

Ramblin' Jack Elliott: *I Stand Alone*. Ian Brennan, producer. Anti 86814. Music: ★★★ Sonics: ★★★



In a year when Bruce Springsteen captured the vitality and humanity of Pete Seeger's catalogue, it seems only fitting that Ramblin' Jack Elliott—compatriot to both Seeger and Woody Guthrie, and indefatigable champion of the American folk song—should have his own say in these matters. *I Stand Alone*, a title that has haunting resonance at a time when most of Elliott's contemporaries are absent voices, either dead or failing, doesn't follow the Springsteen model of injecting the old tunes with a rock n' roll muscularity; rather, Jack does what the Boss once described as the modus operandi of the poets of "Jungleland." To wit, he stands back and lets 'em all be, telling tall tales in a straightforward, reportorial voice

that speaks/sings the lyrics according to how the spirit moves him.

Ragged but right, his voice is an instrument of gentle spirit and great character. It strains at times—he almost taps out vocally trying to reach for effect in what remains of his upper register in the traditional suicide ballad "Willy Moore"—but never fails to hit the emotional markers. Elliott has a grand old time turning T. Texas Tyler's honky-tonk heartbreaker "Remember Me" on its head with rumbling, chortling choruses, yet never lets the tearjerk get away. Most of the record is simply Jack and his elegantly picked and strummed acoustic guitar, but a few numbers find him with supple, understated support from Red Hot Chili Peppers bassist Flea, X/Knitters drummer DJ Bonebrake, and guitarist/dobro player Nels Cline. Lucinda Williams shows up for a boozy duet vocal on Ernest Tubb's "Careless Darling," and sounds like she belongs. Conversely, Sleater-Kinney's Corin Tucker is completely out of her element while warbling unsteadily on the evergreen "Driving Nails In My Coffin,"

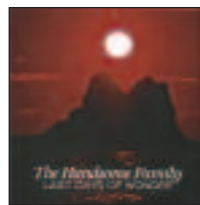
realized here as a sturdy bluegrass shuffle fueled by Cline's whimsical dobro punctuations.

Sonically, producer Ian Brennan close mikes Jack's voice and guitar, dispenses with any aural embroidery, and keeps all supporting instruments (heard only on seven of the 16 songs) at a discrete distance in the background. He understands it's Jack's show and, you might say, stands back and lets it all be.

DAVID MCGEE

FURTHER LISTENING: Bruce Springsteen: *The Seeger Sessions*; James Talley: *Woody Guthrie and Songs of My Oklahoma Home*

The Handsome Family: *Last Days of Wonder*. No producer credit. Carrot Top Records 040. Music: ★★ 1/2 Sonics: ★★★

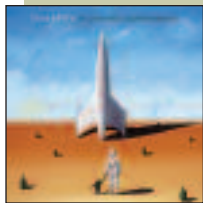


Former big-city dwellers now residing in Albuquerque, the Handsome Family is the husband and wife

Tom Petty's American Homecoming

Bob Gendron

Tom Petty: *Highway Companion*. Jeff Lynne, Mike Campbell, and Petty, producers. American 44285 (CD and two-LP). Music: ★★★★★ Sonics: ★★★★★



Harley-Davidson. Jack Daniel's. Marshall Amplifiers. Fender Instruments. All are connected at the hip to rock n' roll and American tradition. To this list you can add Tom Petty. An artist that prototypically epitomizes pure American music, his recent deal with the American Records imprint couldn't be more fitting. The move reunites the 55-year-old veteran with label owner and producer Rick Rubin, who helmed the boards for 1994's *Wildflowers*, Petty's timeless second solo album. Made only with Heartbreaker Mike Campbell and longtime associate Jeff Lynne, the casual *Highway Companion* is Petty's first solo effort since, its dozen songs revisiting many of his traditional themes—mystery, exploration, self-discovery, wandering, leisure.

In a great frame of mind, Petty has left behind the acrimony of 2002's *The Last DJ*. Blacklisted by radio stations because of its condemnation of corporate broadcast logistics and unimaginative programmers, it remains Petty's only album not to achieve gold status. Kicked off with a variation on John Lee Hooker's universal "Boogie Chillin'" riff, the album-opening "Saving Grace" hums like a trusty Ford Mustang cruising down the Pacific Coast Highway, the protagonist running from place to place in search of inner peace and salvation. Outfitted with playful and vivid rhymes such as "Pretend I'm Samuel Clemens/Wear seer-sucker and white linens," "Down South" witnesses more journeying, Petty reflecting as he plots a return to his roots, a prolonged vacation that sees him offer up his stock for a place to stay. "This Old Town" serves as a geographical metaphor for busted dreams, while the chugging "The Big Weekend" is the opposite, a kick-up-the-dust anthem for escaping life's daily grind.

