

Jim Cuddy "All In Time"
Warners Music Canada 53:19

"And the 1999 Juno Award (the Canadian Grammy Awards) winner for Best Male Vocalist is Jim Cuddy for his solo work, 'All In Time'."

Cuddy and Greg Keelor are Canada's most popular (and arguably best) songwriting team. Usually fronting the great group, Blue Rodeo, this solo release has given Cuddy the chance to record some songs which are harder edged and more fiddle-based than the material on Blue Rodeo's last recording "Tremolo". The result of this musical combination is a strong countrified album that rocks.

Blue Rodeo fans won't be disappointed by this work. Of course, Cuddy's vocals are first-rate: powerful, melodic with great twang; the songs are comfortable, catchy, although not as dense and complex as his work with Keelor. And because long-time Rodeo engineer John Whynot is co-producer with Cuddy, the production sound of the recording is in the same vein as Rodeo's later work: hard and clean.

The core ensemble consists of Cuddy on guitar, Gavin Brown on drums, Colin Cripps on guitar and Rodeo's Basil Donovan on bass. When keyboards were called for Rodeo's James Gray stepped in. Musical aide-camps included Melanie Doane and Adele Armin, violins; Sarah Harmer, background vocals; and alt-country rockers, Jay Bennett and Jeff Tweedy of Wilco on guitar, banjo and vocals. All this talent and camaraderie results in a strong, familiar recording, one that stands repeated listening.

Musical standouts are the opening number, "Second Son" and follow-up "Whistler". Both are a bit wild, complexly mix, with a strong sense of melody. Title tune, "All in Time" is the rockiest cut on the album. Driving yet controlled, this cut could easily be a classic FM single. The most interesting tune is "I'll Make Believe It's You". Sung as a duet between Cuddy and Jeff Tweedy, it's a poignant song about the difficulty of getting over a long-standing relationship. Often all one can do is make believe.

Cuddy says, "I wanted to see if I could be the sole guide to a record. I developed into the songwriter I am being in this partnership [with Keelor]. If anything, the solo experience has made just sitting down easier for Blue Rodeo." As great as this recording is, there's one down side. It has yet to be released in the US. For those who want to be initiated into Cuddy's great work, at this point it can be obtained from HMV Records in Toronto 800-567-8468.

Jeff Beck "Who Else"
Epic 53:59

I haven't listened to Jeff Beck in quite a while. After his remarkable 1970's work with Beatles producer George Martin (particularly "Blow By Blow"), it seems Beck's music didn't gibe with the sounds and actions that were taking place in the commercial musical world. His music didn't rock as much as it oozed. Sure his guitar work was always way above average, but his material lacked propulsion. Or maybe Beck's material was propelled by his own sense of musicality, which was inconsistent with music of the time. This seems to make sense. In the seventies Beck's music fit perfectly on the dance floor even though it did not force the disco issue. Now Beck's latest, "Who Else", seems to have caught the groove again.

The opening number, "Mama Said", belongs on the current techno dance floor. It's hot, rhythmic and electric, filled with a power groove that could literally drag one to the floor. Similarly, "Psycho-Sam", with an energy long missed in Beck's work, has that beat—power and push—consistent with today's dance tracks.

This CD also has some enjoyable surprises. Beck shows he certainly still has the muster for some great get-down guitar action. His use of dynamics and feedback has never been stronger than on "Brush with the Blues". It's as searing a blues number as Beck has put out in decades, and it's live. "Even Odds" is as hard as rock gets. The delicate "Declan" is just plain beautiful. Celtic in tone and inclination, it's probably the most remarkable melody on this recording.

Jeff Beck has always followed his own musical heart. "Who Else" shows that his musical thinking is rightfully in tune with current trends. I'm sorry I missed his recent Detroit concert, but glad I have this recording. Pick it up today.



Beth Orton "Central Reservation"
Arista 58:57

Beth Orton's important 1997 debut recording, "Trailer Park", showcased her strong alto voice, some very quirky lyrics and an extraordinarily-produced recording. It combined a strong lyrical sense with a post-modern slant, a kind of techno-folk music. Critics loved it.

On "Central Reservation", while still sonically fresh and lyrically interesting, Orton, who is still being in good voice, offers a bit of a challenge to the listener. Because Orton mixes her plaintive alto voice with a certain unusualness of instrumentation and production, the listener must be prepared for the plunge. On "Couldn't Cause Me Harm" there's a curious yet compelling mix of slide

guitar, bongos and vibes. On "Central Reservation (Original)" the mix jumps between sparking hi-tech to grungy lo-tech sounds. On "Central Reservation (Ben Watt Mix)" a slow-groove dance beat is mixed with electronic lounge instrumentation. One moment we're being led around a sonic eclectic arena, the next we're being dropped off into what seems a very chaotic hodgepodge of drifty, self-indulgent, prattle. All this is strangely complex, interesting, often smoldering and chilling, but at all times unique.

It's hard to tell if Orton's approach to sound manufacturing will survive or what it will do for the listener. But for now it tells us much about Orton, her boldness and courage. Whether the market, critics, and listeners will give her the time and place to make her statement remains to be seen. All I can say now is that "Central Reservation" is damn hard to get off my CD player.