

Country's Best Frenemy



Musgraves' new album is sharper — and more Nashville-friendly — than her first.

THE SOUTHERN ADAGE “DON’T GET above your raisin’,” memorialized as a song title by Lester Flatt & Earl Scruggs in 1951, has long been a guideline for country artists. It even dictates their choices in pronouns: always the humble “we,” never the immodest “I.” And like many things in life, it’s more strictly enforced on female artists. But Kacey Musgraves’ 2013 major-label debut, *Same Trailer Different Park*, was gloriously provocative. On the album’s two best songs, “Merry Go ’Round” and “Follow Your Arrow,” the 26-year-old critiqued life in small towns like the Texas one she couldn’t escape fast enough, and endorsed weed, girl-on-girl kissing and politics one could only describe as liberal. Her strategy, she told a reporter, was “to push buttons [and] scare off the people who are going to be scared off.”

There’s a touch of retrenchment on her follow-up, *Pageant Material*. “Maybe for a minute I got too big

for my britches,” she sings in “Dime Store Cowgirl,” a plain account of her last two years. To prove her fealty to Nashville, she mentions Willie Nelson, the rodeo, “my hometown” — it’s just a pickup truck shy of being bro country. For anyone who loved her for being disruptive, it feels like her first dishonest step, an apology to the industry she had blown raspberries at.

But everywhere else, this is an even better album than her last, with more consistency and variety. And Musgraves still excels at chiding Southern tradition. “High Time,”

a mellow anthem for those with dubious glaucoma diagnoses, pairs Nashville strings with pro-pot innuendo doubled by the line “Let the grass just grow.” Like “Merry Go ’Round,” the prickly views of small-town life in “This Town” and the title track (“I’m always higher than my hair”) won’t be adopted by any chamber of commerce. Thematically, those songs

trace back to “Merry Go ’Round,” while the be-yourself motifs of first single “Biscuits” and the pro-promiscuity, pro-divorce “Cup of Tea” reinforces “Follow Your Arrow.”

Musgraves does have a weakness for bumper-sticker platitudes (“You can’t sail if your anchor’s down”), so it helps that she finds new corners of her tender voice, while large doses of banjo and steel guitar balance music that tilts toward the folk side of country. Although the social-commentary songs will draw the most attention, she doesn’t need rebukes to make an impression.

Through to the surprise bonus track, the album holds strong: “Late to the Party” is a lightly swinging song about the joy of commitment, and “Family Is Family” counts the ways in which relatives are annoying (“They own too much wicker,” a great line) but settles back into the fold. It’s easy enough to love *Pageant Material* if you don’t agree with Musgraves’ views on social issues, but let’s be honest: It helps if you do.

—ROB TANNENBAUM



KACEY MUSGRAVES
Pageant Material
Mercury Nashville



HudMo's Genre-Less Genius

The Scottish producer's sophomore effort goes from EDM to rap and back.

★★★★★



HUDSON MOHAWKE

Lantern
Warp Records

BACK WHEN HUDSON Mohawke was crafting bombastic synth-scapes in his mom's Glasgow basement in the 2000s, the idea of him collaborating with Lil Wayne and Pusha T was but a left-field electro nerd's distant fantasy. Years later, the producer born Ross Birchard, 29, sits in a rarefied space: He's signed to Kanye West's G.O.O.D. Music as a producer and British electronic indie Warp as an artist, and seamlessly marries those sounds and many more on his excellent sophomore LP, *Lantern*.

In some ways, it's actually a reboot. One of Mohawke's biggest recent successes was as half of TNGHT, along with Montreal producer Lunice. The duo, now on hiatus, skyrocketed to EDM-tent headliner status after its self-titled 2012 EP, which helped redefine trap for the festival set. But the pair's rise in the dance world never seemed to sit comfortably with the restless producer, whose 2009 full-length debut, *Butter*, was a giddy mixed

bag of rave, chiptune, rap and even '80s R&B and electro-funk. With *Lantern*, Mohawke transcends any pigeonholing once and for all, offering a polished vision of his genre-agnostic world.

