



Austin violinist-turned-fiddler-turned-singer **CARRIE RODRIGUEZ** capped her multiyear tutelage with songwriter Chip Taylor in her 2006 debut, *Seven Angels on a Bicycle*. While the album featured several Taylor compositions, it was a folksy and soulful stunner that was clearly a step up for the theretofore reserved Rodriguez. Now ***SHE AIN'T ME*** (Manhattan/Back Porch) makes an about-face, abandoning rootsy twang for full-blown Dixie Chicks-like pop bombast. The comparison is apt: Not only does Rodriguez co-write with Chicks collaborators Gary Louris and Dan Wilson, but she seems equally anxious to break out of an alt-country ghetto. It's a brave move; Rodriguez has a charming voice, but unlike Natalie Maines, she can't always carry the weight of a big production. As song after song builds its way to a soaring chorus, the effect can be numbing. Yet for the first time, Rodriguez has her name on all but one of the eleven tunes, and her material is strong—lyrically intimate and full of loss. She proves she knows her way to a song's emotional core, even when she has to strip away a bit more gloss to get there.

Menacing, grandiose, romantic, apocalyptic: The music of **SHEARWATER** is no summertime fling. The four-piece band is the brainchild of ornithologist and Austin transplant Jonathan Meiburg, who delivers his strange, arresting imagery in a voice—part crooning, part ghostly falsetto—that evokes an anguished Bryan Ferry. Shearwater's music is typified by a sense of urgency, yet the band often works in hushed tones embellished by vibes, piano, hammer dulcimer, woodwinds, and harp that are then turned on their end with discordant explosions of guitar rock. **ROOK** (Matador), the group's fifth and most fully realized album, clocks in at a lean 35 minutes, and it wastes no time showing all that the band can do. The first two songs alone are a stylistic tour de force: "On the Death of the Waters" begins with a whisper, then awakens with a typhoonlike power chord; "Rook" features a pounding beat alongside whooping vocals and a mariachi trumpet. Meiburg's lyrics are obtuse and bird-obsessed and seemingly hint at the impending extinction of the human race. Heavy going? Yeah, but original and positively riveting.

"Overexposed" doesn't begin to cover it. After innumerable recent releases, not to mention all the seventy-fifth birthday hoopla, **WILLIE NELSON** again? You'd think no one else made records in Texas. Actually, ***TWO MEN WITH THE BLUES*** (Blue Note) was recorded in New York City. What distinguishes it from the others? Willie's partner, for one—esteemed New Orleans trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, the artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center—and the band, Marsalis' straight-up jazz quintet, for another. If the thought of Nelson's singing in such company conjures unpleasant duet memories of, say, Julio Iglesias, think again. This live recording swings, and Nelson fits in like another hepcat. There have always been jazz inflections in his vocal style, both in tone and timing, and here he uses them to full effect. Despite a couple of clunkers, "Rainy Day Blues" and "Night Life" are terrific, and hearing Nelson launch into one of his famed meandering guitar solos in the midst of such harmonic mastery only adds to the fun. Plus, anything that loosens up the notoriously uptight Marsalis can't be a bad thing.

Carl Finch

Since 1979 the guitarist, keyboardist, and accordionist (below, center) has led Denton's famed "nuclear polka" outfit Brave Combo, whose latest project has been to score the sound track for *As the Wrench Turns*, a PBS animated series based on the NPR program *Car Talk*. The show debuted July 9.

How did this project come about? Doug Berman, the producer of *Car Talk*, suggested our polka version of "The William Tell Overture" as the theme for the show. The TV producers went for it and asked us to do the majority of the scoring. We set up a studio so we could compose as we watched the video in real time. We'll do a number of shows for the series if this flies. All we can do now is sit around and see what the response is.

But you're not sitting around. We're going to the Midwest, the East Coast. We're touring where the money is: festivals, concerts in parks, pavilions. We'll be playing at Westfest, in Texas, in late August.

The band does many unusual things. What's been your weirdest show? We once played in L.A., and David Byrne came out with John Goodman and Bruce Willis. But as the show ended, the bouncers kicked them all out. Incredibly rude. That moment made me realize that nothing is going to be how I thought it was going to be.



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