

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

In Review



King of My World

Sam Bush
Sugar Hill



The Grandma Project

Kara Kesselring
self-released



Befriended

the Innocence Mission
Badman



Dichotomy A

GRITS

Gotee



Volume and Density

Duvall

Asian Man



Lágrimas Negras

Bebo & Cigala

Bluebird



Ashes

Michael McDermott

Pauper Sky



Country's 20 Classic Gospel Songs of the Century

various artists

New Haven



Even More

Anthony Evans

Epic



Way Out

Justin Roberts
Hear Diagonally



Found

Todd Proctor
Floodgate



Childhood Eyes

Joe Rogness

Two Fish

If you are a regular listener to radio's *A Prairie Home Companion* or a bluegrass fan, chances are you know the signature sound of Sam Bush, a mandolinist who commands his instrument with sublime grace one moment, ferocious jig energy the next. He also has a pleasing voice, tinged with gravel on songs such as the positive-thinking "A Better Man" and the steady-rocking "Bless His Heart."

Working with fellow members of Lake View Presbyterian Church in Chicago, Kesselring has rendered a tender jewel, a collection of songs from her grandmother's hymnal. It starts with the jazzy effervescence of "This Little Light of Mine," then unwinds into numbers such as "Lead, Kindly Light" and "Amazing Grace" that glow with a campfire intimacy. The album closer, "Call Me," is a

Kesselring original that makes a tidy bookend with “This Little Light,” sporting a complementary melody and up-tempo feel.

The husband-wife team of Don and Karen Peris, along with bassist Mike Bitts, have made spiritually charged music since their teens. Fans of the Sundays and Over the Rhine will find much to love in Karen Peris’s luminescent voice, which anchors a home-recorded album sparkling in simplicity. A compelling lyricist and storyteller, she adapts the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem “Heaven-Haven (A nun takes the veil)” as if it were her own.

Too often, hip-hop celebrates profanity, violence, misogyny, braggadocio and bling bling. This album not only transcends those stereotypes but is graced by supple, confident rapping and a nice spectrum of R&B stylings—from the Marvin Gaye-flavored soul of “Hittin’ Curves” to the gospel-meets-blues confection “Mind Blowin’,” spiked with Hammond organ and wah-wah guitar. It boasts dense (but not daunting) melodic layers and lyrics that thoughtfully embrace subjects from gangbanging (“Gutter Boy”) to staking a claim for rap respect through Christ (“Bobbin’ Bouncin’”).

In the late ’90s, brothers Josh and Eli Caterer led the Smoking Popes, a Capitol Records band that turned heads on the international modern rock circuit. Then singer/song-writer/guitarist Josh became a Christian, which led to the Popes’ breakup—though it didn’t silence his passion for hard pop. *Volume* recalls the Foo Fighters and later-era Posies, but there’s a noticeable difference in lyrics, as in “Jesus Never Leaves Me”: “Oh, your hand to hold, as we get old and everything fades / Oh, you can hold me tight, but you cannot go with me into the light when it’s my time to go.”

Suspended in a jazzy haze between the Gypsy Kings and Buena Vista Social Club, *Lágrimas Negras* (“Black Tears”) teams legendary Cuban pianist Bebo Valdés—now in his mid-80s—with Flamenco singer Diego el Cigala, 50 years his junior. The result: a gorgeous, intimate album steeped in minor-key emotion and plaintive singing, framed by sparse rhythm and the occasional appearance of classical guitar or alto sax. On *Lágrimas* el Cigala sings to a departed lover: “Even though you’ve abandoned me / Even though you’ve killed my dreams. . . . In my dreams I overwhelm you / With blessings.”

McDermott, whose songwriting is always informed by his Irish Catholic background, has produced one of his most powerful albums to date. It's the kind of anthemic rock record that doesn't find much favor anymore, though it hardly sounds dated or slick. A key reason: McDermott plumbs timeless spiritual themes on songs such as "Sword of Damocles." Propelled by acoustic guitar, a jaunty harmonica and a beat reminiscent of Midnight Oil's "The Dead Heart," "Damocles" scraps for elusive hope on the blade edge of life's difficulties: "Wake up to the sounds of your aching heart / To see your soul's enemy approach your rampart."

Title hyperbole aside, this collection—released in conjunction with the Country Music Hall of Fame—gathers mighty stars of the present (Alison Krauss & The Cox Family join on a steady-rolling "I Know Who Holds Tomorrow") and the past (Elvis Presley delivers his sweet rendition of "Crying in the Chapel"). All the performances capture timeless themes of surrender, serenity and strength. For its rustic appeal, nothing matches the half-yodeled yearning of Hank Williams's "I Saw the Light," while Patsy Cline's "Life's a Railway to Heaven" chugs on a steamy rhythm and "choo-choo" vocals by the Jordanares.

-->

President Bush is an Anthony Evans fan, as is Kirk Franklin—one of Evans's major musical influences and a co-producer of this album. Evans (who also sings backup for Franklin) makes ample use of urban sounds here, melding hip-hop drum machines to Spanish-flavored acoustic guitars on the energetic "You Know My Name." On the softer side, "Unity (We Stand)" is a tasty stew of gurgling guitars and keyboards, which gets a mid-song jolt from a backing gospel choir: "We stand / We come / We lift our voice as one." In the midst of it all, Evans brandishes a youthful voice that boasts a wide range and expressive emotional palette.

With a voice hinting at James Taylor and John Lennon, Justin Roberts is a kids' singer-songwriter nonpareil. Roberts, who earned his M.Div. at the University of Chicago, makes children's music with smarts and heart, penning songs adults can embrace without succumbing to sugar sickness. "Airplane of Food," spiced with ska horns, captures a youngster trying to feed his sibling, even though junior won't open his mouth. When Roberts sings, "Baby brother, go 'ahhh' / Please go 'ahhh,'" a chorus of backup "ahhhs" echo him in a clever twist. Another big winner: "Picture Day," a power-pop lament about a school picture nightmare.

Praise and worship has been popular in Christian music for several years now, and here Todd Proctor recalls 1980s rock acts such as The Outfield, Foreigner and Rick Springfield. If that sounds like the perfect recipe for musical cheese, guess again: Proctor, a worship leader for the past seven years, does not tackle the task as a neophyte. "Stir in Me," buoyed by swirling organ and Proctor's frayed singing, is instantly catchy in a ready-for-radio way. While the musical foundation grows formulaic over the 11-song span, the album will easily appeal to those who favor contemporary worship styles.

With a voice like faded denim and a polished delivery, calling to mind the likes of Dan Fogelberg (or Bebo Norman, if you're a Christian music fan), Rogness strikes a delicate balance between poetic tenderness and strong, strident textures.

"Childhood Eyes" is all the more remarkable an effort given that prior to its release, Rogness was a highly paid professional outside the music world, flying first class and hobnobbing with corporate executives. But this collection is far from the work of a bored yuppie; on songs such as the title cut, Rogness sings and writes about the tensions that drive a life of faith and discovery.