

REVIEWS

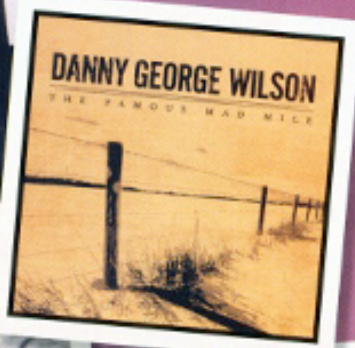
Pick of the year

Countless thousands of CDs and books will be given as presents this Christmas. If you are still seeking that ideal gift, **JOHN STACEY** selects some of his favourites that he has heard – and read – over the year



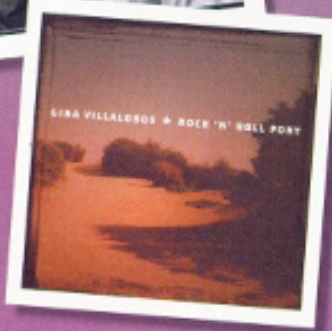
Anthony And The Johnsons – I Am A Bird Now (Rough Trade)

Once in a while an artist comes along with a truly unique voice. This is what Boy George would have sounded like if he had used the bluesy, gospelly elements of his voice to good effect when Culture Club split up. Inspired by Culture Club's *Kissing To Be Clever* in the Eighties, Anthony ended up duetting with his hero on this album. It begins slowly with *Hope There's Someone*, Anthony's deep, tremulous voice burning a hole in your heart. Then the album quickly gains momentum. The basic backing allows Anthony's incredible voice to shine. An intimate and touching album from the Mercury Music Prize winners.



Danny George Wilson: The Famous Mad Mile (Fargo)

A member of Grand Drive, Danny has temporarily ventured down a solo path with this stunning album. Country rock legends Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris served as the blueprint for this gentle, back porch-style musing. From the first track, you're hooked. A strummed guitar here, a weepy pedal steel guitar note there, with a melancholic cello and Jess Klein's sorrowful voice providing gorgeous counterpoint. All nine tracks have a slow-burning elegance that makes them sound quintessentially American while maintaining a certain Britishness. *Old Soul* has to be one of the finest country songs ever.



Gina Villalobos – Rock 'N' Roll Pony (Laughing Outlaw Records)

American Gina Villalobos takes a countrified route to your heart. This album has been creating quite a stir lately on both sides of the Atlantic. Gina appeared recently at Manchester's Roadhouse, where she went down a storm, and it's very easy to see why. *Rock 'N' Roll Pony* is crammed with classic songs that bear repeated listening. Sweetened by delicate traces of pedal steel guitar, Gina's sweetly husky voice, which is not dissimilar to that of Lucinda Williams, has just enough grit to capture your attention.



Eye To Eye: Clean Slate (12th Street Records)

Twenty-odd years is a long time to go between releasing records, but that's what Julian Marshall and Deborah Berg, the duo known as Eye To Eye, have done. This follow-up to 1983's *Shakespeare Sold My Baby* repeats the formula – catchy, keyboards-dominated songs exquisitely arranged and produced, featuring Deborah's cool vocals. The result is cosmopolitan and down to earth, with a touch of Steely Dan and Stevie Winwood in these 11 silky tracks. One of the year's best albums and testament to their professionalism and ability.



Martha Wainwright: Martha Wainwright (Drowned in Sound)

Martha is the daughter of US folk singers Kate McGarrigle and Loudon Wainwright III, and kid sister of Rufus. Her debut album features music closely associated with her parents, but "folk music" it ain't. This is a woman with something to say, and she says it directly and succinctly. The 13 songs Martha delivers are cunningly deceptive. Simply arranged and, with modest instrumentation, they appear pleasant enough on first listen. But give the disc further spins and those feisty, little numbers work their magic: a little instrumental touch here and there, and a chorus that creeps into your subconscious.