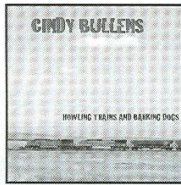


that's just perfect, as O'Brien's long experience in so many musical settings produces just the right sound for each song. Overall, this lively album keeps your feet tapping with lyrics that please the mind as well. While a legion of fans already appreciate O'Brien, this CD will add more to their ranks. — RWarr



**CINDY BULLENS**  
*Howling Trains and Barking Dogs*  
M.C. 0066

Cindy Bullens is less than a household name. A somewhat erratic career interrupted by devastating personal loss, Cindy remains a relatively unknown entity. She clearly has varied musical friends, many of whom drop by to help transform her eighth release into one of the summer's brightest surprises. From her rock beginnings in '79 backing Elton John, earning recognition for her leads on the blockbuster *Grease* soundtrack, Bullens has made all the right moves, and yet she has fallen into cracks so deep her career can be measured in 10-year gaps. Despite the heartbreak of missed opportunity or personal tragedy, *Howling Trains and Barking Dogs* is the album she's been destined to make — coming from a place where talent and maturity intersect to produce songs as accomplished as "In a Perfect World," "Everywhere and Nowhere" and "Labor of Love." Eleven rock-solid originals, self-penned or co-written with a Nashville Who's Who: Radney Foster, Al Anderson, Bill Lloyd and Matraca Berg hit home on this alt-country fare, rekindling early Lucinda Williams, if not a less gentle Mary Chapin Carpenter — a welcome detour for the once-raucous rocker. Mellowed over time or simply refocused, Bullens has crafted a roots-rich tapestry that identifies her place in time, well-suited to her smoked-hickory vocals and seasoned with just enough Dobro, fiddle, slide guitar, organ, harmonica, mandolin and superb backup vocals from the Ordinaires, Wendy Waldman, Deborah Holland and daughter Reid. Bullens approaches this music with the same degree of heart and swagger she's always applied to everything she's done — no less reserved — but with different instrumentation. From the fired up fiddle (David Mansfield) on "Love Gone Good" or Stephen B. Jones' lethal slide throughout "Labor of Love," there's no loss

of passion, offset nicely by her gentle touch on "All My Angels." All in all, an overdue release from an artist in top form and most deserving of wider attention. — ET

**PETER CASE**  
*Wig!*  
Yep Roc 2222

The exclamation point in the title of *Wig!* is no affectation. This album is a raucous, joyful, rock 'n' roll celebration of life and a thumb in the eye of the heart attack that almost killed Peter Case a few months earlier (as well as the cancer that took guitarist Duane Jarvis not long after his appearance on the record). The album is an unrestrained primal howl of life energy, delivered with all of the unschooled rock 'n' roll spirit of the Doors or even the earliest recordings of the Beatles.

In December 2009, to mark the end of his convalescence, Peter played a gig at a Los Angeles venue with his friends D.J. Bonebrake on percussion and Ron Franklin on guitar. They decided to carry on the jam by spending the weekend writing and recording. Peter jotted down some fragments of lyrics, they worked out some arrangements, and most of the album was then recorded live in only two days. The result is a wee-hours party of a record: the lyrics are delivered in a hoarse, yearning, reverbed baritone; the riffs are simple and gutsy; and the guitar is fuzzy and relentless, complementing Peter's soaring harmonica. Although the songs are intensely listenable, there is nothing polished or calculating about them.

Folk music audiences may know Peter Case more for his solo acoustic work of the 1990s and early 2000s, as well as for his Grammy nomination for Best Traditional Folk Album (for his Mississippi John Hurt tribute CD). But Peter's roots are also in rock, including his days fronting the power-pop bands The Plimsouls and The Nerves. Here, he delivers a raw album of swampy shuffling electric blues, rock and rockabilly that will appeal to listeners with an ear for what Bob Seger would call "old time rock and roll." — SS

**KIM BEGGS**  
*Blue Bones*  
Black Hen 0064

Needless to say, Yukon singer-songwriter Kim Beggs handsomely delivers on the promise of her first two critically acclaimed albums, *Streetcar Heart* and *Wanderer's Paeon*, with this debut

Black Hen project. Her vulnerably sincere yet breezily comfortable vocal approach, which recalls Hazel Dickens, engages the listener immediately, while the quality of her marvelously anecdotal songwriting (nine originals are here) authentically captures and comments on various elements of the rustic, laid-back charm of the Canadian north.

Producer Steve Dawson's accomplished guitar playing — on National steel, electric slide and Weissenborn — adds depth to all 13 tracks, with similarly organic support also provided by keyboardist Chris Gestrin, bassist Keith Lowe and drummer John Raham alongside high and lonesome vocal harmonies provided by Laurie Lewis, Gurf Morlix, Natalie Edelson and Jeanne Tolmie. All four of Beggs' covers are solid picks as well, from a stunningly wistful take on the traditional "I'm Thinking Tonight of My Blue Eyes" and a heartbreaking reshaping of Patty Griffin's "Trapeze" (Griffin is another obvious Beggs influence) to an aptly breathless redo of Bob Dylan's recorded-in-Nashville classic "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" and Nashville producer Jack Clement's honky-tonk weeper "Just Someone I Used To Know," a big hit for George Jones.

Standouts among Beggs' plainspoken, often-incisive compositions are many. A few I keep coming back to include the bluesy, pensive tale of "Mama's Dress," a yodel-ridden slice of philosophy with a great hook titled "Can't Drive Slow Yodel," the powerfully pulsing "Firewater Bones" (dedicated to the memory of Beggs' little brother who was born with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder) and the skillfully tongue-in-cheek "Summertime Lonesome Blues." An original talent just hitting her stride. — GvonT

**VARIOUS**  
*Twistable, Turnable Man:*  
*A Musical Tribute to the Songs*  
*of Shel Silverstein*  
Sugar Hill 4051

This tribute is an idea way, WAY overdue! Shel Silverstein was a true Renaissance man: a singer-songwriter for sure, but also author of beloved children's books, playwright, *bon vivant* and world traveler and, as a cartoonist, a key contributor to Playboy's first two decades. Here we focus on 15 of Shel's songs, on an album which Bobby Bare, appropriately, curated. Bare did several albums of Shel's songs and had some of his greatest successes with them.

Shel Silverstein songs could be funny, sad, profound, silly and eloquent, sometimes all at once — aspects that are all represented here. Dr. Dog's take of "The Unicorn," which became the Irish Rovers' sig-