

spotlight



Alicia Keys

The Diary of Alicia Keys

For her sophomore release, Alicia Keys reaches back to the best part of the '70s for inspiration — great songs played by great musicians. The result is an album of classic soul ballads, deep grooves, and sensual love songs that spotlight her vocal talents, with a tasteful, subtle amount of modern production. Her keyboard work, though subservient to the songs, is all over the CD. She still favors simplicity over chops, though she nails the Roger Williams "Autumn

Leaves" chromatic lick in the sexy and Motown-ish "You Don't Know My Name." Basic seventh chord voicings abound in several tunes, such as "So Simple," and some beautiful Rhodes work is the main event on "Feeling U, Feeling Me." Romantic-era flourishes can be heard from time to time as well. I'd be surprised if this disc doesn't inspire a new generation of young players to spend time plunking out Alicia's parts. Additional keys supplied by Onree Gill and Arcell Vickers. ERNIE RIDEOUT

(J Records, www.jrecords.com)

Kent Strand

The Kent Strand Trio

Kent Strand is one of today's best-kept secrets in piano jazz. He isn't flashy, though he commands a formidable technique. Being a definite admirer of Bill Evans, Kent chooses tight, concise, extremely lyrical phrasing, yet his music breathes. On his new album, he plays well-chosen standards in the style of the great masters. Every tune shows his clarity of ideas and his mastery of economy. His extensive experience with jazz greats such as Cab Calloway, Benny Carter, and Doc Cheatham make it a shame that he hasn't had wider recognition. This is great classic trio jazz piano that can only come as a result of thoughtful introspection and years of hard work. ANTHONY COMISSO

(Bay Music & Entertainment, www.baymusic.com)

The Lost Trailers

Welcome to the Woods

The rootsy, rockin' appeal of this album is due to a combination of solid songwriting and really sweet supporting instrumental performances. Acoustic guitar, pedal steel, acoustic piano, and B-3 weave a tapestry that is at once familiar and heart-warming. Ryder Lee is the keyboard-playing half of the songwriting team that fronts the Lost Trailers. Wistful lyrics speak of disappointment and acceptance, an outlook probably tempered by the fact that the band has lost all its gear due to theft on two separate tours, in addition to all the other stuff one encounters out on the road. Imagine a tight-knit group vibe influenced by the Hooters, the E Street Band, and the Band, and you've got the idea. ERNIE RIDEOUT

(Republic, www.republic.com)



James Hardway

Big Casino

James Hardway has been a driving force in electronic music since the '80s, working with artists as diverse as Jah Wobble, Billy Ray Martin, and Anne Clark making platinum records worldwide. On *Big Casino*, Hardway's sixth solo album, he creates a pastiche of electronica, jazz, and tribal percussion that further blurs the lines between individual styles to create a hybrid dance music all his own. Using soulful vocal samples and a variety of keyboard sounds over mesmerizing post-house beats, Hardway's Mac-based musical fusion is undeniably accessible. Having spent a lot of time recording in Cuba and Jamaica, there are Caribbean influences blended in to push the music past electronica to more of a world beat album. *Big Casino* is as perfect for the dance floor as it is for chilling out afterwards, a unique balance that Hardway achieves with ease. As both artist and producer, Hardway has found the formula to mix musical integrity with commercial success, and *Big Casino* is the latest high-grade chapter in his ever-growing musical evolution. ROBBIE GENNET

(Hydrogen Dukebox, www.jameshardway.com)



Lisa Gerrard and Patrick Cassidy

Immortal Memory

I recently saw *Whale Rider*, the film for which Lisa Gerrard

(co-founder of Dead Can Dance) contributed an extraordinarily beautiful score. I was captivated by Lisa's music, as I often am. I got the soundtrack CD, and totally dug it — but I found myself hoping for more, since it's been a number of years since her last CD release. Then the mail came, and with it, a copy of this CD. This is expansive, meditative stuff, with Lisa's rich vocal lines arching in langorous phrases supported by dark, subtle electronic orchestration. I didn't exactly time anything, but I suspect the fastest tactus was in the neighborhood of 60 BPM; talk about down-tempo! Lisa sings in Aramaic, Gaelic, Latin, and I believe in nonsense syllables as well; the emotional content is clear in any language, nonetheless. The synth, sampled orchestra, and percussion support is lush, and the slow tempos afford a clear glimpse into Lisa's orchestrational style. Put this on to slow down the pace, and to open your mind. ERNIE RIDEOUT

(4AD, www.4ad.com)



Outkast

Speakerboxx/The Love Below

One of the more ambitious offerings of the year, this double album from platinum duo Outkast is split into solo discs, one for each member of the band. The results run the gamut from hardcore rap to gentle jazz, covering a wide spectrum of styles. Rapper Big Boi is in full effect on his side with his hit single "The Way You Move" and the hypersynth '80s jam "Ghettomusick," but it's Andre 3000 that brings this disc into must-have territory. Playing most of the instruments, including all the various keyboards, Andre has many genuine moments among the memorable songs he's penned. He opens the record with Vegas-worthy lounge orchestration and takes piano solos on post-Prince jams like "Spread." His jungle-jazz take on "My Favorite Things" features some slamming piano work, and his brash musicality is unzipped and swinging. Every song is unique, yet Andre's personality glues it together to make a cohesive record. With *Speakerboxx/The Love Below*, Outkast have made a groundbreaking classic. ROBBIE GENNET

(Arista, www.outkast.com)



Horace Silver

Rockin' With Rachmaninoff

This is a treasure that nearly didn't see the light of day: a Horace