds guitarist Steph Paynes. "But there is also

**"It's such a male thing to play Zeppelin. It's almost too much for people to take."**

something that is *us* about this band. It's larger than the four of us."

The idea for Lez Zeppelin came when Paynes was at home one afternoon listening to the originals. "Once the idea hit me, of course it had to be all girls," she says. "There was never a question." Each member had been a Zep fan long before the band formed, but the group has learned each album together, starting off with Led Zeppelin I. "It seemed the most organic. We've got the first five albums down, and we're working our way up to *Presence*. Most bands don't bother doing much more than the hits. We want to do it all."

Lez Zeppelin's name is, of course, a teaser—and much like the real Zeppelin, the four enjoy shrouding themselves in a bit of mystery. They're proud of their

strong following in the gay and lesbian community. So are they or aren't they? "Our policy is, 'don't ask, don't tell,'" McLellan says with a laugh. "And I've already told too much." Either way, lyrics like "Shake for me, girl/I wanna be your back door man" sound a lot different coming from a female perspective. "They take on a whole new meaning," McLellan says. "It's such a male thing to play Zeppelin. It's almost too much for people to take."

Much of the fascination with Led Zeppelin, though, is the one cliché it's perpetually up against. "There's still a stereotype in rock that says if a woman plays an instrument, she's not sexy anymore," explains bassist Lisa Brigantino. "Or that women can't play instruments as well as men. I think it's bullshit. We play the shit out of this stuff. We play it as if we wrote it. When people come to our shows they're like, 'Ah, girls can't play Zeppelin, they can't play rock & roll.' And by the end of the night their jaws are on the floor."

A Led Zeppelin show was a product of '70s hedonism, a full-on display of salacious pansexuality right down to the inhu-

manly tight jeans—and Lez Zep gives many of its fans the same erotic charge. "It's amazing to us how many men approach us after a show and say, 'I'm straight, but I've always wanted to sleep with Robert Plant,'" Paynes says. "They're almost relieved, because they can be attracted to us without feeling threatened about their sexuality. In a way, we're almost an answer to their prayers."

"Men, women... we're all attracted to each other, aren't we?" the guitarist continues. "And a sexy rock star is so intense and larger than life. Of course you're going to feel attracted in many various ways."

"And they were brilliant," Destroy adds. "That's what made them sexy, too."

McLellan doesn't skip a beat: "That's why people love us."

**Lez Zeppelin plays Cubby Bear Saturday 4. See listings.**

## Top live shows



### Isobel Campbell Schubas; Sun 5

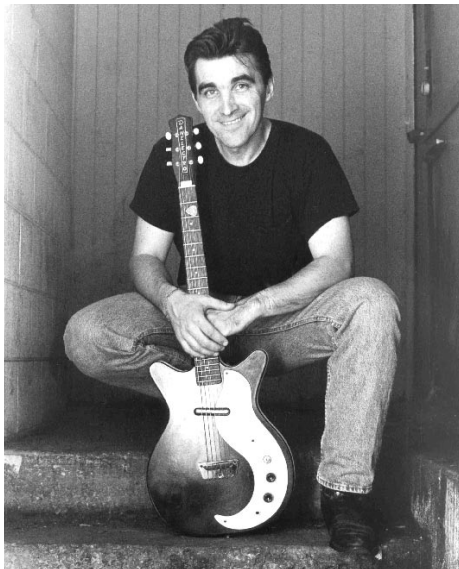
In Belle and Sebastian's literate wallflower days—when the band's live sets were colored by shambolic performances and lengthy sound-checks—Isobel Campbell spent many nights hiding behind her cello, meekly saying hello to the crowd and rarely taking the mike. Offstage, however, she was one of the band's unofficial faces thanks to her Jean Seberg looks and retro yé-yé girl fashion, while in the studio she helped coax the group toward a more soul-tinged, sunny, collaborative sound.

