

The Hello Strangers ★★★1/2

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IMI Records

Sisters Brechyn Chace and Larissa Chace Smith have teamed up as the The Hello Strangers to record one of the top debut albums of 2014 with their self-titled CD. Their harmonies at times recall a distaff version of the Everly Brothers and a country-influenced Indigo Girls.



The Hello Strangers.

Both women demonstrate a knack for strong songwriting that tells a story. The spirited “What It Takes to Break a Heart” is an up-tempo, Saturday night on the town song. They easily switch genres for “Ruined,” a country-flavored, long-gone-wrong tune that could have been recorded by Patsy Cline. The wistful “Never Roam Again,” elevated by Wanda Vick’s viola, has the poetic simplicity of early John Prine. Jim Lauderdale contributes vocals on the haunting “What You Don’t Know, which he co-wrote with John Leventhal.

Producer Steve Ivey keeps arrangements uncluttered to allow the vocals to come to the forefront. “Conococheague” sounds like a traditional British ballad with voices intertwined like a couple embracing. “Que Sera Sera,” a tribute to the sisters’ paternal grandfather who sang with Doris Day, is turned into a bittersweet waltz that plays to the sisters’ vocal strengths. 14 songs, 51 minutes

Otis Clay and Johnny Rawls ★★★

Soul Brothers

Catfood Records

Soul Brothers is an album that pays tribute to the soul music that flourished from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, while also demonstrating there is still life in the genre in the 21st century. Longtime singers Otis Clay and Johnny Rawls bring a grit and energy to their performances, recalling work of such duos as Sam and Dave and Mel and Tim.

The briskly paced “Only You Know and I

Know,” a hit for Delaney and Bonnie that was written by British rocker Dave Mason, starts the album on a high note. “What Becomes of the Brokenhearted,” Jimmy Ruffin’s finest moment as a balladeer, works well as a duet, with Clay and Rawls trading verses about love gone wrong. “Turn Back the Hands of Time,” a hit for Tyrone Davis in 1970, may be the ultimate song in pleading for a second chance



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and Clay and Rawls do it justice. Newer songs, such as “Road Dog” and “Hallelujah Lord,” which Clay and Rawls had a hand in writing, show the album is more than an exercise in nostalgia. “Hallelujah Lord” highlights soul music’s roots in gospel. The Rays provide strong backing throughout, especially a four-piece horn section that captures that soul music flavor. 10 songs, 37 minutes

Over The Rhine ★★★★★

Blood Oranges in the Snow

Great Speckled Dog

Blood Oranges in the Snow, the third album of Christmas music in 18 years by Ohio-based duo Over the Rhine, covers the gamut of emotions felt during the holidays. Linford Detweiler and Karin Bergquist, have crafted an intimate, acoustic recording that invites a listener to savor the music.

The title track is a traveling song about the anticipation of reuniting with family and friends for the holidays. “Snowbirds” is a lighter song on those fleeing cold weather for warmer climes. “Another Christmas” and “My Father’s Body,” both sung by Detweiler, are somber reflections on the holiday. The former incorporates lyrics from *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, while the latter connects Christmas past and present with a meditation on the loss of a parent. Merle Haggard’s “If



Over the Rhine.

We Make It Through December” finds Detweiler and Bergquist sharing vocals on a timeless tale of the economic blues of Christmas. Bergquist shines on “New Year’s Song,” a torch song about the hope for better times as the chronological odometer rolls over to another year. It wraps up the satisfying album on an optimistic note. 9 songs 37 minutes.

The Stray Birds ★★★1/2

Best Medicine

Yep Roc

The Stray Birds combine the versatility of The Band with the vocal prowess of Crosby,



The Stray Birds.

Stills and Nash on *Best Medicine*, a strong follow-up to their debut album of 2012. The trio of Mayer de Vitry, Oliver Craven and Charlies Muensch, who all hail from the Lancaster area, demonstrates a deepening musical chemistry on this rootsy collection of acoustic music. The title track sets the tone for the CD with its celebration of a music store as a cultural center and the promise of new sounds as an emotional balm.

On *Best Medicine*, each member of the band is showcased: “The Bells” is a vibrant, up-tempo selection featuring de Vry on lead

vocals; Craven steps to the forefront on the bittersweet “Stolen Love”; Muensch takes his first lead vocal on “Pallet” as the band transforms the folk standard with a Western swing accompaniment.

Craven’s “Simple Man,” a tale of a farmer down on his luck, and de Vry’s “Black Hills,” a song about Native Americans, reveal the breadth of the trio’s songwriting. 12 songs, 45 minutes.

Mark Rogers and Mary Byrne ★★★

I Line My Days Along Your Weight

Important Records

Mark Rogers and Mary Byrne bring a low-key intensity to *I Line My Days Along Your Weight*, the debut album for the husband-and-wife duo. Recorded live with minimal overdubs, the largely acoustic CD has the feel of a recording session in a living room. Byrne’s impressionistic poetry mixes well with Rogers’ skills on a variety of stringed instruments, including guitar, lap steel guitar and mandolin.

The layered instruments symbolize the closeness of a relationship on “First Fall Nights,” which includes the album’s title in the lyrics. “A Racing Heart” opens with an a



Mark Rogers and Mary Byrne.

cappella introduction by Byrne as she and Rogers make effective use of pauses and silence in their music. Call it inspirational minimalism.

“Walk With Me” is a haunting, romantic ballad that features fragile guitar work by Rogers. “Green Gold Velvet” serves as a compelling memory of childhood; Rogers and Byrne grew up near other in Central Pennsylvania but did not meet until later in life. Set in their current home of New York City, “Sirens Call” is a sketch of life and death and the desire to persevere amid the urban landscape. “I won’t stop till the ambulances come for me,” Byrne declares “Always more chances till the sirens come for me.” 10 songs, 38 minutes. ■