



Fervor Coulee Bluegrass' Favorite Bluegrass Albums of 2016

Donald Teplyske | December 11, 2016

At the end of each year, writers and broadcasters get to indulge themselves and—oh yes—their readers and listeners with their judgements on the year past. I've spent considerable time reviewing the bluegrass albums I heard during the past year, and have come up with my definitive (at least for today) list of Favorite Bluegrass Albums of 2016. Of course, your mileage will vary: I once received a cranky email from the father of a fairly prominent bluegrass artist whose album I didn't include on such a list several years ago. For those such as I, I repeat—these are *my* favorite bluegrass albums of the year. Not the best, 'cause that is silly. And all I can base it on is those albums I've heard, and maybe I somehow missed your son's album...talk to his publicist.

1. Laurie Lewis & the Right Hands- "The Hazel & Alice Sessions" (Spruce and Maple) Laurie Lewis places Hazel Dickens with the bluegrass vocal big-three: Bill Monroe, Carter Stanley, and Lester Flatt. Alice Gerrard is a fearsome master of vocal folk, old-time, and bluegrass. "The Hazel and Alice Sessions" is not only a worthy tribute to a key bluegrass partnership, but an entertaining and formable collection of music. For me, undoubtedly the bluegrass album of the year. Nominated for a Grammy this time out, I could listen to this one every day.

2. Sister Sadie- "Sister Sadie" (Pinecastle) It remains rare for an all-female outfit featuring well-established personalities to come together to perform and record. Sister Sadie is one hell of a band! Presenting Dale Ann Bradley, Tina Adair and Gena Britt with Deanie Richardson and Beth Lawrence, Sister Sadie not only has individual name recognition, but an appealing, unified bluegrass approach. Dedicating the album to bluegrass innovator Lynn Morris, Sister Sadie has paid homage to the power of their gender's role in bluegrass and country music.

3. The Earls of Leicester- "Rattle & Roar" (Rounder Records) Like the Bluegrass Album Band did three decades ago, The Earls of Leicester are more than a bluegrass supergroup. They deftly remind the bluegrass community of what this music is about: no 'nod' to the roots of the music (to use the popular vernacular,) this is a full-blown tribute to the sturdy trunk that has supported the many branches of bluegrass for 70 years. While one may not 'hear' that the album was largely cut live with the musicians playing simultaneously within the same room, you can certainly 'feel' the intimacy of the experience. Everything is precise and note-perfect of course, but listening to "Why Did You Wonder?" one can envision Jerry Douglas nodding to Paul Warren to take a fiddle break after a chorus, Shawn Camp encouraging Charlie Cushman to step-up to deliver a memorable fill, and Jeff White grinning to Barry Bales as the song is brought home. With great regard for the tradition and even greater understanding of the precision required to make this music appear effortless—and the ability to pull it off—"Rattle & Roar" is another outstanding bluegrass recording from The Earls of Leicester.

4. Bryan Sutton- "The More I Learn" (Sugar Hill Records) Hands down, Bryan Sutton is the preeminent contemporary bluegrass guitar player. With clarity, precision, and enthusiasm born of ingenuity and good-taste, he is the 'go-to' player within both the bluegrass and Nashville-country studio recording worlds. All the while, Sutton has maintained a recording presence. While early recordings focused primarily (although not exclusively) on impressive interpretations of familiar instrumentals and fiddle tunes, Sutton has pushed himself on latter albums to develop his songwriting while also presenting himself as a singer. This progression continues with "The More I Learn," with seven originals and co-writes and nine songs featuring Sutton in the lead position. A very satisfying recording that will appeal to those who have come to appreciate Sutton's tasteful approach to bluegrass and acoustic music.

5. Balsam Range- "Mountain Voodoo" (Mountain Home) Balsam Range is a band that encapsulates all that modern bluegrass represents. So consistently impressive that we no longer expect their albums to be 'better than their last,' in less than a decade Balsam Range has hit the plateau of excellence few groups achieve. Like The Del McCoury Band, Blue Highway, and Alison Krauss & Union Station before them, a new release from Balsam Range is measured against their individual legacy. "Mountain Voodoo" lacks nothing.

6. James Reams & the Barnstormers- "Rhyme & Reason" (Mountain Redbird) I've never hidden the fact that James Reams is one of my favourite people in bluegrass. He gets to the heart of the music each and every time, whether interpreting an under-heard classic of the genre, reinventing a country song, or performing one of his many excellent original numbers. Now based in Arizona, the longtime Brooklyn bluegrass mainstay returned this spring with a wonderful new album, "Rhyme & Season." "Rhyme & Season" is most deliberately a concept album, a rarity in bluegrass circles. It includes songs from Mike Stinson ("Angel of the Evening," Marty Stuart ("Rough Around the Edges,") and Lawrence Shoberg ("Born to Roll") and from the catalogs of Porter Wagoner ("\$100 Funeral") and Charley Pride ("Special,") songs that capture the experiences of life's outliers, the lost and often invisible.

7. Jeff White- "Right Beside You" (Jeff White Bluegrass Records) "Right Beside You" is simply a terrific bluegrass album, one provided shades of influence from the Americana tree. As a result of the familiarity of the material, "Right Beside You" sounds classic. Because of the quality of performance, it is.

8. Blue Highway- "Original Traditional" (Rounder Records) Their eleventh album and first since Rob Ickes departed, continues Blue Highway's recent blueprint: original music written or co-written by band members along with a single traditional song. The album's title alludes to the group's tendency to bridge the generations of bluegrass through recognition and reverence for the traditions of the music while ensuring a contemporary, original perspective is always present. With three formidable lead vocalists and key songwriters-Tim Stafford, Shawn Lane, and Wayne Taylor- along with Jason Bursleson's alternately aggressive and pensive, propulsive and sympathetic banjo presence (his tune "Alexander's Run" is a highlight of the recording) and an instrumental lineup as strong as has ever been staged, Blue Highway is one of the top bands in the business. And this is an excellent bluegrass album.

