

# Critics' Choice: New CDs

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into a "vial of hope," and for now that's enough.

## Son Volt

"The Search"  
(Transmit Sound/Legacy)

"I can't stand any more decisions," sings Jay Farrar a third of the way through "The Search," Son Volt's sharply bittersweet new album. It's not the only yelp of vexation delivered here by Mr. Farrar, the group's lead singer, chief guitarist and guiding force. But he seems not paralyzed but energized: more driven than he's been in years.

"The Search" is largely about distilling sense out of senselessness and culling hope from despair. Those are the same American preoccupations that Mr. Farrar memorably tackled with his pioneering alt-country band, Uncle Tupelo. But as songs like "Automatic Society" and "Methamphetamine" demonstrate, he has contemporary woes in mind. After an opening elegy, "Slow Hearse," the album plunges into a song, "The Picture," with a pointed aphorism: "War is profit, and profit is war."

Simple but effective sonic details — a chirpy horn arrangement, a reverse-looped guitar part — prevent "The Search" from feeling either preachy or repetitive. And while reality can be bleak in Mr. Farrar's world, there's always a sun-streaked horizon ahead. "We'll know when we get there," he sings confidently, about that unseen place. "We'll find mercy."  
NATE CHINEN

## Ry Cooder

"My Name Is Buddy" (Nonesuch)

In his music Ry Cooder dreams of a rearranged past. The action in "My Name Is Buddy," a heavily Steinbeck-ish song cycle about vagrant wanderers in the San Joaquin Valley of California, could take place anywhere from the early 1930s to now.

Pete Seeger, who plays on one track, hovers above the album like a guardian angel; his twin visions of American cruelty and generosity are its running subtext. But possibly more important in terms of how you will react to this record is that Buddy, the central character, is a red cat. His traveling companions are a

mouse named Lefty and a blind, ordained toad, based on someone like the Rev. Gary Davis.



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Many lyrics here are about miners, strikebreakers and downsizing. But many others are about cheese or carrying around a little suitcase, and are sung by Mr. Cooder in an irritating fake-hayseed voice or, as on "Green Dog," with Bob Dorough-like jazz affectations. The politics here are local, with global applications. But cuteness trumps politics.

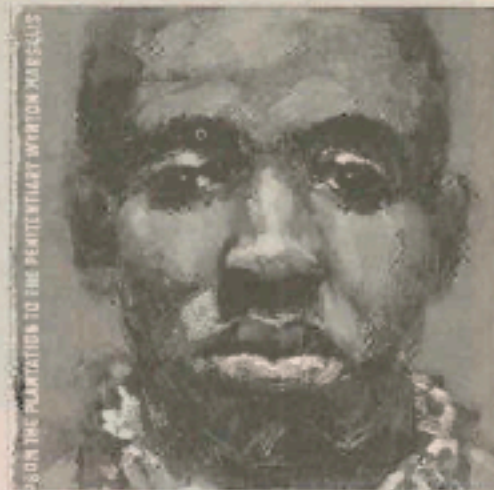
The first half of "My Name Is Buddy" may not be for those who get their news from sources other than old social-realist novels, aren't serious cat-fanciers or are older than 12. Its casual mix of cowboy, Tex-Mex and Irish folk-song forms can sound very much like a Dan Zanes album for children, except with better musicians (the drummer Jim Keltner, the accordionist Flaco Jimenez) and touches of Mr. Cooder's genius for building a soundscape.

In the less poky second half the music suddenly becomes insistent, gnarled, idiosyncratic and sometimes plainly beautiful. This is where Mr. Cooder projects more of the imagined music in his head, and where his scratchy, shorthand guitar-playing reveals more of itself. It's a rough road, but worth it once you get there.  
BEN RATLIFF

## Wynton Marsalis

"From the Plantation to the Penitentiary"  
(Blue Note)

From his landmark album "Black Codes (From the Underground)" through his Pulitzer Prize-winning oratorio "Blood on the Fields," the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis has always found avenues for social critique. But his new quintet album de-



### ONLINE: VIDEO

In Studio with the Stooges, including an interview with Iggy Pop, and more:

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livers a fresh jolt to the system, by blowing apart the refuge of allegory. Oh, and he raps. But we'll get to that.

Mr. Marsalis delegates most of the album's vocal duties to a remarkable newcomer, Jennifer Sanon. Singing in a clarion tone with minimal vibrato, she projects a timbre, not unlike Mr. Marsalis's trumpet, carrying the album the way that Abbey Lincoln carried Max Roach and Oscar Brown Jr.'s "Freedom Now Suite."

But that was a cry for civil rights; what troubles Mr. Marsalis is the state of civility itself. His lyrics disparage a culture of heartless poverty, chic misogyny and rapacious greed. He delivers the sharpest jabs himself, quasi-rapping on a track called "Where Y'All At?":

All you '60s radicals and world-beaters  
Righteous revolutionaries,  
Camus-readers  
Liberal students, equal-rights pleaders  
What's goin' on now that y'all are the leaders?

Don't be fooled: Mr. Marsalis still has no amicable feelings for hip-hop, the genre his lyrics elsewhere deride as "ghetto minstrelsy." But while this album builds on blues and jazz traditions — by way of a band that has studiously conquered them — it also hungers for relevance.

"You got to speak the language the people are speakin'," barks Mr. Marsalis, "'Specially when you see the havoc it's wreakin'." But he seems



aware that fighting fire with fire, in some cases, might only fuel the flames.  
NATE CHINEN

## The Stooges

"The Weirdness" (Virgin)

The old Stooges stomp from the late 1960s — a pounding, wah-wahing, cymbal-socking, garage-psychedelic blare — is back in force on "The Weirdness." Nearly everything else has changed.

"The Weirdness" is the first full album that Iggy Pop has made with Ron Asheton on guitar, his brother, Scott, on drums and Steve Mackay on tenor saxophone since the Stooges' 1970 "Fun House."

The world now remembers the Stooges as a proto-punk band, and they reinforce that impression on "The Weirdness." There's only a hint of the deliberate, droning vamps that linked the group back to psychedelia, and the longest song runs just over four minutes.

Despite his reckless, self-immolating stage act with the Stooges, Iggy Pop, 59, survived the decades as a working rock star. Always a blunt songwriter, he has left behind the cocky nihilism of the original Stooges for a grown-up assortment of experience, irritation, leering, humor, calculated defiance and glimpses of burnout.

He's not a street kid anymore; more than one song on the album revolves around money. Yet every so often he tries, a little desperately, to tweak taboos: "My idea of fun is killing everyone," he rhymes.

After three decades of punk it's harder to get a rise out of people with a bad attitude. But that Stooges stomp, primal and insolent, still sounds like trouble.  
JON PARELES