

REVIEWED BY TOM WILK

**Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale
Gilmore ★★★★★***Downey to Lubbock*
Yep Roc

In their careers, Dave Alvin and Jimmie Dale Gilmore collectively have played music professionally for more than three quarters of a century. Alvin, 62, and Gilmore, 73, have joined forces for *Downey to Lubbock*, their first album as a duo. It's an inspired exploration of American roots music that mixes original tunes with well-chosen covers.

The title track, which refers to their hometowns, is an energetic recounting of their musical lives from Alvin's days with the Blasters and Gilmore's time with the Flatlanders to the present. The wistful "Billy the Kid and Geronimo," an Alvin original, imagines a meeting between the Western outlaw (voiced by Alvin) and the Native American leader (sung by Gilmore). The cover songs are a cross-section of blues, folk, and rhythm and blues. Woody Guthrie's "Deportee (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos)" is plaintively sung by Gilmore and especially relevant where immigration remains a topic of debate. Gilmore and Alvin add a level of intensity, vocally and instrumentally, to "Get Together," a Top 5 hit for the Youngbloods in 1969.

Alvin pays tribute to John Stewart, a fellow Californian songwriter, with a yearning performance of "July, You're a Woman." Gilmore takes the lead on a spirited rendition of "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," the early 1950s hit by Lloyd Price, while Alvin and Gilmore trade verses on an energetic reading of Sonny Terry & Brownie McGee's "Walk On." *Downey to Lubbock* is a strong collaboration that should lead to a sequel. (12 songs, 52 minutes)

Pete Townshend ★★★★★1/2*Who Came First: 45th Anniversary Expanded Edition*
Universal Music Enterprises

Who Came First, the first solo album by Pete Townshend, showed another side of the principal songwriter and lead guitarist for The Who upon its release in 1972. The album allowed him to go beyond The Who's hard-edged rock and explore folk, country and pre-rock pop with a spiri-

tual focus in a more relaxed setting.

"Content" and "Parvardigar" reflect his following of the Indian religious leader Meher Baba and function as prayers set to music. Solo versions of "Pure and Easy" and "Let's See Action," songs also recorded by The Who, show Townshend fully capable of working as a one-man band. The expanded edition of the album features 17 bonus tracks and demonstrates Townshend's abilities as a multi-instrumentalist from the peaceful instru-



mental "His Hands" to the keyboard experimentalism of a nearly 10-minute version of "Baba O'Riley." Townshend also dabbles in bluesy soul ("I Always Say"), spiritual reflection ("Day of Silence") and the Great American Songbook (a shimmering rendition of Cole Porter's "Begin The Beguine"). Among the unreleased tracks, the rootsy "There's Are a Fortune in Those Hills" recalls Townshend's work with Thunderclap Newman and a lively rendition of Ronnie Lane's "Evolution" from 2004 pays tribute to the late bassist with the Faces and Townshend's occasional collaborator. (25 songs, 110 minutes)

Kelly Willis ★★★★★1/2*Back Being Blue*

Premium Records/Thirty Tigers

After recording a pair of CDs with Bruce Robison, her husband of 22 years, Kelly Willis makes a welcome return as a solo artist with *Back Being Blue*, her first album under her own name in 11 years. Her song selections, both her own and those of other writers, show her ability to handle different musical genres.

The rockabilly-flavored "Modern World," a Willis original, reveals her mixed emotions on the influence of social media and cellphones on daily



living. "I love you, but you won't let go," she sings with a touch of exasperation. The title track is an effective country/soul ballad dealing with romantic loss that Willis says was influenced by Crystal Gayle. With its fiddle and piano, "Freewheeling" has the feel of a traditional country ballad, while the country/folk two-step "Fool's Paradise" is a mid-tempo lament. With its accusatory tone, Willis turns "Only You" on its ear and shows her depth as a writer. She revives "I'm a Lover (Not a Fighter)," a 1969 hit for Skeeter Davis, and makes Randy Weeks' "Don't Step Away" and Rodney Crowell's "We'll Do It for Love Next Time" her own. All three renditions showcase her strength as an interpreter and the ability to find songs that suit her vocally. (10 songs, 31 minutes)

The Kennedys ★★★★★1/2*Safe Until Tomorrow*

Kennedys LLC

Music drew Pete and Maura Kennedy together, sustaining an artistic and marital partnership that dates to the 1990s. *Safe Until Tomorrow*, the duo's first album together in three years, is a satisfying collection of original songs and a smattering of covers. It's a two-person operation with Pete handling most of the instrumentation and Maura serving as the principal songwriter and vocalist. Opening with a Byrds-like guitar line, the upbeat title track serves as a song of reassurance for caregivers helping elderly parents.

The jangly pop of "Umbrella," sung by Maura and inspired by a dream of a spinning quarter, is a celebration of the Kennedys' 25 years together.

The uplifting "Is Anybody Listening?" and "Sing the Chorus" provide a message of hope in trying times. The latter uses music as a metaphor for daily living. "Sing the chorus strong and loud/When your world's gone wrong," she declares. "Sing the chorus loud and strong/And put your hopelessness back where it belongs." "Union," written by British songwriter Andrea Glass, mines a similar theme in urging couples to find strength in each other. The environmental message of "Dancin' on The Moon" draws inspiration from the '60s hit "Dancing in the Street." That Motown connection is reinforced with a folk-rock version of "Midnight Train from Georgia," a hit for Gladys Knight and the Pips in 1973. (11 songs, 42 minutes)

Bob Rea ★★★★★*Southbound*

Shiny Dime Records

Bob Rea's songwriting evokes the storytelling of Steve Earle, the eye for detail of Guy Clark, and the rueful humor of John Prine on *Southbound*, his first solo album in seven years. The lively title song serves as a character study of a free-spirited woman who can't be pinned down by a man. "She will leave them brokenhearted with a Mona Lisa smile," he sings. "The Highway Never Cries," a restless rocker, finds the narrator leaving his troubles behind and anticipating a fresh start.

Rea shows his bluesy side with "Soldier On," a meditation on right and wrong, while "The Law" is a timely commentary on political division. His aching vocal "Vietnam" is a sobering reminder of the collateral damage of that divisive war and how three lives were forever altered by the drawing of a lottery number. On "Screw Cincinnati," Rea lightens the mood with a humorous tale of star-crossed lovers. "Fish Can't Fly" finds Rea with an urge to wonder. "Fish can't fly and I can't stay," he sings with a phrasing and creative use of language that recalls the best of Roger Miller. (13 songs, 51 minutes) ■