Campbell has steadily grown as a solo artist, releasing wistful, orchestral odes to trees and Loretta Young as the Gentle Waves, ambitious pastoralisms with tinges of bossa nova and '60s folk under her own name, and a record of Billie Holiday covers with Scottish chamber jazz artist Bill Wells. Campbell's latest collaboration, *Ballad of the Broken Seas*, is a set of dusty ballads and gritty bar rock recorded with former Screaming Trees singer Mark Lanegan (both pictured), a curious match that has created surprisingly compelling results.

When the Scottish chanteuse makes her Chicago solo debut Sunday 5, she will travel with an accomplished band that includes former members of the Teenage Fanclub and the Soup Dragons—as well as Eugene Kelly, one half of legendary indie-pop band the Vaselines, with whom Campbell recorded a Nancy-and-Lee-like duet on 2003's *Amorino* (Instinct). The show should feature tracks from throughout Campbell's already varied career—including as-yet-unheard songs from her forthcoming folk-pop record—and will, at long last, allow the former twee-pop poster girl the opportunity to command the spotlight rather than shy away from it.—*Scott Plagenhoe*

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**Eddie Angel + Kaiser George & The Hi-Risers**  
**FitzGerald's; Sat 4**

Nashville-based roots-rock guitarist Eddie Angel usually has about umpteen side projects going on at any given time. His most famous, the surf-rock instrumentalists Los Straitjackets, took off far beyond anyone's expectations. In addition to recording a few instrumental solo records, he'd already had his hands full playing rockabilly with the Planet Rockers and garage-rock with the

Neanderthals (who dressed *Flintstones*-style in caveman gear). But over the course of the last decade, Los Straitjackets left all these other projects in the shade. Naturally, Angel's been focusing all his efforts toward that end, but the man's got too much talent in him to sit still with one concept—a solo tour was inevitable.

Angel's said that this show is really a live "compilation" of everything he's ever done, from his three bands to various solo recordings—and even a nod toward Chicago blues giant Eddy Clearwater, with whom Los Straitjackets recorded a rockabilly album a

few years back. On his own, Angel is similar to the late Danny Gatton, another nonsinging guitarist who used early rock and R&B as his foundation, except that Angel doesn't grandstand as much, and when he does choose to take a long guitar ride, it doesn't sound tedious to any nonmusicians in the house. The Ventures and Link Wray were two extremely different sides of '50s-era rock instrumentals, yet Angel's guitar grind is the missing bridge between the two.—*James Porter*



**Ester Drang**  
**Empty Bottle; Wed 8**

Craftier and more tuneful than your average indie-rock outfit, Ester Drang creates moving, moody songs that pack a higher percentage of melody than its peers. Even though there are only three musicians in the band, they show no fear of orchestral maneuvers or vibey interludes that are just a little too smooth and pretty to be cool.

That uncoolness, of course, is what makes Ester Drang very cool. The group, which hails from the Tulsa suburb of Broken Arrow, Oklahoma, is on tour behind its latest album, *Rocinate* (Jade Tree), named after Don Quixote's long-suffering but always-loyal horse. Ester Drang embellishes its tonal palette with steel drums and flügelhorn arrangements that would

not be misplaced on a Burt Bacharach oldie or one of those grand mope operas favored by latter-day American Music Club. Electronic tinges and synthesized rhythms come into play as well, turning each song into a dubby, clubwise hybrid whose texture seems to change on a whim.

Guitarist Jeff Shoop and drummer James McAlister, both major players on Sufjan Stevens's *Illinoise* album, are adept at creating their chameleonic sound, while frontman Bryce Chambers steers the emotional flow with his mellow, measured vocals. He parses life's little dramas as if through a karmic haze. Given the lush backdrop of *Rocinate*, we're really curious how the new songs will sound in a live context. But like Quixote's steed, we're confident the band will rise to the occasion.—*Steve Dollar*



**Cyrus Chestnut**  
**Jazz Showcase; Tue 7–Mar 12**

We hear it all the time: Gospel music is the foundation of modern black music. But we rarely hear those in the jazz world putting that rhetoric into practice. For many, gospel's unbridled emotion just doesn't sit well with jazz's detached worldliness. And it's why pianist Cyrus Chestnut's career-long mission of reframing gospel music leaves him peerless.

