

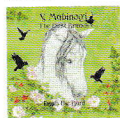
colour to Campbell's dozen thoughtful songs. Drummers Angus Mackay and D.C. Macmillan deserve extra applause, for a regularly deployed four-on-the-floor drive, providing energy and rhythmic lift to a very pleasing collection.

David Innes

## DAMH THE BARD

★★★★

**Y Mabinogi – The First Branch**  
(CEAR BRYN MUSIC) [www.paganmusic.co.uk](http://www.paganmusic.co.uk)



Damh The Bard (aka Dave Smith) made his recording debut under that name in 2002 with *Herne's Apprentice*, having trained as a Bard, poet and storyteller in the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids, in the 90s. *The Hills They Are Hollow* followed in 2003, and several more albums since then including 2009's collection of mainly traditional folk songs, *Tales From The Crow Man*.

Damh has honed his craft, his self-penned material and performing skills developing and strengthening with each recording as he drew from the rich folklore and mythology of these islands. Nothing prepared me for *Y Mabinogi*, however. A double CD, the first of four such releases, *Y Mabinogi* comprises three stories – the First Branch of *The Mabinogi*, Welsh tales first written down in the 11th century though with oral traditions far older than that, which Damh tells here from the perspective of Pryderi, son of Pwyll and Rhiannon.

In the first of these stories, Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed, chances upon Arawn, King of Annwn, whom he unwittingly offends and he subsequently agrees, by magical means, to take the form of Arawn in order to redeem himself. The second features Rhiannon whom, after further magical events, Pwyll rescues from an arranged marriage, while the third tale recounts the birth of their son, Pryderi, and his mysterious disappearance.

It's a gripping performance from Damh The Bard, with *Y Mabinogi* a powerful combination of words and music, his narration and musical arrangements vivid and compelling.

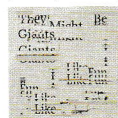
George Clapperton

## THEY MIGHT BE GIANTS

★★★★

**I Like Fun**

(LOJINX) [www.theymightbeginants.com](http://www.theymightbeginants.com)



Another year, another They Might Be Giants release and, given the increasing proliferation of their output towards kids over time, it appears that this one is aimed squarely at adults again.

Of course, it doesn't really matter either way, since TMBG's energy and enthusiasm have always been half the battle. There is, however, a faint twinge of the times detectable in some of the album's lyrics: 'By The Time You Get This' laughs joyously in the face of the oncoming apocalypse, while it's difficult not to read 'An Insult To The Fact Checkers' as a subtle rebuke to the President most likely to cause it. For every bit of forgettable nonsense (frankly, they can keep the Morphine-meets-Jonathan-Richman gibberish of the title track), there's a song like 'I Left My Body' which proves they can still hold their own against the likes of latter-day indie-rock favourites such as Guided By Voices.

Otherwise, it's largely business as usual – unsurprising, really, given that

they're hardly likely to try and reinvent the formula this late on in the game. However, like excited children digging into a chemistry set on Christmas Day, you know they'll always have a great time regardless.

Chris Carter

## STICK IN THE WHEEL

★★★★

**Follow Them True**

(FROM HERE) [www.stickinthewheel.com](http://www.stickinthewheel.com)



The second album from London outfit Stick In The Wheel is as direct, uncompromising and occasionally brutal as its predecessor. It's folk music most definitely, but not as many know it or indeed perform it, which can only be a good thing.

As much manifesto as album, *Follow Them True* continues their quest to reclaim folk music for the working classes, link the past to the present, and explore the darker edges of the music. So there's a powerful take on 'Abbots Bromley Horn Dance', one of the strangest English traditions and a take-no-prisoners a cappella 'Poor Old Horse' as well as the disquieting 'Over Again'.

Nicola Kearey's vocals remain the focus of the music, upfront, defiant and as far removed from most current folk singers as it's possible to be, but the rest of the band are equally important to the music. Ian Carter's intricate guitar playing drives things along while drummer Simon Foote, fiddler Ellie Wilson and singer Fran Foote all play their part, and Kearey shows a softer side on 'Blind Beggar Of Bethnal Green'. An important album and one that will hopefully reach far beyond the folk world.

Jeremy Searle

## LAST OF THE EASY RIDERS

★★★★

**Unto The Earth**

(AGITATED) [www.lastoftheeasyriders.bandcamp.com](http://www.lastoftheeasyriders.bandcamp.com)



When a band's name sounds like a homage to rock's back pages, you've a sense of where they're coming from.

Check out that album title, *Unto The Earth*. Mmm, serious vibes of the whole Bakersfield Sound influence there. To their credit, Last Of The Easy Riders aren't trying to dupe anyone and probably care more about national parks than the national debt. This four-piece from Denver get back to nature on their second outing, evoking the likes of Chuck Prophet and The Long Ryders with a bucolic psychedelia.

The guitars go jingle-jangle nicely enough, but they loll under a vocal sound that's too dense at times and lacks focus. Maybe an outside producer would've brought keener ears to bear. There's plenty to interest fans of prime songwriting though, with 'Freewheelin'' channelling Brent Rademaker's jaunty spirit. 'It Won't Be Long' is a loping pedal-steel waltz and 'Turn The Tide' rides on a rocking block of chords.

