

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [June 12, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Sermon on Exposition Boulevard

Rickie Lee Jones

New West



Please Come Home

Dustin Kensrue

Equal Vision



Blue On Blue

Leigh Nash

One Son/Nettwerk



Autumn Defense

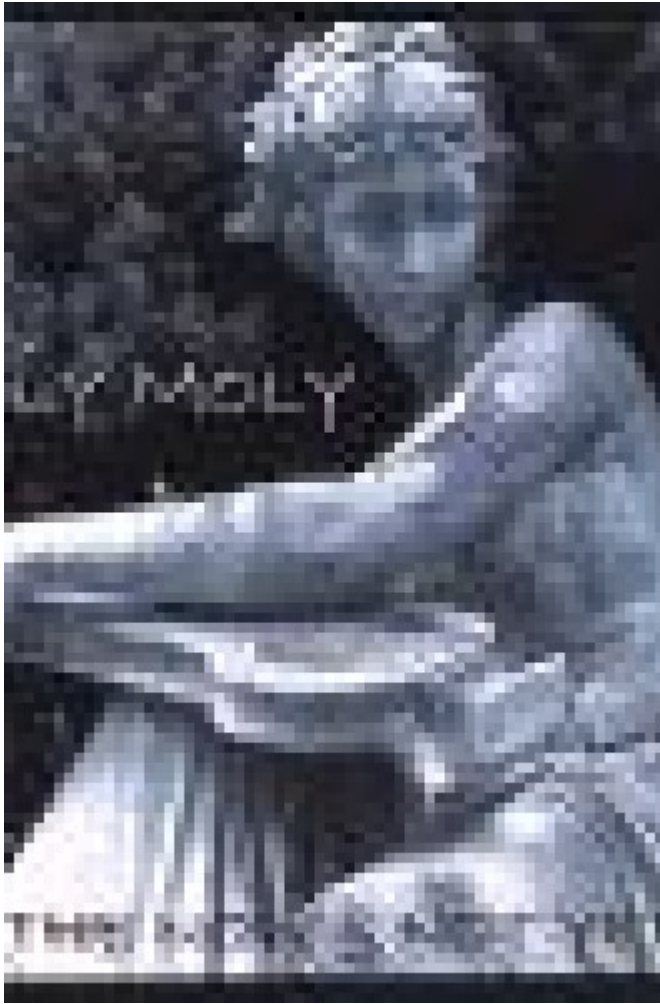
The Autumn Defense
Broadmoor



Momento

Bebel Gilberto

Ziriguiboom/Six Degrees



The Now & Not Yet

Holy Moly Band
self-released

Rickie Lee Jones broke into the music business in 1979 with the jazz-pop novelty hit “Chuck E’s in Love,” and she has been a maddening enigma ever since. At best she’s inconsistent, at worst she’s the embodiment of the tortured artist: all tantrum and attitude with little worthy fruit to show. So when Jones embarked on an album framed by gospel cinemascapes, you could feel music critics circling like Pharisee vultures. What business does Jones have tackling scripture? Isn’t this the kind of task better suited for Christian artists such as Buddy and Julie Miller or T-Bone Burnett?

It seems Jones was betting on a sort of creative resurrection—which, depending on your viewpoint, either reeks of calculation or suggests an earnest reach for salvation. Jones herself wrote in the midst of this project: “We have Christ and

though there are few words, they are enough, they are enough to last two thousand years.”

The Sermon on Exposition Boulevard (New West) turns out to be a triumph, from the vertigo-inducing vocal-and-organ swirl of “Falling Up” to the dust-meets-rust fumes that fuel “Nobody Knows My Name” (“Now I walk among them and I sing to them / And I open up my wrists and nobody knows my name”). Jones embraces redemption and salvation as if her life depended on them, and the guitars, drums and Jones’s weary voice exude a startling authority.