Chestnut arrives at the Jazz Showcase this week behind his 13th album, *Genuine Chestnut* (Telarc), his first

since leaving bankrupt major label-dom. It's a rollicking, typically eclectic collection of gospel, jazz and pop, all played with the sincerity and introspection Chestnut fans have learned to expect. Alongside his longtime rhythm section of bassist Michael Hawkins and drummer Neal Smith, the Baltimore-born player finds the jazz soul inside Bread's "If" and Fats Domino's "I'm Walkin'," as well as gospel warhorses like "Lord I Give Myself to You." Chestnut frequently channels earthquake-inducing heft on these tunes—but this is jazz, and he doesn't let us forget by skittering out daring breaches of harmony.

His skill at navigating these disparate styles, especially in an acoustic format, makes him a contemporary equivalent of Chicago's king of accessible jazz, pianist Ramsey Lewis. Like Lewis, Chestnut hears gospel and pop as grist for bona fide improvisation and doesn't mind satisfying non-jazz heads along the way. Last year's one-off collaboration *Gold Sounds* (Brown Brothers Recordings), a jazz tribute to alt-rockers Pavement, was another example of this inclusive vision; instead of an ironic reading, Chestnut's passionate contributions almost made us forget that Pavement didn't have hard-bop maestro Horace Silver as an arranger. Through respect and savvy, Chestnut proves you don't have to popify gospel to make it vital again.—*Matthew Lurie*



**NOFX**  
**House of Blues; Sun 5 (two shows)**

When Southern California-style pop-punk became an insidious plague in the '90s, there were still a handful of bands that either transcended the limitations of the style (like Green Day) or were grandfathered out of the scorn that most of these bouncy, nasal-voiced copycats deserved. Despite being a perfect sonic prototype for these bands, NOFX not only deserved respect for predating the craze by more than a decade (the group formed in the early '80s), but also because, from the start, these four were always more funny than annoying.

NOFX made up for releasing its earliest albums on the poorly

regarded California imprint Mystic Records by calling one of those releases *So What If We're on Mystic?* It's released an '80s hardcore parody record. At one of the first Warped Tours, band members played punk-rock live-band karaoke with audience members singing the leads. It's mocked censors, made self-derogatory ethnic jokes, and played musical pranks that subverted its gold-record status at the height of corporate-punk popularity.

The band's music may not be groundbreaking, but by mastering this simple format NOFX has been able to give its large fan base something that sounds right to it, while continuing to tweak the themes just enough to entertain a broader audience.

Over the last few years the band, as well as frontman Fat Mike's label Fat Wreck Chords, has become more overtly political, and some of its pointed anti-Bush material is a nice return of punk to its early '80s anti-Reagan days (albeit a lot peppier this time around). Humor's truly given this group longevity; regardless of your politics, NOFX's live shows are always so silly and entertaining that even Donald Rumsfeld would have a good time in the pit.—*Jake Austen*

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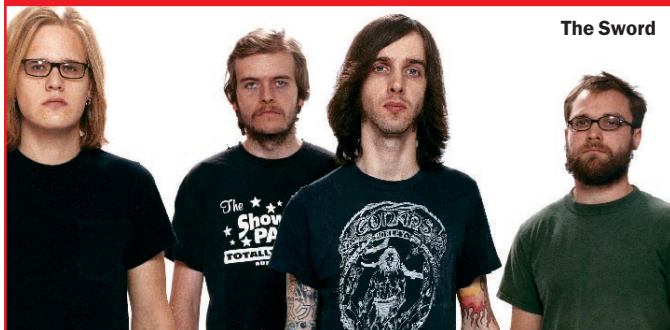


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## LIVE: BEST OF THE REST



The Sword

### Pearls & Brass

(Empty Bottle; Fri 3)

This Drag City band's debut is full of lumbering, ballsy blues-rock riffs that should sound even larger live.

