

Survival of the Fittest

Musicians in their prime beat the odds. *By Kevin C. Madigan*

Various Artists *Mozart 250—A Celebration* (Sony BMG Masterworks)



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart departed this mortal coil exactly 250 years ago, and it seems only fitting that we celebrate the man and all he stood for. His music is very much alive, especially so on this handsome box set—three CDs for the price of one, no less—culled from Sony BMG's vast archive to commemorate the occasion in grand style.

The recordings are magnificent, and all the big names are here—among them violinist Pinchas Zukerman, pianists Alicia de Larrocha and Rudolf Serkin, flutist James Galway, harpist Marisa Robles, sopranos Judith Blegen and Leontyne Price, and conductors George Szell and Colin Davis. This is a wonderful overview of Mozart's extensive repertoire, and many of the familiar pieces are represented, with selections from operas such as *La Nozze Di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*, and numerous sonatas, concertos, symphony pieces and choral works. The third disc in the set is a collection of adagios with the cheery title of *Serene and Sublime—Mozart's Most Relaxing Melodies*.

Even the artwork is impressive—the maestro's stern visage in bust form adorns the cover, festooned with a violin, a trumpet, a manuscript, fruit and flowers. If albums such as this one help to convert even more people to the extraordinary man and his music, then so much the better.

Alejandro Escovedo—*The Boxing Mirror* (Back Porch)

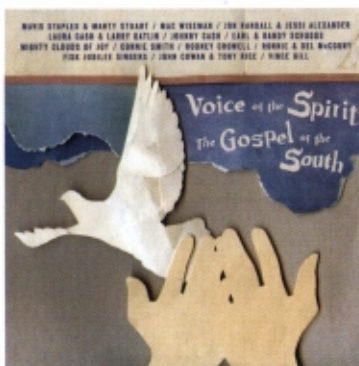
Alejandro Escovedo is alive and well and making great records. A couple of years ago, there was no guarantee that this would be the case. Stricken with Hepatitis C, his fans were given the alarming impression that Escovedo was on the verge of checking out, permanently. This Austin troubadour is made of strong stuff, it seems, for these songs are as good as anything he's released during his lengthy career. Not content to confine himself to the tired "Tex Mex" category, Escovedo continues on the attack with the ferocity he began using on the rock project Buick MacKane in the late 1980s.

The album kicks off with the brooding and powerful "Arizona," a song he has been opening his shows with lately that features a haunting cello accompaniment. "Have another drink on me / I've been empty since Arizona." He struggles a bit with the vocal on "The Ladder," but it adds to the song's appeal. The title track begins with a slow military drum, and evolves into an intricate tale that defies logic. Evocative and mysterious, much like the man himself.

Not one to let a mere bout with a dreaded disease get in the way of progress, Escovedo commands enormous respect in the music industry, and has a steady and devoted following. This new album is proof of his strength and endurance.



Various Artists—*Voice of the Spirit—The Gospel of the South* (Dualtone)



Gospel isn't dead either. Not by a long shot. This well-defined collection proves the point admirably. A hefty dose of gravitas is provided by the commanding presence of Johnny Cash, his comforting and familiar baritone weighing in on the song "Unclouded Day," recorded near the end of his life in 2003. The project was put in motion by Cash's son, John Carter Cash, who approached these genre stalwarts to participate, the only criterion being that whatever songs they chose had to come from the South and be gospel. Mavis Staples displays her sheer joy in singing, all gravel and grit, allowing herself a chuckle at the very end of "Twelve Gates to the City," along with an extra "hallelujah" for good measure. Easily my favorite track is the one by Earl and Randy Scruggs, who do a lovely job of the instrumental "If I Be Lifted Up," all guitar picking and swirling fiddle. It's short and very sweet, and needs no words. A close second is "Denomination Blues," beautifully done by the great Rodney Crowell, who after all these years remains largely unheralded. Another gem is "Where The Soul Of A Man Never Dies," with overlapping vocals by Jon Randall and Jesse Alexander. Somewhat heavy-handed, however, is the Fisk Jubilee Singers' version of "Ain't No Grave Gonna Hold My Body Down," which presumably comes across more effectively in a full-throng Baptist church. Hats off to Vince Gill, who closes the album in his usual inimitable style with "What Are They Doing In Heaven Today." This is an album for people who recoil at the thought of gospel music. It is simply excellent music played by the masters.

Worthy of Mention: Old school chanteuse Ilona Knopfler is stylish, jazzy and very cool. Pour a cocktail and enjoy *Live The Life* (Mack Avenue). The World Party band is the brainchild of rock cult favorite Karl Wallinger, whose *Dumbing Up* (Seaview) is finally getting a U.S. release, as is his entire back catalogue. Remastered, of course. Luka Bloom, solitary and soulful singer/songwriter (and brother of Irish folk legend Christy Moore), makes a welcome return with *Innocence* (Cooking Vinyl).

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