

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [December 25, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Pigeons Couldn't Sleep

Peter Himmelman
Himmasongs



The Best of Jonathan Rundman: 20 Songs from the 20th Century

Jonathan Rundman

Salt Lady



All This Could Kill You

Ben + Vesper
Sounds Familyre



Hudson River Wind Meditations

Lou Reed

Sounds True



We'll Never Turn Back

Mavis Staples

Anti



First Morning

Information Superhighway
self-released

Peter Himmelman, formerly the bushy-haired hero of the New Wave band Sussman Lawrence, has transitioned into a middle-aged rocker, and his music reveals only the best results. His songs have a muscular, energetic groove that begs comparisons with Bob Dylan—his father-in-law. The lyrics balance pungent humor and well-versed, poignant observations. Yet what ultimately sets Himmelman apart is his ability to see straight to the core of things, digging and mining for slivers of the miraculous. Himmelman may not sell as many records as Johnny Cash or Bono, but *The Pigeons Couldn't Sleep* (Himmasongs) proves that he belongs in their league.

With his soulful, semifrayed tenor, Himmelman remains a savvy and edgy singer-songwriter. As the album's title suggests, Himmelman sees a society so fearful and

paranoid that even cooing creatures need a shot of Xanax. The title track opens in a haze of slide guitar and percolating keyboard, with Himmelman crooning: “You can break a stone with a hammer, but it ain’t as easy as it seems / Some things in life go smooth, but they’re mostly in our dreams.” It’s a song Dylan himself would be proud to own.

The Jewish faith seems to inform some of Himmelman’s topics. “There Comes a Time” celebrates the mending of a broken spirit, with horns and heavy rhythm creating a soul ditty that sounds breezy but heralds the whirlwind: “I’m afraid it’s time to say your prayers / You can stop running around, baby stop putting on your airs . . . There comes a time to mend your ways, and that time is now.”

Pigeons includes an 84-minute DVD that adds to the “all killer and no filler” impression of this project. Sardonicly titled *Rock God*, this is a brilliant piece of self-observation with lessons and laughter for anyone who has harbored dreams of stardom. The DVD presents Himmelman, now in his late 40s—lauded time and again in music magazines—still holding on to the rock mentality that better days are just around the corner. As the footage alternates between the hysterical (Himmelman answering questions while using a urinal) and the sober (footage of the Sussman Lawrence band which shows how he’s aged), *Rock God* seems to embody the proverb “Many are called, but few are chosen.”

Himmelman has made career sacrifices for his family and his faith, passing up chances for greater fame and fortune (he declined to open for Rod Stewart because he would have had to perform on the Sabbath). He holds claim to riches of a different sort—from fiercely loyal fans who’ll follow him anywhere to a body of wry, hard-hitting work poised to outlast pop-culture trends.

Other CDs of note:

This quirky, clever Lutheran rocker from Minneapolis has experimented a lot—he once enlisted the Silos as a backup band, and he issued a 52-song double-disc tied to the liturgical calendar. Here Rundman collects his favorite tunes. “Tape” and “Meeting Nixon,” from the *Recital* album, have always been two of this reviewer’s favorite Rundman tunes, while “Front Row at the Fashion Show” could be Neil Young’s acoustic-rock commentary on a fashionista gathering.

The new family of musicians on Sufjan Stevens’s Sounds Familyre records has redefined what it means to marry artistic passion and spiritual vision. No wonder

Stevens (of “Illinoise” fame) plays multiple instruments on this bracing effort by Ben and Vesper Stamper (Ben is also a pastoral worker, song leader and elder of a small church in West Orange, New Jersey). “Kill” should delight fans of Archer Pruitt, Stevens or the Sea and Cake. Other highlights: “An Honest Bluff” with its dark male-female harmonies and swaths of wintry accordion, and “Vow Takers,” with an acoustic vibe stolen from a walking daydream.

Could it be that Lou Reed—the proto-punker who once sang the praises of shooting heroin and made an album of machine noise—has created a soundscape for meditation, tai chi and bodywork? You bet. Only four tracks make up this hour-plus CD of impressionistic pieces that defy Reed’s “Walk on the Wild Side” persona. “Move Your Heart” is 29 minutes of pulsating, gurgling synthesizer absent of musical dynamic—the aural equivalent of a swirling tide pool. “Find Your Note” uses feedback tones and subsonic rumble in similar fashion.

With splendid backing from drummer Jim Keltner (John Lennon, George Harrison) and guitarist Ry Cooder (Buena Vista Social Club), Staples draws on and enriches the musical canon of the civil rights movement. The album opener “Down in Mississippi” crawls right out of the Delta marsh with a menacing ashcan beat and Staples’s down-so-long blues drawl. On “We Shall Not Be Moved,” Staples takes this gospel standard into delightful, defiant territory, with tremolo guitar and basso profundo backup vocals.

Rob Clearfield, the Sunday-morning pianist at Chicago’s LaSalle Street Church, is a star in the making. Drawing on disparate influences—progressive and modern rock, gospel and straight jazz—*First Morning* is the result of his collaboration with vocalist Leslie Beukelman, whom he met at the Chicago College of Performing Arts. Together they create both tender, spellbinding beauty, as on “Your Voice-Part 1,” and pulsating, assertive dynamics, as on “Simple Unfolding.” The closing track, “Song for a Child,” is an earnest jazz lullaby, with Clearfield’s piano sketching streaks of twilight. Available at cdbaby.com.