### The Chicago Jazz Philharmonic featuring Orbert Davis

(Auditorium Theatre; Sat 4)

Local star trumpeter Davis leads this hybridized orchestra through compositions that fuse equal parts jazz and classical.

### Early Man + Priestess + The Sword + The Black

(Empty Bottle; Sat 4)

Four excellent heavy bands collide in a night of monstrous metal that'll rattle the Bottle's walls.

### The Venom Lords + The Sonnets

(The Mutiny; Sat 4)

It's a rare power-pop band that can play on the same bill as thundering garage rockers the Venom Lords, and the Sonnets rock hard enough to carry the load.

### Peru Negro

(HotHouse; Sun 5, two shows)

This ensemble has mastered the hypnotic grooves and romantic melodies of Afro-Peruvian music.

### The Hellcopters

(Double Door; Sun 6)

Strip away the Hives' kitschy, matchy outfits—and add more talent. These Swedes are the garage-rock fix you need.

## Album reviews

### Javier Left of Center (Capitol)

Javier is one of a rare breed: R&B singers who can play guitar and write nongimmicky songs. But consider the others in his company—Van Hunt, Raphael Saadiq and *Smoking Gun* fixture D'Angelo—and it's clear each one of them possesses something that Javier is missing: quirk. In fact, *Left of Center*, Javier's poorly titled second album, couldn't be more squarely in the middle.

Javier has an unusual pedigree for a major-label R&B star. He led a soul cover band in his native Connecticut, achieved a college degree in music education, and then landed his biggest break, touring for two years as the vocalist of the eccentric, jam-heavy Derek Trucks Band. But journeyman success isn't unheard of: Others before him, most notably his good friend and collaborator Anthony Hamilton, also passed through careers as backup singers before finding their niche. And if anything, *Left of Center* showcases his uncanny ability to inhabit some of the myriad styles he's surely tried out on the road: R. Kelly's pop-gospel on "Answer is Yes," Prince's balladry on "Ways I'm Feeling U" and, seemingly



everywhere else, Babyface.

Of all *Left's* sources, Javier rides the perilously thin line between homage and imitation most often with Babyface. Not only are the flamenco guitar ornamentations that adorned Babyface's mid-'90s peak with Boyz II Men on nearly every track, but Babyface's empathic lover-man aesthetic pervades as well. In the album closer, "Lovin' U," a one-song summary of *Left's* failings, Javier chants an inexplicably hackneyed explanation to a since-departed girlfriend over solo acoustic guitar: "Lovin' you is all that I wanted to do." As could be said for much of *Left*, if that's the best plea he can muster, no wonder she stayed away.—ML

### Neko Case Fox Confessor Brings the Flood (Anti-)

Reverb swathes Neko Case in an angelic glow on her latest album. It catches her up into a rapturous cloud and somehow makes her voice—already vibrant and rich in emotional nuance—into something atmospheric.

It also gives the material on the Chicago singer-songwriter's fourth studio album a specific vibe whose pleasures, paradoxically, aren't so easy to pin down.

*Fox Confessor Brings the Flood* is a blissfully out-of-time song cycle that evokes a lot of different things, and keeps revealing more with each listen. At any turn, we're reminded of old-school country-gospel harmonies, the otherworldly twang of Angelo Badalamenti soundtracks, the early 1960s dream pop of half-forgotten girl groups and doo-wop swains, and the soulful Americana of the Band (yep, that is Garth Hudson playing piano and organ on several cuts). But, mostly, we marvel at how Case inhabits this ephemeral world of sound as if it were her own private playhouse—a jukebox of the mind, stuffed with twinleweeds and glimmer.



