

On music

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [March 24, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Written in Chalk

Buddy and Julie Miller
New West



Dare the Untried

Voices
self-released



Goodnight Oslo

Robyn Hitchcock

Yep Roc



808s & Heartbreak

Kanye West

Roc-A-Fella



Lay It Down

Al Green
Blue Note

Buddy Miller has worked with and provided material for some of the most prominent names in country music, including Emmylou Harris, Steve Earle and Lucinda Williams. The Dixie Chicks and Brooks & Dunn have covered his songs; Grammy winner Shawn Colvin maintains that “there’s absolutely no one like Buddy anywhere.” Still, he remains an unknown to many country lovers.

Written in Chalk (New West) is an iridescent disc by Buddy and his wife, Julie, herself a distinctive singer-songwriter. The Millers concoct harmony that’s equal parts honey and whiskey. “Gasoline and Matches” celebrates love with a bump and grind that is as incendiary as the title, while “Memphis Jane” rides the rusty rails of a downtuned, snarly honky-tonk guitar. The song spotlights a female drifter who

changes first names like soiled blouses: “She wants to ride, but she ain’t going nowhere / She wants to ride, but she don’t even know where.”

Heralded by handclaps and fiddle riffs fatter than ripe grapes, “Ellis County” celebrates simple country life: “Take me back when Daddy led the singing on Sunday / Nobody had to plow until Monday.” The sad-as-a-bloodhound song “What You Gonna Do Leroy” tells a man-done-wrong-by-his-woman story, with a sweet cameo by former Led Zeppelin singer Robert Plant.

When Julie gets the spotlight, she glimmers on “Long Time.” Dobros, fiddles and slide guitars step aside for jazz guitar, muted trumpet and piano; the track simmers with heartbreak.

Not every track nails it. Simplistic lyrics dog “One Part, Two Part” (“One part love, two parts pain / One part sunshine, two parts rain”), and the song struggles to up the ante dynamically. But it’s easy to feel spoiled after hearing an album closer as beautiful and brooding as “The Selfishness of Man.” Buddy’s voice creaks with a weariness until it is kissed by an Emmylou Harris harmony. Together they express trepidation, underpinned by vibrato guitar and a lone drum: “Why can’t we see the folly and the uselessness of hate? / Love could lead to understanding / Maybe it’s not too late.”

Buddy, who turns 57 this year, has much left to say, with lyrics that at turns delight and challenge the listener, and sonic textures as sharp as an Edward Hopper painting. His album *The Best of the Hightone Years* includes cuts from his fine *Cruel Moon* album (the title track and the menacing “Does My Ring Burn Your Finger”), as well as four duets with Julie.

Other CDs of note:

If people are looking for a folk act to play at the next School of the Americas protest rally, the Chicago-based Voices should make the short list. Its sublime, peace-and-love-era harmonies at times bump up against strident lyrics. (“From the SOA to Guantánamo Bay, the torture still remains”), but credit this outfit for mixing lean, hummable melodies with breezy acoustic grooves. It also knows how to have fun, as evidenced on the Latin flavored “Changed,” which explores love’s fickle nature. Available at cdbaby.com.

This British psychedelic popster toured the U.S. last year to perform his spare solo masterpiece "I Often Dream of Trains." On *Oslo*, Hitchcock gets back to a band-based sound, leading off in slinky, surreal fashion with the "What You Is," which sounds like Creedence Clearwater twisted in a funhouse mirror. "Saturday Groovers" sounds like a reel of audio tape rescued from the *Shindig!* archives, while the compelling title track mounts up on a thunderhead of moody, minor-key 12-string electric guitar.

If you're expecting the celebratory Kanye who released "Jesus Walks," guess again. The crumpled paper heart on the cover says it all as West leaps into demon-purge mode following the shocking death of his mother from botched plastic surgery and the breakup of a long relationship. In "Welcome to Heart break," West sings: "Look back on my life and my life gone / Where did I go wrong?" Still, West shines in "Say You Will," which suspends a melody and tenor vocal that singer Seal would gladly steal over a creepy loop of computerized blips, synth strings and distorted drums.

The man behind "Let's Stay Together" delivers 11 songs about romantic love and staying true through the rough patches. The midtempo title cut, punctuated by horn stabs, smokes with a string-laden groove and a gospel preacher's vocal (Green is a minister). Throbbing bass lines dance with Hammond organ riffs, and the album's sublime, nonslick approach makes it sound like a 1970s find. Guests include Anthony Hamilton, Corinne Bailey Rae and John Legend, who duets with Green on the satin-smooth "Stay with Me (By the Sea)."