Throughout, Petty keeps arrangements simple and tempos steady, his nasally drawl in fine form. He turns inward on

team of Brett and Rennie Sparks. Rennie writes dark and wittily wicked lyrics filled with mystery, wanderlust, and violence (Greil Marcus has said they contain “everyday surrealism”), sings backup and occasional lead vocals, and has been known to gently strum an Autoharp, banjo, or ukulele. Brett writes the songs, plays a slew of instruments, and records most of the couple’s music in their home studio on a Mac computer. The prolific pair has racked up seven CDs since 1995’s *Odessa*.

Last Days of Wonder is the duo’s latest, and it’s one of the partnership’s least satisfying efforts. Oh, these two are talented enough. At their best, Brett’s twangy voice, simple tunes that typically play to a country, waltz, or gentle rock rhythm, and Rennie’s lyrics evoke the ugly-beauty of the American underbelly. In the Handsome’s world, the funhouse mirror is both cracked and irresistible. The problem with the new record is one that faces most duos, the

White Stripes among them: after a while, it’s pretty much impossible to not become repetitious.

The opener, “Your Great Journey,” a song about death, sounds a lot like many another Handsome title. The music slowly chugs along to Brett’s vocal while a plaintive pedal steel cries behind. “Tesla’s Hotel Room” picks up in a similar vein, as does “These Golden Jewels,” which to these ears seems like an ill-advised attempt to do Tom Waits, complete with a three-wheeled carnival-wagon tempo, barely strummed banjo, and woozy saw. Things pick up on occasion, but sadly, the record never reaches lift-off.

The sound is remarkably good given the low-fi-high-tech recording technology. Vocals are clear, the odd array of instruments sound quite natural and are nicely spaced, and the whole production, which is basically Brett’s, has a warm, almost creamy quality. **WAYNE GARCIA**

FURTHER LISTENING: *The Handsome Family: Singing Bones; Jenny Lewis: Rabbit Fur Coat*

Rockin’ Bones: 1950s Punk and Rockabilly. James Austin and Cheryl Pawelski, producers. Rhino 73346 (four CDs).

Music: ★★★★★ 1/2 Sonics: ★★★



Reeking of sex and Bardahl, as sleek and swift as a Harley, and as fleeting as its practitioners and fans’ misguided youth, rockabilly has spent most of its lifetime as an underground

phenomenon since surfacing in 1953 with Bill Haley and breaking out in 1954 at Sun Records. Until the Stray Cats rocked this town in the early 80s, rockabilly’s lone national hit had been Carl Perkins’s epochal “Blue Suede Shoes” (included here). So why this box set of four CDs and 101 cuts? Maybe because America has produced precious little music as original, deceptive simple, timeless—even as culturally revealing of its time—as rockabilly.



the bare-bones “Square One,” a lullaby that along with the mournful “Damaged by Love” recalls his *Wildflowers* moods. Jangling chords, bushy acoustic strumming, and casual beats supply the foundations for Petty’s rhythmic bridges and punchy, to-the-point refrains. Campbell’s lead-, pedal- and slide-guitar accents color the lyrical images, and Lynne’s bass keeps grooves grounded. Cozy and warmly inviting, the music blows like a summer breeze, country and rock elements lending looseness and snap. Petty sounds himself sounds rejuvenated, relieved of pressures and eager to relay soulful tales concerning drifting travels and weary experiences.

The producing collective takes a hands-off approach, the sonics glowing with golden hues and organic tones. Organ passages radiate; guitar strings have resonance and weight; instruments remain individually separated. The soundstage is open, wide, and airy, the brightly chiming intro to “Ankle Deep” evocative of a reunion of Traveling Wilburys members. At the finish of the album-closing “Golden Rose,” a keyboard echo fades into the distance, the music pulling safely and soundly into the garage for the night.

FURTHER LISTENING: *Tom Petty: Wildflowers; Tom Brosseau: Empty Houses Are Lonely*