9. Danny Paisley & Southern Grass- "Weary River" (Patuxent Music) "Weary River" was released in late 2015, too late to be considered for most year-end lists including my own, but the album received its due in 2016. For those who continue to appreciate bluegrass unadorned by passing fancy, this album has much to offer.

10. Del McCoury Band- "Del and Woody" (McCoury Music) As produced previous sets from Billy Bragg & Wilco, Jay Farrar, et al, and The Klezmatics, lyrics stored within the Woody Guthrie Archives were turned over to McCoury to be repurposed. This rootsy set, fully bluegrass in sound and intent, is the result and the first thing one may notice is how much it sounds like a typical Del McCoury Band album: if unaware of its genesis, one wouldn't be surprised by anything included here. The musicianship is naturally first-class. McCoury has crafted these 12 songs within the well-established family oeuvre, balancing up tempo, but still substantial numbers and reflective, even maudlin songs. "Del and Woody" should satisfy those searching for fresh takes on Guthrie lyrics as well as the legion that devours music of The Del McCoury Band.

11. Sam Bush- "Storyman" (Sugar Hill Records) Sam Bush, it can be argued, is the most significant mandolin player of the last fifty years. Bowling Green, Kentucky's favoured son has long been the bellwether of all things acoustic and 'grassy. "Storyman" comes almost seven years after the exceptional "Circles Around Me," an album that signified a high-point in Bush's considerable solo output. As strong as that album was (it made my Top Ten for 2009 and, in hindsight, it would now be certain of a Top 5 berth) "Storyman" is an even more complete encapsulation of Bush's approach to acoustic, bluegrass shaded Americana.

12. Special Consensus- "Long I Ride" (Compass Records) For more than forty years, Greg Cahill has been making bluegrass music as leader of the Special Consensus. Never in that time, as far as I'm aware, has he experienced the type of success as seen in the past few years since signing on with Compass Records and Alison Brown, who also produces this record. They are a stellar bluegrass group, one of the finest in the business. "Long I Ride" is further evidence of this true life fact.

13. The Grascals- "...and then there's this" (Mountain Home) One of bluegrass music's strongest and most engaging performing groups, The Grascals have consistently freshened traditional sounds with modern, progressive elements. From start to finish, in this case Bill Monroe's plaintive "Highway of Sorrow," this album maintains the best parts of The Grascals' country-tempered style of bluegrass, with lots of banjo from Kristin Scott Benson: The Grascals are back at the top of their game with "and then there's this..."

14. Town Mountain- "Southern Crescent" (LoHi Records) "Southern Crescent" isn't so much a departure from previous albums, especially 2012's excellent "Leave the Bottle," as it is an intense continuation of their southern influences and hard-scrabble bluegrass sound. As raucous as this approach is, there is a place within the (sometimes) staid and constrained bluegrass community for exactly this type of music. It isn't trying to be country, it sure isn't leaning toward easy listening, NPR pap-it is bluegrass, just not the type favoured by Bill Monroe. For that matter, it isn't of the flavour projected by Doyle Lawson, Rhonda Vincent, Lonesome River Band, or most of today's mainstream headliners.

15. The Boxcars- "Familiar With the Ground" (Mountain Home) Continuing their own tradition of excellence, with the self-produced "Familiar With the Ground," The Boxcars ably demonstrate that there is nothing better than a five-piece bluegrass band.

16. Kristin Scott Benson- "Stringworks" (Mountain Home) A beautifully balanced bluegrass album, one that alternates between instrumentals and songs. A very well-constructed and superbly executed bluegrass release, one that reveals the continued growth of one of bluegrass music's most respected banjoists and personalities.

17. Audie Blaylock & Redline- "The Road That Winds" (Patuxent Music) Like his previous releases, "The Road That Winds" is a bluegrass album firmly down the dotted, middle line-it holds a steady course without drifting toward the edges, meeting anything in its way head on. Blaylock comes from the Jimmy Martin school, and his music will always be rooted in that tradition. However, over the course of their evolution, the younger members of the group-and obviously, Blaylock, too-have kept their sights on progressing with their music, ensuring they remain relevant as artists and entertainers. It's straight-ahead bluegrass, but forward looking in execution.

18. Corrina Rose Logston- "Bluegrass Fiddler" (Patuxent Music) The title of the album is an acute summation. This is a bluegrass fiddle album, and a darned fine one. While I will sometimes drift-off (to use a polite term for 'fall asleep') listening to a fiddle-dominated recording, "Bluegrass Fiddler" kept me intrigued from start to finish. No doubt part of the reason was that Logston's assembled band keeps things interesting, not just supporting her fiddling showcase, but sounding like a true band who has worked up a strong set of numbers.

19. Josh Williams- "Modern Day Man" (Rounder Records) A stunning bluegrass vocalist and guitarist, Williams' contributions to Rhonda Vincent's concert appearances are significant, never failing to impress. With the release of "Modern Day Man," Williams delivers evidence that second chances must be earned through honesty, acceptance and no little bit of hard work.

20. Jeff Scroggins & Colorado- "Ramblin Feels Good" (Self-released) With flashes of greatness, "Ramblin Feels Good" is an above-average bluegrass release from a group that has quietly established a reputation as one of the more satisfying bands working the bluegrass circuit.