Rather than TNGHT's id-driven bangers or the campy synth freak-outs of his early solo work, *Lantern* is a beautifully restrained — by HudMo standards, that is — concept album that mirrors a full day, yawning awake with palate-clearing drones and ending ecstatically in the wee hours of a club utopia. There are no rappers here; instead, Mohawke enlisted soul vocalists like Jhene Aiko and Irfane. It's an unexpected turn, and occasionally misses the mark, like when Miguel gets lost in the murky psychedelics of "Deepspace."

But the instrumentals are where Mohawke's grandiosity shines brightest. "Ryderz," with its dusty sample from D.J. Rogers, heroically scuffs up West's old chipmunk soul sound. Even further from Mohawke's brash trap is "Kettles," a sparkling, drum-less synth exploration in miniature that borders on classical. It's a welcome deviation, and a clean slate, for a guy who doesn't like to stay in one place too long. —MEAGHAN GARVEY

Tell Us More HUDSON MOHAWKE

Do you think fans of your trap-rap work with TNGHT and Kanye West will be turned off by songs like "Kettles"?

I'm not under any illusions: Someone who only knows me from TNGHT is probably going to be like, "What the f— is this doing on here?" It was very much an experiment for me. Plus, I have always been keen to get into doing more soundtrack work.

It's easy to hear West or someone else rapping on "Ryderz" and making it a hit. Why did you keep it instrumental?

I didn't want it to be heralded as their song — that would defeat the purpose. It's an ode to the classic hip-hop production of the late '90s and early 2000s. That style of sample-based production just doesn't exist anymore. People who own the rights to the

samples essentially shut things down, which is a shame.

How did you decide which guests to work with?

The people I chose were people I had the utmost respect for. I've been in touch with Miguel since before he was, like, Miguel. But it's also people who wouldn't outshine the fact that it's my record. —MEGAN BUERGER



MUSE
Drones
Warner Bros.
★★★★☆

Brit rock trio's seventh album aims high, hits somewhere in the middle

MUSE TREADS BETWEEN SUBLIME and ridiculous more than any rock band in recent memory, with jaw-dropping pretention that makes it hard to tell if they're just having a laugh. *Drones* is, of course, a concept album, about, according to the liner notes, "the journey of a human, from their abandonment and loss of hope to their indoctrination by the system to be a human drone." But the intent doesn't match the straightforward — for Muse, at least — result. As always, the best tracks ("Mercy," "The Handler") find Matthew Bellamy's protometal riffs and soaring vocals preventing his sappier instincts from holding sway. The title track ends the LP in true WTF fashion, with a church choir singing, "Now you can kill from the safety of your home with drones/Amen." Muse is one of the world's biggest rock bands, but for all its missionary zeal, *Drones* preaches to the converted. —JEM ASWAD



TAMIA
Love Life
Def Jam
★★★★☆

R&B veteran's new album makes stability seductive

FEW SINGERS MAKE MARRIAGE sound as sexy as Tamia does on her sixth album, *Love Life*. Monogamy anthems are a staple for the singer, 40, who has been married to former NBA star Grant Hill for 16 years. On *Love Life*, she elegantly touches on the vexing and rewarding aspects of relationships, and explains how to keep the fire burning. Tamia is less concerned with fleeting moments and more focused on trust, quality time ("Chaise Lounge") and gratitude ("Like You Do") — with a generous side of morning sex. *Love Life* is at its best when the beats settle like soft caresses and Tamia's vocals float into breathy exhales, like on "Lipstick," where she sings about skipping dinner for something sweeter. Extra spice like that preserves the freshness when lagging, predictable ballads ("Day One") threaten the mood. As an ode to nuptial bliss, the album is both convincing and surprisingly coquettish. —CLOVER HOPE