

Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Divine Liturgy of the Wretched Exiles

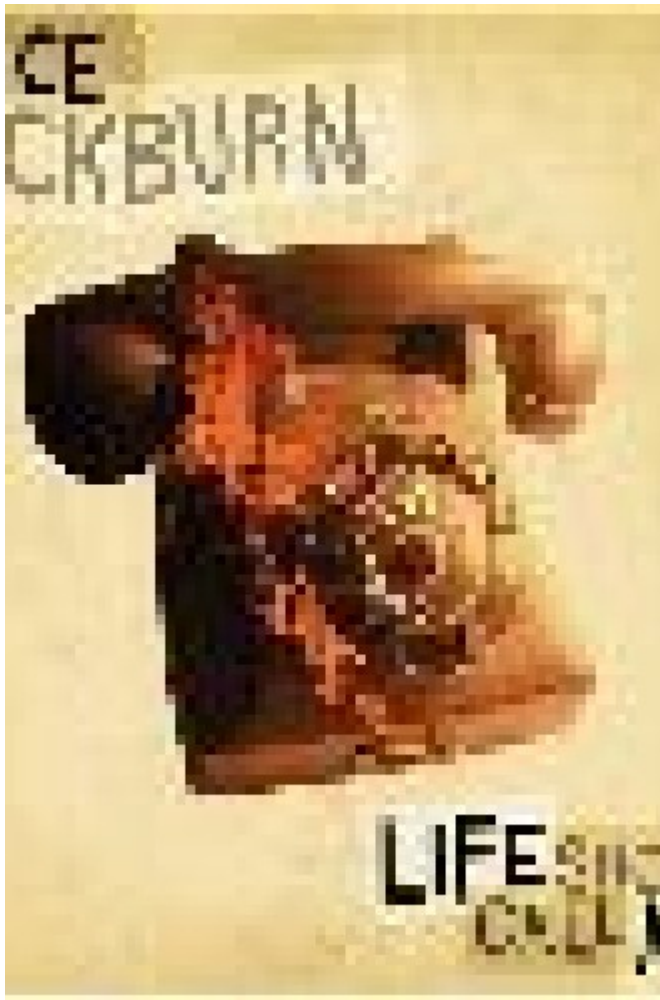
the Psalters
self-released



Driven to My Knees

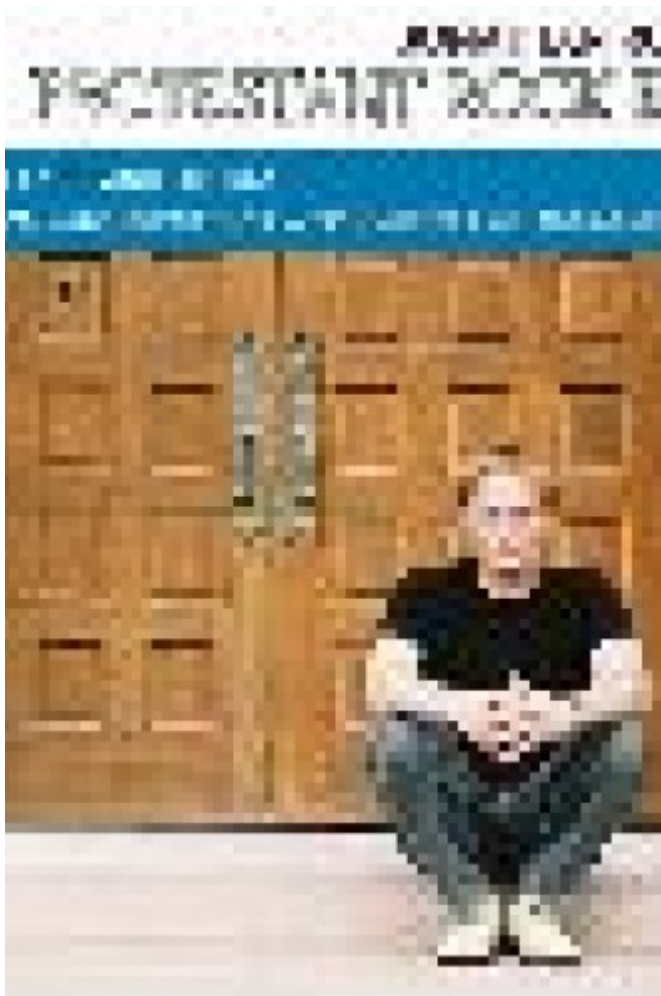
Tom Feldmann

Magnolia



Life Short Call Now

Bruce Cockburn
Rounder



Protestant Rock Ethic

Jonathan Rundman
Salt Lady



Antidepressant

Lloyd Cole

One Little Indian



Broken (and Other Rogue States)

Luke Doucet
Six Shooter

Psalm 96 issues an invitation repeated throughout the Old Testament: “Sing to the Lord a new song.” Today’s Christian musicians follow that call into vistas that David could never have foreseen, from Celtic folk to speed metal to reggae. Yet it’s hard to imagine a foray as bold, brash and challenging as *The Divine Liturgy of the Wretched Exiles*, by the Psalters (it’s a self-released album: www.psalters.com).

If one could reduce sacred music to slideshow archetypes featuring a gospel choir, a praise band and a slick Christian music act, the Psalters might be depicted as a crude tribe of ragmen and women giving in to Walt Whitman’s “barbaric yawp” as they wrestle with brokenness, temptation and demons too frightening to name and with the shudder-surrender to Truth itself.

