

## THE TEXAS SAPPHIRES *Valley So Steep*

Lowie Farm Ifr001 (2006)

## INTERSTATE COWBOY *There's a Road*

Ranch Ruckus (2007)

It didn't take long for the Texas Sapphires to become a jewel of the local Austin twang scene. On its debut affair, the band's Billy Brent Malkus wrote 11 of the 12 tunes that straddle bluegrass, honky-tonk-country, and singer/songwriter-folk idioms. While the band's overall accomplished playing is enough to draw the listener in, the Sapphires' real beauty lies with Malkus' lyrics, which possess a poetic prose atypical of the aforementioned roots-centric genres. Occasionally subtle metaphorical imagery ("Cold Silver Ring") seeps through, and many tunes are centered around quirky, humorous derelicts ("Dirty Me, Dirty Me").

Although every tune is top-notch, undoubtedly the best of the lot is the Western swing-styled "Dirty Tattered House Shoes," sung by sassy belter Rebecca Lucille Cannon. Singing about the joy of living alone after a lover departed,



The Texas Sapphires - salivating for cold milk

Malkus looks at life through a different lens, as evidenced by lyrics like "Things keep getting brighter/in fact I'm lit up all the time/burgundy, blue ribbon and back into that box of wine/Say I look disheveled/I'm together as can be." Malkus and Cannon together make formidable duet partners, able to milk the utmost emotion out of such slower songs as "Deep Gap Blue" and "Down Hard." Somehow it all works, and this disc can be treasured by those craving sharp steel guitar, fiddle, and guitar flat-picking playing or those salivating for thought-provoking, offbeat lyrics.

From a bit north of Austin is Northern Colorado's Interstate Cowboy, which

also takes an original approach to its music, though not quite as quirky as the Sapphires'. Instrumentally, the band is stocked to the gills with two-time Grammy winner/Nashville Bluegrass Band alum Gene Libbea (bass, piano), ex-Nashville session

vet Dick Meis (pedal steel guitar), and the talented, young Grant Gordy (guitar, mandolin). Frontman/guitarist Tim Champlin wrote nine of these baker's dozen tunes, ranging from the groove-fueled, Americana-ish "I Got Nothin'" and the guitar-cranked "Everytime She Makes a Mistake" to cutesy guy-and-gal duet "The American Way" and the Latin-tinted "Rio Grande Lament." "No Place Like Home" provides interesting social commentary on small-town life. A single mother returns to her former hometown, where it doesn't take three jobs to make ends meet and her kids can make the team.

While Champlin's originals are an essential part of Interstate Cowboy, another key ingredient is the group's predilection to romp on jazz standards "Take the 'A' Train" and "Lady Be Good," showcasing Gordy's amazing, intricate fretwork. Overall, there's a relaxed tone to the proceedings and a warm, floating vibe provided by both Meis and Gordy. As the name suggests, Interstate Cowboy never stays at any mile marker for too long.

— Dan Willging (Denver, CO)

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