Two tracks that show a deviation from the format are 'Shadow Cruiser', which moves darkly in a minor key with its dusky homage to prairie drifters, and closing cut 'Woodland Echoes', climaxing with an almost jazzy workout and hints of Ray Manzarek's stabbing keyboards.

Gareth Thompson

## MATTHEWS SOUTHERN COMFORT

★★★★

**Like A Radio**

(MIG) [www.mig-music.de](http://www.mig-music.de)



With a Number One single and three acclaimed albums, Matthews Southern Comfort were right on the crest of the 70s singer-songwriter wave, and prefigured the rise of U.K. Americana. Though Iain Matthews is the only constant in this new line-up, his revival of the name signals a return, not to some retro retreat, but to a way of doing things.

The all-Dutch band displays tasteful virtuosity throughout, with acoustic guitars weaving delicately around each other, and Bart de Win's jazz-tinged piano subtly implying both rhythm and melody. As with the first version of the band, though, *Like A Radio* is all about the voices. Matthews's singing has never faltered across his fifty-year career, and is showcased perfectly with, naturally, some beautiful harmonies by de Win and Eric Devries. The material, too, is first-rate, with a couple of classy covers punctuating a dozen originals.

From the political to the observationally personal, these are songs to hold the listener with both lyrics and arrangements, and with choruses that you find yourself humming days later. 'I still have faith in my direction,' sings Matthews in 'The Thought Police'. And so he should.

Oz Hardwick

## GARY MILLER WITH KEITH ARMSTRONG, IAIN PETRIE & FRIENDS

★★★★

**Mad Martins**

(WHIPPET) [www.mad-martins.co.uk](http://www.mad-martins.co.uk)



Gaze in awe and wonder, my readers. What is this rare, precious and beautiful artefact? To call it a triple-CD concept album is to demean it. An archive of myth and legends of lost hard-times in ye North East? A History Channel biopic movie for the mind? The theatre of the inner and outer ear? A coffee-table art book loaded to the seams with antique print curios, spoken-word verse of sinister and nefarious exploits, and engravings of exquisite quality? It's all these... and more.

Gary Miller is lots of things, one of which was and is and always will be The Whisky Priests. Keith Armstrong is a Newcastle bard responsible for the fondly remembered *Ostrich* magazine. Gary and this 'Jingling Geordie' first collaborated on the *Bleeding Sketches* (1995) album, acclaimed as a 'runaway pit-carriage roller-coaster fun ride' by *Rock 'n' Reel*. Now, The Mad Martins is an ethno-cultural project transcending regular genre tags, excavating secret eccentricities, a soundtrack story that tilts and twists through degrees of oddness.

There were brothers three in the 18th century – 'mad and proud and dangerous', Renaissance Man and doggerel pamphleteer William 'The Lion of Wallsend', sewage-engineer and New Romantic artist John, and 'the notorious incendiary' Jonathan who tried to assassinate the Bishop of Oxford, and then had arsonous encounters with York Minster, which led him straight to Bedlam.

Strong story-telling vocals are driven by Northumbrian pipes and swirling

accordion as contagious as the electrically activated with the energies 'dark and profound' spin-off 'Mad Martin's Instru' available as separate compa *Flowers Among Them All*).

Although sprawling audio facet conjuring imaginative it defies gravity by allowing profound meditation but no indulgence in its confrontat and conceptually complex i veritable triumph, my read that's not wealth enough presentation too.

And

## GRAE J. WALL ET CHICOS MUERTOS

★★★★

**Quinze Petites Morts**

(TRASHVILLE) [www.trailer-trash.co.uk](http://www.trailer-trash.co.uk)



Grae J. Wall be a bit of a taste but on is a real joy and part Ke

then passed through the Sh MacGowan filter. Fronting of country, skiffle and punk Hertfordshire, it's the perfe

Opening with the off-kilt 'Steeple In The Rain' with fiddle, the album makes its From here we step up the b My Hand' before changing entirely, 'Old Brown Sofa' e death of a lover with sear piercing accuracy. There is in *Quinze Petites Morts*, w between anger, celebrati with joyful abandon. 'This Fascists' chronicles protest *Woody to Billy*, *Martin to C Berlin Refugee* is a straight ballad of loss and loneliness served the majesty of 'Sitti East Berlin'.

For an album so packed death and loss it seems to celebratory, placing a mas listener's face. Death loses Grim Reaper is dragged in placed in his hand and is f the party.

## TOMMY EMMAN

★★★★

**Accomplice One**

(PLAYERS CLUB) [www.mascotclub.co.uk](http://www.mascotclub.co.uk)



What is m Accompl of duets, is the virtuos there is no

musicians are engaging in ghastly cutting contest. In comes across is mutual re feeling that guitar phenom and his guests are inspirin and focusing on commun songs.

J.D. Simo sings with sou on 'Sittin' On) The Dock o plays a finely judged slide Carroll and Emmanuel pla with engaging *joie de viv* It Reel', an instrumental l folk medley; David Grism playing is emotionally cha Blues'; Jack Pearson plays jazz solo on 'Tittle Tattle Crowell, Jorma Kaukonen Jerry Douglas and others wonderfully.