electric, and slide guitars, with a small rhythm section that includes his granddaughter, Sheena Rachell, on bass. The spirited boogie-woogie "Bugle Call" gives everyone a chance to solo, while "Black Snake" has a loping, swing groove. Two cuts are pared down, backing Rachell's mandolin and vocal with just acoustic guitar and harmonica, played by Peter "Madcat" Ruth. **– *DF***



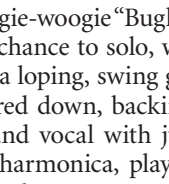
Tara Nevins
Wood And Stone
Sugar Hill Records

Donna the Buffalo's Tara Nevins stretches out as a front-person and tries new musical personas on her latest solo effort. The material alternates between Buffalo-like rustic rambles to swingier, more-contemporary numbers. But no matter the genre, the results are engaging and entertaining.

At times playful and always eclectic, 11 of 13 songs on *Wood and Stone* are originals (the exceptions being covers of Van Morrison's "Beauty of Days Gone By" and "Stars Fell on Alabama," written by Perkins and Parish).

Produced by Larry Campbell, who also contributes acoustic and electric guitar, pedal steel, citern, harmonium, banjo, and even fiddle on several tracks, the album features natural, down-to-earth arrangements where atypical instruments blend, i.e. the double solo between electric guitar and pedal steel on "Who Would You Tell."

Wood And Stone adds another powerful and engaging chapter to Nevins' musical achievements. **– *SS***



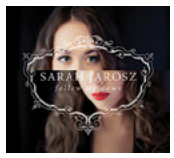
Chris Crocco Fluid Trio
The Chris Crocco Fluid Trio +
GPA Records

He may not have had it in mind when he named the band, but the word "fluid" perfectly describes Chris Crocco's playing style.

Crocco is not afraid to show off his chops, but everything he plays flows, no matter how dissonant the solo.

There are really four folks playing here; Crocco, saxophonist George Garzone, bassist Peter Slavov (who represents the plus sign in the album), and drummer Francisco Mela, their first record having been bass-less. Crocco is the obvious leader of this troupe, having written all 10 tunes and sharing soloist duties with Garzone. Whether it's a bopper like "Avenge" with notes flying everywhere, or a smoky tune like "Heaven" with its bluesy playing, Crocco proves more than up to the task. His chordal work in conjunction with songs like "Heaven" is eloquent when it stands alone, but his comping behind Garzone is masterful and subversive. While he isn't always a conventional soloist, he can swing with the best of them, and does on cuts like "My Own Personal Wake," where he covers the whole street, opening with almost two minutes of lovely solo chord work before the song turns into a light swinger with Crocco and band gliding along perfectly.

Crocco is representative of a new generation of player that tips its cap to those who came before while expanding the jazz-guitar universe. **– *JH***



Sarah Jarosz
Follow Me Down
Sugar Hill Records

Sarah Jarosz's second album has a greater range of melodic expression and more diverse influences than the her first, *Song Up In Her Head*. It's less old-timey/gothic, more modern/21st-century acoustic music.

Jarosz hasn't fully abandoned gothic themes; the original composition "Annabelle Lee" draws inspiration from the Edgar Allen Poe poem of the same name.

Joining Jarosz is a host of exceptional players including the Punch Brothers Band, Bela Fleck, Jerry Douglas, Stuart Duncan, Edgar Meyer, Dan Tyminski, Darrell Scott, and her touring partners, Alex Hargreaves and Nathaniel Smith. Produced by Gary Paczosa, the sound is clear, yet warm; even with double tracking and EQ tricks, Jarosz' voice retains its direct and guileless power. Her picking isn't bad either, though much of her playing is relegated to fundamental rhythm parts and the occasional solo. Her lead lines on the octave-mandolin solo on "Old Smitty" are seriously *hot*. Hopefully, *Follow Me Down* will create the legions of fans she deserves. **– *SS***



Alex Skolnick
Veritas
MegaForce Records

While some still think "heavy metal" when they hear the name Alex Skolnick, anyone familiar with his recent work won't be surprised at the mix of styles on *Veritas*.

A tribute to players he listened to while growing up, most of its cuts work on several levels. Some show obvious influences; "99/09," showcases his affection for Prince and John Scofield. The inspiration shows beautifully, with funky, slinky rhythm parts and solos that represent Prince, along with slightly off-kilter funky solos that recall Sco. "Songs of the Open Road" is Skolnick's tribute to Dave Grohl. It's airy, and his playing shows a freedom represented in the song's title. "Flection" is a gorgeous ballad with nice changes and a big solo meant to honor John Coltrane and Bill Evans. The unlikely imagined collaboration of "Path of Least Resistance" shows the influence of Jimmy Page and Pat Metheny, with the Metheny influence standing out.