Four years in the making, between Case's stints backing up various pals (like John Doe), working various side projects and performing with the New Pornographers, *Fox Confessor* is unabashedly retro in spirit yet contemporary in its imagination. Her collaborators, who include members of Calexico and the Sadies, help create intricate and detailed arrangements that animate the lyrics with subtle flourishes. These allow Case to sidestep the literal in her songwriting, as she delves into self-invented fables ("Margaret vs. Pauline"), dwells in sweet-sad waltz-time ("Star Witness," "That Teenage Feeling"), dials up John the Revelator ("John Saw that Number"), and limns enigmatic scenarios ("The Needle Has Landed") that resolve in cello-and-dulcimer duets and a few descending guitar notes that keep echoing—even when the reverb is off.—SD



### Dilated Peoples Park West; Tue 7

Few groups in the past decade have been able to walk the fine line between mainstream overkill and deficient backpack rap without absorbing some baggage. Those who choose the formulaic route dominate the charts and simultaneously lose credibility, while others are too proud to toil in anything other than the obscurity of the underground.

L.A.'s Dilated Peoples have no such clause, retaining creative control without veering off the boom-bap purist path. Regular touring solidified a footing in the West Coast underground long before their buzzed-about 2000 Capitol debut, *The Platform*, saw the light of day. When Kanye put his production touches on its 2004 single, "This Way," the trio gained a follow-

ing outside of hip-hop insiders, and now it's determined to claim new fans with its latest, *20/20*. MCs Evidence and Rakaa Iriscience tag-team with lyrics that are amusing and illustrative, all balanced with braggadocio that is more spirited than obligatory ("Don't worry if

I write checks / I write rhymes"). An essential part of the group, World Famous Beat Junkies member DJ Babu brings an energy that is usually only found onstage, and the group takes every opportunity to display his explosive scratch techniques live.

The result's a complementary gumbo of lighthearted Cali vibe, social commentary and weighted beats that are stable without being dull. Dilated Peoples are satisfying rather than innovative, but they pull it off because the basics never go out of style. In a binary land where MCs and DJs compete for either outlandish rhymes or flashy pop success, it's nice to have something solid to chew on. The group's Park West show with Little Brother and Defari restores the balance, if only for one night.—Emily Youssef

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**Sparks**  
*Hello Young Lovers*  
(In The Red)

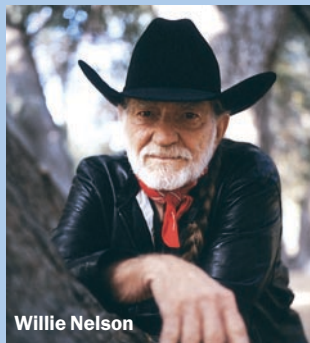
Being a Sparks fanatic means never being able to describe your favorite band by comparing them to someone else. Though there are a few acts with visual similarities (Cheap Trick shares the nerd/rock-star dichotomy, Tav Falco also promotes Hitler-mustache chic), musically it's a lot harder to find an act as quirky, seductive and confounding. Perhaps they measure up best with Milwaukee's Frogs, another brother act that makes bizarre music that's seemingly humorous and jaunty, but ultimately melancholy. But unlike the perpetual-loser Frogs, Sparks were spoiled by some brief overseas chart success a

few decades ago, so fans don't have to settle for cheapo home recordings; every Sparks album sounds like it cost a zillion bucks.

*Hello Young Lovers* embraces this slick commercial sheen, but does so while presenting offsetting compositions that seem profoundly uncommercial. Music that sounds like Queen couples with lyrics that are too dumb for the sonic majesty. Sexy dance music is presented with clinical unsexiness. And near-perfect pop offerings seem gloriously wrong. "Metaphor" uses metaphors to explain what metaphors are, concluding that "chicks dig metaphors." "Dick Around" is a grand, operatic would-be hit single based upon a phrase that likely can't be used on the radio. "Perfume" is a love song reduced to a shopping list of rhyming perfume brands.

