



Cecilia Zabala

The Color of Silence

(Acoustic Music/Rough Trade)

A sensuous and mysterious Argentine excursion

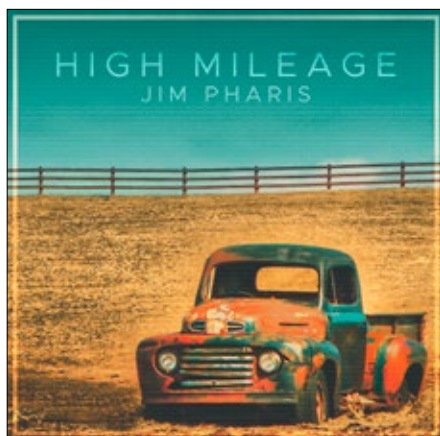
Playing acoustic, seven-string Spanish, and requinto guitars, Cecilia Zabala weaves a tapestry of tango rhythms, jazz progressions, and Argentine folk melodies on *The Color of Silence*. But that is only part of the sonic web the Buenos Aires native spins. Zabala's feathery, free-falling voice is the other featured instrument on this solo set, where guitar and vocals cradle and enfold each other to create a sensuous and mysterious effect.

Rising and falling in tandem with her cross-picked gossamer guitar, Zabala's seesawing scat singing mimics choral liturgical music on "La otra mitad." On the sinuous title track, Zabala's vocals flit from airy jazz to soothing lullaby as they torque around her guitar's polyphonic textures. It's a piece that manages to evoke both Latin jazz and music from the Baroque era without inducing whiplash.

On the busy but uncluttered "Detrás del horizonte," harp-like fluting on the upper strings remains tethered to Zabala's twanging bass pulse, while sparkling clusters of notes drift and scatter like fading fireworks. Even instrumentals like "Princesa," where Zabala's ethereal voice is absent, conjure an otherworldly mood. Around a bell-toned note that tolls repeatedly like a distant beacon, Zabala's acoustic guitar pirouettes and prowls like a fairy tale princess pacing her ivory tower.

With *The Color of Silence*, Zabala transports the listener to a dream world, where her delicate virtuosic playing creates a mood, a setting, and a space for vocals that range from light-as-soufflé aria to shamanic incantation.

—PM



Jim Pharis

High Mileage

(jimpharis.com)

Solid set of originals, blues, and gospel covers

The rusting pickup truck on the cover of *High Mileage*, the third full-length album from Louisiana-based singer-songwriter Jim Pharis, is the subject of the collection's cantering, bent-note title track. Over a stinging razor-wire riff, Pharis' weathered, fraying vocal compares the automotive hulk to his own biological shell. He concludes that both may be battered but they'll get the job done, an attitude that serves as the theme for this set of originals and country blues and gospel covers. Pharis does more than accept human frailties here; he cherishes them with infectious good humor.

"Five Alarm Fire" celebrates a high-strung girlfriend, "jumpy as a cat watching a snake," with suitably rattled accompaniment, where Pharis' plummeting repeating notes hail down like raindrops hitting a tin roof. Here, as on a handful of other tunes, A.J. Primeaux's fluttering, wailing harmonica lends color to Pharis' swooping and filament-fine guitar.

Pharis' slide guitar slithers and snaps forward like a rubber band on a cover of Oscar Woods' "Don't Sell It, Don't Give it Away," a tale of romantic woe and rejuvenation. Plangent ringing notes churn like a waterwheel on "Drift Away," a placid rumination on mortality that turns uplifting. And speaking of uplift, Pharis' cross-picking percolates with banjo-style rattle and pop on a version of Sister Rosetta Tharpe's "Up Above My Head I Hear Music in the Air." Here, Pharis reminds us that the spirit moves us all—even those of us who have to coax our rattletrap human chassis to the pearly gates.

—PM



Ahi

In Our Time

(22nd Sentry)

Everyman troubadour delivers striking sophomore set

On this second album by Canadian troubadour Ahi (pronounced "eye," it's the initials of his name, Ankinoah Habah Izarh), the artist takes a sonic stance that instantly, and effortlessly, commands attention. He rails with a gritty, heartfelt delivery that brings several well-known journeymen firmly to mind—Springsteen, Seger, Mellencamp, and Garland Jeffreys chief among them—courtesy of exuberant anthems that ring with both passion and purpose. Songs with titles such as "Breakin' Ground," "We Want Enough," "In Our Time," "Just Pray," and "On My Side" affirm that sense of urgency and the desire to share his rowdy resolve. The rallying cries of "Straight Ahead" and "We Want Enough" provide a stirring, seismic call to arms, a result of the drive, determination, and exaltation inherent in each carousing chorus and riveting refrain.

To Ahi's credit, he manages to temper his sentiments effectively and affirmatively. Edge and anguish may be prime components, but the arrangements are driven by acoustic guitars carefully textured beneath the rumble. While the music often trends towards rougher terrain, several songs ("The Honest One," "Five Butterflies," "Made It Home") are defined by the tone and texture of strummed guitars and the subtle shimmer that they emanate. Likewise, "In Our Time," "Penny," and "On My Side" find Ahi's mellower melodies spiraling into a final emphatic wail.

Ultimately, *In Our Time* is one of those rare albums that resonates even at the outset. Both reflective and resolute, it's very well suited for these tumultuous times.

—Lee Zimmerman