A self-described nomadic tribe “walking in the footsteps of ancients past,” the Psalters take their cue from the temple musicians of 3,000 years ago: “They were people intending to glorify God through music,” the group states on its Web site. “They did not perform for the sake of entertainment, utility, or artistic expression.” The Psalters summon a spirit of abandon and wailing on *Exiles*, organized into a liturgical movement of 21 tracks. “Trisagion” and “Psalm 6” open things with a whirlwind of percussive cannon shots, organ swirls, sandstorm Arabic scales, and vocals that sound as if ripped from the soul of a penitent trapped in a lice-infested hairshirt. It’s exhausting to listen to, but closer to capturing the feel of soul-crashing prayer than any song in your music library.

Elsewhere, *Exiles* takes more carnivalesque turns. The minor-key “Gloria” pumps with oscillating cello and accordion before a whirling-dervish collision of handclaps and doumbek and djembe drums enters the mix. “He vindicates the little ones and gives worth to their suffering,” the male and female singers exult, conjuring images of praise rendered around a Sinai desert campfire.

Then there is “Dig It Up,” dressed in the style of a chain-gang chant, with spooky basso profundo singers sludging along as a coin-rattle sound loop drags beneath. “Dust and mud coming through my pores / You can’t find God in the department stores,” the opening lines intone; to listen closely is to take to heart the message that as consumers, we are more shackled than we can possibly know.

On the closing “Train de Vie,” banjo, trumpet, upright bass and shouted vocals create a klezmer beast run amok: “Not conforming to this age or its kings / They pass away but on we sing / Pilgrim songs of hope incarnating.”

Exiles is not for the artistically faint of heart. The songs resist categorization and are so collectively bizarre that they challenge the listener to embrace them. Still, a strong, resonant heartbeat pulses below its disturbing, often brutal surface. *Exiles* is vastly more authentic than all the Christian-themed music straining to play it safe. Flaring, daring and wholly original, this is the voice crying out in the wilderness, a voice impossible to ignore.

Some other CDs to note:

Minneapolis-based roots rocker Tom Feldmann has crafted a gospel record that’s caked in the tumbleweed-dry textures of Americana music. While Feldmann’s creaky voice serves the style well, his original material suffers on two accounts. First, his

songs too often fail to escape their mid- and dirge-tempo rhythms, creating a mood that's more dour and dull than hypnotic. Second, his lyrics are often little more than simple refrains, devoid of any imagery or storytelling to give them added gravity. A notable exception is "7 Trumpets Sound," in which Feldman invokes apocalyptic visions of fiery mountains and lightless skies against a shivery backdrop of ever-shifting tempos and echo-slathered slide guitar runs.

Songs from Cockburn's newest album fit seamlessly into his live sets during his latest North American tour, suggesting that the Canadian songsmith retains his edge for storytelling—and for wearing his causes proudly on his sleeve. Cockburn succeeds where other banner-wavers fail, thanks to his keen ear for melody and uncanny skill with words and images. In "This Is Baghdad," he laments: "Carbombed and carjacked and kidnapped and shot / How do you like it, this freedom we bought?" On the friskier side, "Slow Down Fast" compresses wordplay into a dizzy taffy spiral, driven by an incessant acoustic groove: "Shills and hawkers and rockers with walkers/ Bombs in the lockers and brain dead mockers."

From the groovy Lutheran rocker who brought us *Sound Theology*—a 52-song megaproject tied to the liturgical year—comes something nearly as ambitious: 42 songs on two CDs, combining originals with hymn interpretations, scripture settings and curriculum music. Though the collection is meant for church musicians, Rundman throws in some grand wrinkles—from the percolating banjo that drives "Texas Kyrie" (part of a larger "Heartland Liturgy") to the poppy, poignant C-key piano on "When Rising from the Bed of Death." Not all is airy and light, though; "Hey Hey Samuel" snarls with fuzzy guitars, while a live version of "Wide Awake" (from *Sound Theology*) sounds as if recorded in a top-down convertible streaking through a twilight-painted desert.

Since his days with the Commotions, Cole has shown his mastery of an understated brand of rock that suggests the likes of Lou Reed, Dire Straits and Peter Himmelman, artists who blend masterful hooks with a lyrically sharp bent. As the title suggests, this album pits shadow against sunlight, strength versus sensitivity: the aural equivalent of holing up in a sacred space on the rainiest of autumn days. The title track in particular glides along on slip-sliding rock textures and a cunning, catchy chorus that sticks in the synapses: "With my medication I will be fine."

Canada has produced a bumper crop of outstanding pop musicians lately. Many, like Doucet, have been supported by the Canada Music Fund. Doucet proves that the investment was worth every Canadian penny as he turns in an effort recalling the

finest hours of Michael Penn, Matthew Sweet and David Baerwald. A song cycle that roughly traces the swift fall and stumbling rise of its collected protagonists, *Broken* begins with the fine "Brother," which dishes this arresting image: ""Brother, oh brother where will you lay your head/ Under a velvet Jesus just to keep you safe from death?" "Vladivostock" sounds like the bastard son of the Beatles' "Back in the U.S.S.R.," huffing and puffing with fuzz-guitar hooks offset by a creamy, jazzy backbeat b-section.