Unlike aging bands who crank out uninspired product out of habit, Sparks' obscurity has allowed them to stay ambitious and experimental even 20 albums into their bizarre career. This new offering continues that tradition of ambition by creating this suite of theoretical love songs that, despite their alluring catchiness, are so weird they would ultimately repel any potential paramour. That's a good metaphor for this band's long-standing commercial futility, but maybe this is the record that finally breaks their bad-luck streak. After all, chicks dig metaphors.—JA

# Short takes



Willie Nelson

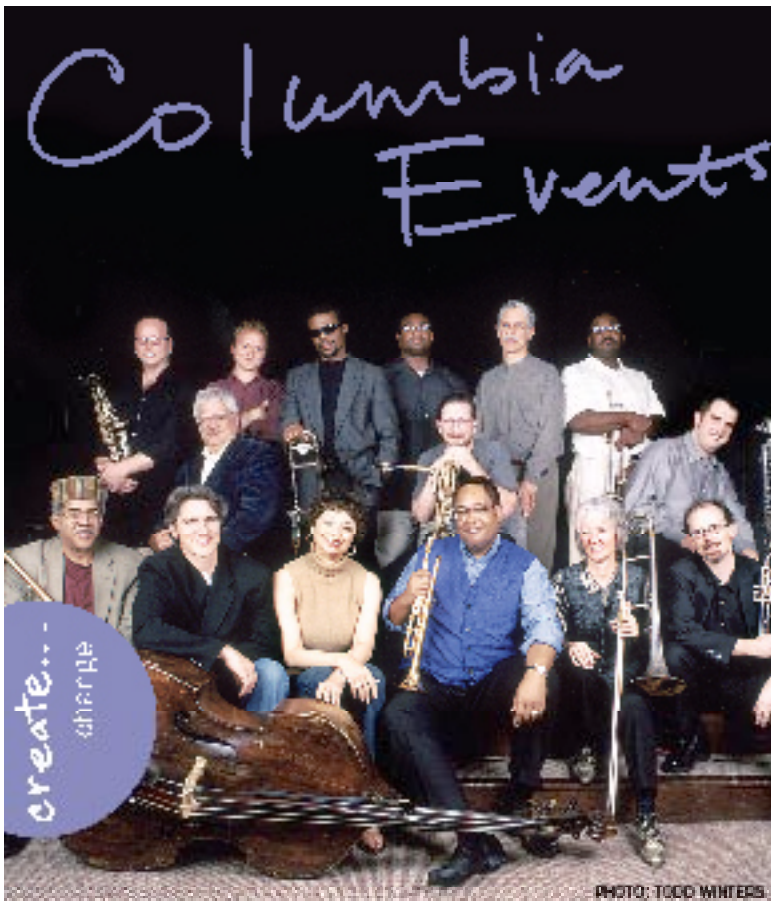
**Willie Nelson**  
*You Don't Know Me: The Songs of Cindy Walker*  
(Lost Highway)

No, this does not include "Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly Fond of Each Other," which is getting a lot of down-low downloads on iTunes. But, if you want to hear Nelson tear it up on a set of midnight ballads, the veteran Texas songwriter Cindy Walker gives him a lot to work with on this album. He does okay on the uptempo Western swing-type selections, but he positively kills it when the tempo slows down. Cue up "Not That I Care" for an example of a grown man lying to keep from cry-

ing; his mouth says that he doesn't care one way or another about what his ex does, but his offhanded, disjointed delivery says bullshit. He does too hurt, and he gets his point across without getting overly theatrical about it. Nelson knows heart-break ballads (having written some himself), so here's a case of genius recognizing genius.

**James Hunter**  
*People Gonna Talk*  
(Rounder)

Singer-guitarist James Hunter, based in England, continues to pursue a vintage soul sound. But unlike other retro-soul acts, his music is slightly sophisticated, like early '60s Ray Charles with an all-sax horn section. Van Morrison has been in his corner for years, taking him on tour and occasionally enlisting him to play on his albums. Although several songs on Morrison's *Days Like This* sound like outtakes from a Hunter session, his own sound is a good deal more traditional. *People Gonna Talk* also showcases the drumming of Jonathan Lee, who incorporates Latin and swingy jazz rhythms instead of playing straight pounding 4/4 beats. It's not nostalgia—just good singing and songwriting with a soulful feel.—JP



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