

posefulness of Marcus' search that's so compelling. He declares both "Awake my soul you were made to meet your maker" in "Awake My Soul" and "The shame that sent me off from the God that I once loved/was the same that sent me into your arms," in "Winter Winds," offering up little supporting commentary or judgment aside from an undeniable sincerity. Then again, from soaring trumpets highlighting "Winter Winds" delicate alliteration, "litters London with lonely hearts," to the modern-day relevance of Great Depression-era style "Dust Bowl Dance," nothing is done without extreme care and awareness. Would you expect less from a group of modern kids giving the banjo its day in the sun? (www.mumfordandsons.com)

***** 8/10

By Laura Studarus

JOANNA NEWSOM



HAVE ONE ON ME

Joanna Newsom: *Have One on Me* (Drag City)

A Joanna Newsom song is impossible to describe. Not Newsom's voice, of course, which conjures up adjectives like "gossamer" and "sprightly," or her harp, which is an instrument she pretty much lays sole claim to in 21st-century pop music, but her songs themselves, the way they bend back on themselves and wander away. Newsom makes one believe in impossibilities, like Peter Pan or *The X-Files*.

It's been over three years since Newsom's wondrous *Ys*, but on *Have One on Me*, she gives us not just one, but three discs of new material. Not a whole lot has changed, though Newsom manages a country tinge to the title track. Country in this venue sounds more like *Oklahoma!* than Johnny Cash. Clocking in at 11 minutes, "Have One on Me" goes through so many shifts and changes, it's difficult to get a handle on it, but the result is thrilling rather than frustrating.

Despite the friendly titles of some of the tracks, ("In California," "Ribbon Bows") things take a more somber turn as Newsom continues on her way. As Newsom sings, "But the darkness has fallen so fast/It seems like some kind of mistake." Stripped for much of the time of the horns and orchestral adornment of the first disc, Newsom turns a celebration into a confessional.

Just when it seems Newsom couldn't possibly have any more rabbits in her hat, the third disc contains some gospel flourishes that concentrate her voice in a whole new way, bending down low to grab some bit of soul. The third disc also contains the mannered, medieval love song "Kingfisher." Of the three discs, it's the bravest, but the one requiring the most getting used to.

Newsom has never been one of those artists who leave the listener wanting more, knowing that there's more to give. The massive amount of material contained in *Have One on Me* will take a long time to digest. Perhaps as long as it takes Newsom to produce another album.

***** 9/10

By Jim Scott



PLANTS AND ANIMALS

La La Land (Secret City)

Plants and Animals' sophomore album, 2008's *Parc Avenue*, was one of the year's best, a pastoral pastiche of '70s-flavored folk-rock grooves, aided by strings and horns, that set a genuine, organic mood of laidback cool. Since releasing the album, the Montréal trio has toured almost constantly, playing over 150 shows in the States and abroad. Perhaps as a result, the band's third album possesses a distinctly more volatile, rougher-edged sound. Starting with driving guitar tension vaguely reminiscent of Neil Young, opener "Tom Cruz" sets the stage for an album that finds the band having expanded its sound and become more versatile, while retaining the dynamic songwriting smarts showcased on *Parc Avenue*. The hazy atmospherics of "Swinging Bells" segue seamlessly into the rhythmic pulse of "American Idol," with its danceable rock and roll vibe and mid-song saxophone solo. "Undone Melody" builds from *Parc Avenue*-like reverie to string-filled emotional catharsis, before the track's raucous disintegration at the six-minute mark. "Ken Tiki" is a good mid-album dose of swinging soul, and "The Mama Papa" threatens to run itself aground with propulsive rhythmic intensity and near-yelped vocals. While Warren Spicer

was relatively new to singing on *Parc Avenue*—the band's debut was an instrumental affair—he sounds completely in his element here. And finally, the album ends, in exhilarating fashion, with a return to the Neil Young-esque guitar throwdown on "Jeans Jeans Jeans."

If there was anything negative to be said about the band's last album, it was that, despite the sonic beauty and intricate touches, all of the songs on the album tended to ride along on a similarly-textured vibe. *La La Land* blows that template sky high, expanding and expounding upon the band's sound in a way that is utterly thrilling while still retaining all the muted joy and gentle perfection of *Parc Avenue*. Which makes *La La Land* an album for the ages and Plants and Animals' ultimate piece of work thus far. (www.plantsandanimals.ca)

***** 8/10

By Frank Valiah



QUASI

American Gong (Kill Rock Stars)

For almost 20 years, against the odds, Quasi has been one of the most consistently interesting American rock acts. The two main reasons for this extraordinary success are its principal members: Sam Coomes (The Donner Party, Heatmiser), an indie treasure, and Janet Weiss (Sleater-Kinney, Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks), one of the best drummers working today. After all this time, these two have managed to keep this project relevant and evolving. With the relatively recent addition of the super-cool Joanna Bolme (Stephen Malkmus and the Jicks) and a great new album, they show no signs of slowing down.

American Gong is more thematically and musically diverse than any of their recent records. It's more in line with the Quasi of the late 1990s (*R&B Transmogrification*, *Field Studies*) than the Dave Friedman-produced *When the Going Gets Dark*. Thankfully, they've stepped away from straightforward political songs, such as "White Devil's Dream" or "Peace and Love," choosing instead to investigate a wide range of subject matter with Coomes' trademark dark wit. From the opening notes of "Repulsion" it's clear that this is going to be a guitar heavy album. In fact, since Coomes' 2003 Blues Goblins release, Quasi has steadily added more traditional blues elements to their sound. "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "Black Dogs & Bubbles" have an FM radio guitar rock sound that meltdowns in the middle of each track in delicious, soupy mess of 1970s fuzz and feedback. "Everything & Nothing At All" could have been an unreleased track from 1998's *Featuring "Birds"*. And the acoustic guitar driven "The Jig is Up," which recalls Coomes' late 1980s work, is about as good as it gets. I wish they would put out an album of songs just like that! Why don't "heavy" bands make "acoustic" albums anymore? Nothing would make me happier than if the next Quasi release is their *Workingman's Dead*. (www.theequasi.com)

***** 8/10

By Paul Bullock



RADAR BROS.

The Illustrated Garden (Merge)

Radar Bros. has been quietly accruing an impressive discography and is one of a litany of criminally underappreciated Merge Records acts. If you haven't heard them, you're in for a real treat—an act that evokes hazy summer afternoons nursing a beer on the front porch via winsome, stately Galaxie 500-esque reveries. And a new, punchier rhythm section augments frontman Jim Putnam's warm tenor here, wrapping itself around the fulsome piano and guitar arrangements like a tattered scarf. The gently chugging "Rainbow" dazzles, recalling Yo La Tengo with insidious "da da da" backing vocals, subtly imprinting itself onto your subconscious, as does the rest of this lovely, soft-hewn record. Just give it time. (www.myspace.com/radarbros)

***** 6/10

By John Everhart