Others are recognized, as well, including Metallica, Jeff Beck, and others. But the truly outstanding element is Skolnick's skill in composing wonderful melodies and songs. **– *JH***



Tab Benoit
Medicine
Telarc

Louisiana bluesman Tab Benoit returns with a seventh solo album, and it is indeed good medicine. Ranging from old-timey Cajun blues (backed by fiddler Michael Doucet) to growling electric blues, this is a true bayou brew of influences and inspirations.

Cut at Louisiana's legendary Dockside Studio, it was engineered by David Z and co-produced by Anders Osborne, who also added guitar on many tracks, playing one of B.B. King's own Lucille guitars. Equally exciting is the keyboard work of Ivan Neville.

But Benoit's guitarwork is in the spotlight throughout. On the title track, he plays with a lowdown grind that recalls the best of Howlin' Wolf axman Willie Johnson. "Sunrise" is a soulful and slow R&B anthem that's pure New Orleans – and perhaps one of Benoit's best songs ever. His vocals recall Van Morrison and the lyrics are classic.

This is no snake oil. **– *MD***



Roy Gaines and His Orchestra
Tuxedo Blues
Black Gold Records

Roy Gaines and His Orchestra is a swinging big band that plays blues straight out of the '40s, packing a punch with Gaines' guitar and a powerful horn section. If you can't keep from dancing (or at the very least, snapping your fingers), check your pulse.

Gaines' resumé reads like a history of the blues. At age 14 he was backing his hero, T-Bone Walker, onstage in Houston. He then became a session man for the Duke and Peacock labels, adding guitar to sides by Big Mama Thornton, Junior Parker, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Jimmy Rushing, and Coleman Hawkins. From the '60s through the '70s, he played in Ray Charles' big band, recorded a couple albums with the Jazz Crusaders, Aretha Franklin, and toured with the Supremes. And that's just the highlights.

Here, Gaines assembled an orchestra for sessions that included a tight rhythm section and 21 hornsmen on various tracks. The sound is big, bold, and brassy, with Gaines' stylish guitar showing the way.

Gaines penned half of the album's 12 cuts, the others range from Nat King Cole's "Reggae Woman" to Bobby Troup's "Route 66" and Quincy Jones' "Miss Celie's Blues."

Tuxedo Blues is blues the way Gaines wants it. And what music it is! **– *MD***



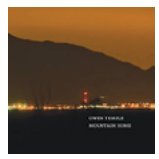
Tommy Shaw
The Great Divide
Pazzo Music

On the surface, it would seem unlikely that Tommy Shaw (see interview in "First Fret," July '11), singer and guitarist from Styx, would release a bluegrass album. But *The Great Divide* is a collection of original songs highlighted by the play of some of today's best musicians, and wonderful, soaring vocals from Shaw.

Shaw grew up in Alabama and heard plenty of bluegrass, so it makes sense the lyrics here cover a range of familiar issues, including lost love, economic hardship, and the various struggles in the journey of life. The humorous "Back in Your Kitchen" and "Give 'Em Hell Harry" contribute a certain charm, all of the songs have great hooks, and Shaw's vocals are spot-on, whether in traditional "high lonesome" wail or narrative voice.

Shaw plays guitar or dobro on most of the cuts and one listen to "Back in Your Kitchen," with its sublime dobro, proves he has no problem fitting in with players like Sam Bush on mandolin, Stuart Duncan on fiddle, and Rob Ickes and Jerry Douglas on dobro, among others. Alison Krauss and Dwight Yoakam lend vocals on a couple cuts.

Cynics, beware – Shaw and company are serious, and seriously good. **– *JH***



Owen Temple
Mountain Home
El Paisano Records

Being anointed "the new Dylan" is usually the musical equivalent of the *Sports Illustrated* cover jinx. In Americana, calling someone the "new John Prine" is shorthand for saying they're an acoustic guitar playing singer/songwriter with a uniquely appealing voice and a bag full of smart, sometimes wryly humorous, songs with a poignant edge. "Desdemona" is one of many tunes on *Mountain Home* that show how well Temple wears the hat. Like many of the better singer/songwriters of the last decade or two, Temple isn't afraid of a backbeat. He knows it's possible to think *and* tap your feet at the same time – which comes across strongly in the Gibson-Brothers-like title cut and is essentially the way things go the whole way through.

There's no track-by-track breakdown of who plays what, but the three acoustic players – Temple, Gordy Quist, and producer Gabriel Rhodes – all earn their paychecks. Rhodes' resonator stands out in several places, and many songs showcase him and pedal-steel player Tommy Spurlock, who shows a knack for finding sweet spots. Temple also gets extra points for a fine cover of Leon Russell's 1970 gem, "Prince Of Peace." **– *RA***