“It Hurts” builds its bloody bed on slightly off-tuned guitars, creating a seasick feeling. “Donkey Ride,” like at least three other songs on the album, is an improvised first take that continues the atonality: Jones sings like a toothless madwoman witnessing Christ riding in the blistering desert heat while mule-stubborn guitar strings squeal and creak. If you like things more traditional, “Circle in the Sand” rambles infectiously, a Velvet Underground update for the pre-apocalypse. As Jones raps and rants like an exuberant female Lou Reed, you’ll hear soft bells and a I-IV-I chord progression that owes more than a passing nod to the Velvet’s “I’m Waiting for the Man.”

If you find Tom Waits (Jones’s ex-boyfriend), experimental folk or wobbly female singers irritating, you might opt to pass on this record. But with the overwhelming raft of albums that play the gospel like a simplistic tale for cardboard-cutout heroes, we need works like this that explore the blood, sweat, sacrifice and ugly moments of Christ’s life. *Sermon* goes a long way toward restoring the proper balance.

Other CDs of note:

Orange County’s Dustin Kensrue lives up to the “dust” part of his name on this solo outing, a lean 30-minute effort that conjures fever dreams of Johnny Cash collaborating with the Replacements’ Paul Westerberg. Redolent with acoustic textures, the album tells tales of prodigals struggling and rescued, as on “I Knew You Before” and “Blood and Wine.” The latter tune kicks loose from its stall, building in tempo and emotion on the chug of Kensrue’s acoustic guitar and Chris Jones’s freight-train drumming. Kensrue sings with the raspy conviction of a man who honed his voice on a stage of discarded packing crates.

Only 30 years old, Nash has been singing professionally since she was 14. In that time, she’s seen the chart-topping glory of “Kiss Me” (with Sixpence None the

Richer) and the sadness surrounding that art-pop band's recent breakup. Here, she bounces back in polished pop form, and the results enchant and delight. From the arpeggiated strings and sneaky sax that frame "Just a Little" to the bobbing sea foam of drums, distorted guitars and keyboard textures on "Ocean Sized Love," *Blue on Blue* boasts radio-ready economy and smart spirituality. The one constant: Nash's voice—fluttery, full of soft hiccups and conjuring images of creamy vapor trails in a Sunday afternoon sky.

Wilco fans—known for their jealous adoration of the band—may grate at this, but the 2004 release *A Ghost Is Born* sounded nowhere near as captivating and accessible as *Circles*, the Autumn Defense album by Wilco members John Stirratt and Pat Sansone. If *Circles* elicited winter chills, this follow-up is all about spring thrills: the songs grow on the listener with leafy stealth. With its flutes, bongos and brushstrokes of a 12-string acoustic guitar, "City Bells" brews a robust bossa nova that suggests 1967 more than 2007. "This Will Fall Away" conjures the same era—its wispy acoustic textures suggest David Crosby's work with the Byrds.

Gilberto comes from bossa nova royalty—she's the daughter of João Gilberto and singer Miúcha, and she made her first appearance at Carnegie Hall with saxist Stan Getz when she was just nine. Now 41, she's on her third solo album and sporting a voice so sultry she cordons the listener in steam and incense, as on the funky, trippy "Bring Back the Love." Throughout this CD, Gilberto (whether singing in English or Portuguese) melds old-school bossa melody and ultramodern percussive fancy—the beats burnished smooth as sandblasted stone. Then there's "Os Novos Yorkinos," an acoustic guitar romp intimate as a campfire jam session.

The Jesus Movement music of the early 1970s grafted direct, spirit-infused lyrics onto groovy Woodstock vibes. Strong echoes of that approach can be heard on this independent disc by a sextet based in Naples, Florida. The opener "In Your Time" peaks with a fuzzed-out wah-wah guitar solo, while "Security" recalls the classic-rock swagger of bands such as Heart, Kansas and Rush. ("Here we sit / Mortals are we / Captured within our depravity.") "I Need the Light," with its organ-and-guitar turbo swell, could pass for a Foghat or Pat Travers outtake. The production and busy arrangements need fine tuning, but the jubilant melodies and spirit make this a worshipful rock music throwback.