

Reviews

John Long

"Lost & Found"

Delta Groove Productions (106)
Grade: B+

John Long's "Lost & Found" is sizzling old-school blues by a barroom veteran with a ghostly voice whom Muddy Waters referred to 20 years ago as "the best young country-blues artist playing today." Two decades later, the 56-year-old Long is still playing and trying to live up to this high praise by one of the godfathers of the blues. Thanks to Delta Groove Productions, with "Lost & Found," the St. Louis native releases his first full-length recording of his career. The disc is aptly named because, with a 30-year back catalog of demos, samples and homemade recordings to pick from, the emotive Long had no shortage of material when it came to choosing the dozen tracks that make up this blues masterpiece.

Produced by bluesman Al Blake (former frontman with the Hollywood Fats Band and current bandleader of The Hollywood Blue Flames), "Lost & Found" is a modern acoustic, country-blues record that feels as if it was made by Elmore James or other classic Chicago blues singers from a bygone era; it could easily sit beside the best of the greats of their day. With all compositions Long originals that he either wrote or co-wrote, songs such as the piano pounding "Hell Cat," to the slide-guitar of "Blues And Boogie Woogie" and "Greyhound Driver" are sure to find their own place on the shelf with other blues legends when Long's story is finished being written. Let's hope these "lost and found" gems are just the first volume of many more CDs to come from an artist that lives and breathes the blues — keeping this dying genre alive for a new generation of music lovers.

— David McPherson

Tori Amos

A Piano: The Collection

Rhino Records (R2 77775)
Grade: A

Tori Amos' latest release, *A Piano: The Collection*, from Rhino Records, is nothing less than stunning. The five-disc set, released Sept. 26, comprises 86 songs, several of them never-before-released tracks and, with rare exception, the best



Courtesy of Rhino/lyby Cindy Palmano

Tori Amos

of her music since her debut in 1991.

Though some of her recent B-sides have been less than her stellar earlier ones, those on this set strongly impress. The best of these are "Take Me with You," a typically contemplative song addressing relationships; the politically charged nine-minute rocker "Zero Point"; and "Not David Bowie," a song with more depth than the title might indicate (and the song's protagonist is *not* talking about Bowie): "you forgot to value/all of us that bled for you/and it is what it is/you swore you were conscious/not a champagne spiritualist/and it is what it is."

Many of her classic songs appear in the form of alternate or remixed versions. For the most part, there's not a whole lot of difference from the original versions; often the vocals are crisper or more up-front, and in others there is specific instrumentation that sounds similarly altered.

The few live tracks that appear illustrate Amos' relationship with her die-hard fans. "The Waitress" hypnotizes at nearly 10 minutes in length; it and "Sugar" are two of a few tracks in this set that appear twice but are the only ones where the second appearance is a live track.

Disc one is an expanded version of *Little Earthquakes*, something sure to make her fans quiver, and justifiably so, especially with the unedited single version of "Crucify."

The fifth disc contains B-sides — most of them previously released. They range from the superb "Sugar" and "A Sorta Fairytale (Demo)" to the less-impressive "Purple People." Altogether, they provide a solid representation of her 15 years'

worth of B-sides.

Considering the set from a greatest-hits perspective, it isn't complete but comes extremely close. The one key omission is "Raspberry Swirl" (from 1998's *From the Choirgirl Hotel*); this high-energy dance song was a radio hit as well as a fave among fans — possibly because of its daring subject matter.

If you've not already heard about the packaging for *A Piano*, you will. The top is suitably designed like a piano, plastic keys and all (no, the keys don't move),

and the box opens like a piano bench, horizontal flip-top style. Inside is a gorgeous book with biography, album info, liner notes and just about everything a fan could ask for, *except* lyrics. While this last item would've been nice, this is a collection, so it's not as requisite, plus lyrics for all the songs would've significantly upped the size (and production cost) of the book and packaging.

With a new studio album due in April 2007, new fans can catch up with her career with this set, and for \$75 (\$15 per disc, not to mention the rest of the package), it's well worth the money. Longtime fans will also enjoy it and likely consider it a necessary addition to their collection.

— Ray Sidman

Great Speckled Bird

Great Speckled Bird

Collectors' Choice Music (CCM-702)
Grade: A-

An important folk-rock duo of the 1960s, Ian & Sylvia turned to country music at decade's end. After cutting a couple of albums with Nashville musicians, the twosome returned to Music City leading a progressive country-rock outfit named after a Roy Acuff song. Great Speckled Bird's lineup included guitarist Amos Garrett; drummer N.D. Smart, who had played in Bo Grampus and The Remains; and steel guitarist Buddy Gage, who would soon join The New Riders Of The Purple Sage. Released in 1970 on the new and short-lived Ampex Records, the eponymous LP was an innovative attempt

to connect youthful, long-haired musicians to traditional country roots. Ampex labelmate Todd Rundgren produced the band's only album; a mere 21 years old at the time, Rundgren maintained a clean, spare sound that avoided any hint of country-politan syrup.

This Great Speckled Bird reissue adds one bonus track to the LP's original 12 songs, 11 of which were composed by Ian or Sylvia Tyson. The disc kicks off with the upbeat "Love What You're Doing Child," one of the numbers arranged to spotlight Ian & Sylvia's vocal harmonies, perfected during the duo's years on the acoustic circuit. Among the other up-tempo country-rock tunes are the percussive "Long Long Time To Get Old," the steel guitar-sweetened "Disappearing Woman" and "Bloodshot Beholder," which breaks for a dazzling six-string lead. Considering the duo's folk background and Canadian heritage, it's no surprise that their ode to "Calgary" suggests Gordon Lightfoot and the singer/songwriter genre while referencing their native country. Released as Great Speckled Bird's unconventional debut single, the soaring "We Sail" relies on studio pianist David Briggs accompanying Sylvia backed by a choir; the four-minute gospel inspiration pauses for a stately steel-guitar interlude.

"Trucker's Cafe" and "Smiling Wine," which make up their second and final 45, highlight Sylvia leading the group in a straight country direction; her vocal range, enhanced by some down-home twang, cast her as a country music natural. She and Ian sing the first verse to the chestnut "Crazy Arms" in French, giving the song a joyful Cajun spin. Composed by Ian and Amos Garrett, the western epic "Rio Grande" has a south-of-the-border flair thanks to its brilliant, understated guitar playing. Retitled "New Trucker's Cafe," the bonus cut is a swinging live version of the studio track "Trucker's Cafe." Recorded for Canadian television's *The Ian Tyson Show*, the evolving band added former Bo Grampus bassist Jim Colegrove, steel guitarist Ben Keith, and pianist Jeff Gutcheon, who would proceed to form Hungry Chuck, another underappreciated roots-rock experiment.

(www.collectorschoicemusic.com)

— Joseph Tortelli

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