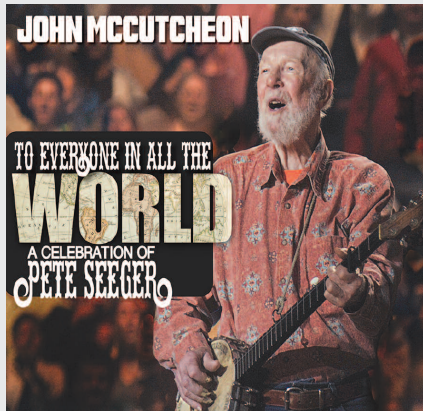


Pete Seeger, American Hero

During and after World War II, the Soviet Union were our friends. So much so that American communist groups started sprouting up in the United States. Sure, the USSR used Socialism and we used Capitalism, but both were correctly seen as valid economic systems. Yet, before the 1940s even ended, an insidious witch hunt instigated by Joseph McCarthy—a Republican senator from Wisconsin—started falsely accusing musicians, writers, actors, and directors of treason. “McCarthyism” ruined the lives and careers of many people for no good reason, and Bob Dylan lampooned it all in



his 1962 song “Talkin’ John Birch Paranoid Blues,” where he sang about “Looking everywhere for them goldarned Reds/I got up in the mornin’ and looked under my bed!”

Enter Pete Seeger [1919-2014], the proud, defiant, banjo-plucking singer/songwriter in the grand folk tradition of Woody Guthrie. His curiosity led him to a meeting of New York communists, for which he was publicly excoriated and brought before Congress to be grilled about his “un-American activities.” His appearance on August 18, 1955 before Congress had him standing up to such foolishness (complete with banjo!), refusing to give names or implicate himself. He was sentenced to a year in prison for “Contempt of Congress,” but his conviction was overturned on appeal.

Pete Seeger’s songs have stood the test of time and were never more important than they are today. *To Everyone in All the World: A Celebration of Pete Seeger* (Appleseed Records), by **John McCutcheon**, brings 15 songs associated with Seeger to life including “Turn Turn Turn,” “If I Had a Hammer,” “God Bless the Grass,” “Guantanamo,” “Talking Union,” and “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy.” (The obvious omission is “We Shall Overcome.”)

McCutcheon sounds great singing these songs with the help of bluegrass band Hot Rize, Cajun band BeauSoleil, and many others. He plays six- and 12-string guitar, hammer dulcimer, banjo, and Tibetan singing bowl. As such, this project stands as the first great folk album of 2019. Long may these songs be heard!

Solo Spin Doctor

For his third solo album, Spin Doctor’s guitarist **Eric Schenkman**—who wrote all five of the group’s big hits—asks that musical question, *Who Shot John?* (VizzTone Label Group). It’s a self-produced primal



PHOTO BY KAREN KUERN

rockin’ affair with bass and two drummers (one of which, Cody Dickinson, also plays electric washboard and piano) partially recorded in Newark, and filled to the brim with blues-rock extraordinaire. Highlights include “Locked in the House All Day,” “Agent Orange Blues,” and “Lincoln’s Feat.” Wholeheartedly recommended.

Let’s Get Fractal!

With an opening track called “Briefing for a Descent into Hell” of almost 19 minutes, and a closing track, “Urban Nightscape,” of over 17 minutes, guitarist-composer-producer **Stephen Thelen**, a Swiss American, has created an instrumental soundscape of almost shocking proportions that—over the course of more than an hour—



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOONJUNE RECORDS

squeezes out every ounce of sound that an electric guitar could possibly give birth to. We’re talkin’ effects to the teeth here. *Fractal Guitar*, his MoonJune Records debut, took almost three years to record at locations both in Europe and North America, and features seven other guitarists and three drummers.

Thelen is most known for his work in the minimal groove band Sonar in which he uses no ax effects. His compositions veer progressive-rock, classical, ambient, and experimental, and have been recorded by The Kronos Quartet. Here, he dives headfirst into sonic possibilities that I never even knew existed on the electric guitar. Dense, polyrhythmic, all-instrumental (thankfully), it’s a wild ride of surprising and supple elasticity. For the record, Thelen says that “fractal,” in this sense, means “a rhythmic delay with a very high feedback level that creates cascading delay patterns in odd time signatures.” Oh yeah! Bring it on! Call it “Post-Prog” if you want.

Au!

It took a decade, but the Canadian **Allison Au Quartet** is at the top of its game. Their self-released *Wander Wonder* is a worthy



PHOTO COURTESY OF FERMESTOBERWIN

follow-up to 2016’s *Forest Grove*. Au’s dexterity on the alto sax, her creativity, compositional chops, and band-leading is exemplary. Alternately hypnotic with traces of Wayne Shorter, ’70s Brazilian pop, balladry, and swing, this is a state of the art post-bop gem!

Promising Debut

Jersey Girl **Katie Henry** is on the board with her impressive debut *High Road*, where the talented singer/songwriter/guitarist/keyboardist transcends the blues to venture into her own stylized brand of



Americana soul, pop, rock, and folk. She’s got some great help. Produced by John Ginty (Dixie Chicks) with help from Ben Elliott (Eric Clapton/Keith Richards) at Showplace Studios in Dover, it features an impressive lineup of players including Spin Doctor guitarist Anthony Krizan, Patti Griffin’s guitarist/vocalist Billy Harvey, and Marcus Randolph on pedal steel (from one of the best touring bands in the land, Robert Randolph & The Family Band). Material spans the gamut from blue-eyed soul and rock ‘n’ roll to what should be considered country but isn’t. Highlights include “Dead Man’s Hands” and “Gypsy Sister,” but there ain’t a flat tire on this sleek joyride vehicle.

No, I Didn’t Try The Squirrel Meat

I’ll never forget going on the road in Texas with the **Kentucky Headhunters** in 1992, when they hipped me to the culinary pleasures of eating possum and squirrel (I declined). My bunk on the bus was like a small coffin. I banged my head more than once getting up. Falling asleep to the rhythm of the road was rather hypnotic and the



PHOTO BY JOHN LEE

good old boys in the band seemed to take a real shine to me. The Broken Spoke in Austin was a real hoot but Farm Aid in Irving beat all. They made a mistake and instead of giving me a press pass, they gave me a laminate that said “ARTIST.” So, you know I took full advantage and wandered into the green room where the real artists congregated. I sat myself right down between Willie Nelson and Neil Young as if I belonged there. I even smoked some pot. Joe Walsh staggered in high as hell and fell face first into the food. Then he went onstage, and I overheard Kinky Friedman say to John Mellencamp, “Uh oh, this is gonna be one helluva train wreck.”

It wasn’t. Walsh blew the crowd away, came backstage, and proceeded to fall asleep directly on the couch next to the food (or what was left of it). These memories have been instigated by the release on Alligator Records of *Live at the Ramblin’ Man Fair* by the **Kentucky Headhunters**, where the former country rock band settles into a hard rock blues groove plus a Southern Rock take on The Beatles’ “Don’t Let Me Down.” Loud, in your face, and entertaining as all hell, it made me smile. These boys go ever on.