

in vivid imagery, defying categorization. *The Story Of Light* pursues the guitarist's spirituality-obsessed narrative, the second installment of a cryptic trilogy that began with 2005's *Real Illusions: Reflections*. Vai's musical mood swings pack a virtuosic creativity, summoning a landscape that few rock-based six-stringers can match.

Vai's mad scientist mentality kicks up with the 6/4 time, multi-layered guitar orchestration of "Velorum," his instrumental melodies on par with the progressive keyboard-bending flair of players like Dream Theater's Jordan Rudess. The wistful, clean-chorused guitar lines of "Creamsicle Sunset" evoke the most ethereal of daydreams, Vai's picking mimicking the legato runs of a harpsichord.

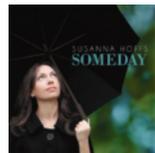
The real standouts cover decidedly non-Vai territory: hauntingly heavy blues. His hard-nosed take on "John The Revelator" features the sampled voice of Blind Willie Johnson, main vocal by *The Voice* finalist Beverly McClellan, who breathes fire into the verses. The track segues seamlessly into "Book Of The Seven Seals," an apocalyptic smorgasbord of gospel choir, lightning guitar leads, and hard-stop rhythm breaks—truly powerful and cinematic.

Another inspiring, musically schizophrenic guitar lesson from one of the instrument's most gifted composers, Vai continues to puzzle and satisfy our darker avant-garde rock appetite. **MARK URICHECK**

SUSANNA HOFFS

Someday

(WELK)



SOMEDAY HAS FINALLY arrived for singer, songwriter, musician and founding member of the '80s female pop band the Bangles, Susanna Hoffs. This all-original ten-track collection by this prolific songwriter confirms Hoffs' ability to intertwine the baroque folk/pop style into ear-pleasing arrangements. Combined with her signature raspy vocals and the record's vintage vibe, these songs transport the listener back to a (peaceful) place as Hoffs paints the vivid picture of "wishing

you were kissin' Valentino by a crystal blue Italian stream."

Hoffs collaborated with Mitchell Froom on this project, the man who played the signature keyboard riff on the Bangles' "Manic Monday." *Someday*, in true essence, is a love letter to the '60s music Hoffs enjoyed listening to while growing up in California. From the opening song, "November Sun," to the last beat of "True," this album brings the audience on a groovy journey through the eras of Hoff's illustrious career. **RENEE DAIGLE**

BEACHWOOD SPARKS

The Tarnished Gold

(SUB POP)



WITH THEIR FIRST ALBUM IN over a decade, Beachwood Sparks pick up where they left off with an understated collection of what Gram Parsons famously dubbed "cosmic American music." The sunny California twang, lush harmonies and psychedelic undertones are present, yet the album is no mere throwback. *The Tarnished Gold* is a buoyant and heart-wrenching take on summer that one can appreciate year round.

Highlights include the breezy opener, "Forget the Song" in which Chris Gunst croons in his delightfully plaintive voice, "forget the song that I've been singing/Lay down the weight that I've been holding," and "Mollusk," named after a Venice surf shop and featuring weeping pedal steel guitar and lyrics that ruminate on the passing of time. Lighter songs like "No Queremos Oro," sung in Spanish, serve as interludes that help space out the weightier tracks and add additional colors to the quartet's palette.

Much like summer's end, when *The Tarnished Gold* concludes, one is saddened that it is over despite the inevitability of its ending. If this turns out to be the final Beachwood Sparks record, one could not ask for a better bookend. **IAN ARNOLD**

BODEANS

American Made

(MEGAFORCE)

WISCONSIN-BASED ROOTS ROCKERS BODEANS were formed in 1985 by high school chums



Kurt Neumann and Sam Llanas, and immediately struck a chord in and around the Midwest.

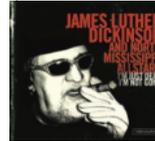
They eventually caught the ears of Slash Records, a subsidiary of Warner Bros. and became a household name when their tune, "Closer To Free," became the theme song for the popular TV program *Party Of Five*. After a series of lineup changes and ten albums, the band is back (minus Llanas but featuring Neumann, Michael Ramos on keys, Honeydogs co-founder Noah Levy on drums, Warren Hood on violin/fiddle, Ryan Bowman on bass and Jake Owen on guitar) with *American Made*, a hodge-podge of pop, Americana and experimental sounds.

The album kicks off with "All The World," a slow-burning mini-anthem that captures the group's inherent humanity, followed by "Jay Leno," which, despite its title, actually deals with a traumatic event from Neumann's childhood, then marches along with the martial "American." The fresh lineup gels perfectly, as evidenced on tracks like "Everything You Wanted," "Flyaway" and a string-laden, heated cover of Springsteen's "I'm On Fire." The disc closes out with the danceable, Irish-flavored "Shake The Fever," leaving the listener wanting more and, no doubt, the players wet with sweat and all shook down. **TOM HALLETT**

JAMES LUTHER DICKINSON AND NORTH MISSISSIPPI ALLSTARS

I'm Just Dead I'm Not Gone

(MEMPHIS INTERNATIONAL)



THE ICONIC KEYBOARDIST and producer James Luther Dickinson has, by his own admission, not left us yet. This 42-minute concert excerpt from 2006 at the New Daisy Theatre in Memphis is one succinct, definitive statement about the power of rock 'n' roll. Believe it or not, this is the first live album released under Dickinson's name. Let's hope folks unearth more sets like this.

Backed by his sons, Luther and Cody, along with bassist Chris Chew (North Mississippi Allstars) and guest Jimmy Davis, this show provides plenty of explosive