

music

One Bass, Many Faces

Sometimes you get that feeling an artist is completely different away from his stage persona. If you've caught a Rootdown show recently, you're familiar with some of the antics of the local outfit's bassist, **Jackson Michelson**. Random animal sounds, high-pitched cries of excitement, absurd costumes to match equally ridiculous facial expressions ... all of these eccentricities can be witnessed at a Rootdown show. And yet, when encountering Michelson's music outside Rootdown, you get the sense you're not listening to the same guy. It's so serious, so "mature," so surprising that upon first listen you aren't really sure what to do with it. It's only when you accept the fact that Michelson's solo work is meant to be different that you can get with it just fine.

Michelson's songs are mainstream in production and appeal, filled with equal parts pop, rock and country. The catchy "Summer Fling" is a sly country banger about how a fling can grow into something more, and "As it Rains" is one of those swelling country-pop rockers meant to inspire you to live in the moment, dance in the rain, keeping dreaming, etc., etc.

Revealing a whole other side to his art, Michelson proves he can sing rather well when he isn't acting silly (not that there's anything wrong with silliness). His lyrics aren't going to win any awards for cleverness or exceptional depth, but you get the sense that's not his intention; simple truths seem to most stir his interest. Best, then, to keep it simple at Michelson's upcoming show and enjoy his forays outside the silly.

Jackson Michelson plays 9 pm Friday, July 1, at Whiskey River Ranch; \$5. — *Brian Palmer*

The Devil's Right Hand

It's easy to take **Steve Earle** for granted, in the same way it's easy to take a musician like Elvis Costello for granted. Like Costello, Earle hit the airwaves as a precocious, angry rocker, and his gritty, impossibly catchy 1989 hit "Copperhead Road" turned heads, heralding so-called alt-country. And, as with the great bespectacled one, Earle also descended to the depths of his own personal hell — in his case, a nasty heroin addiction and a stint in prison — before re-emerging with the post-rehab focus of a mortal phoenix, determined to make the most, artistically and otherwise, of his short time on earth. This he has done, heroically, and with a range and ferocity his early work only hinted at. Earle, like Costello, seems to release a new album every year, always brilliant and always different than the last. For all but the most hard-core fans, such prolific and sure-fire output can be difficult to keep up with: *Dude, Jerusalem was a masterpiece! What? He has a new one? Two new ones? And a novel? And an album with the same title?*

If now were not now, and country and folk were still pure categories unsullied by such adjectives as "new" and "neo," Earle's name would be etched into the pantheon of all-time Nashville, anti-Grand Ole Opry greats that includes Hank, Johnny, Waylon and Willie. Not that Earle gives a rat's ass about things like that. At 56, Earle — singer, songwriter, producer, label owner, author, political activist and official coolest guy in any room — is a Renaissance man in full, and he remains intent on making up for lost junk time with a supreme talent tempered by a ghetto wisdom and the Zen humility of a guy who knows exactly how, why and where he exists in the world.

Earle's latest double punch is *I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive*, the title of a debut novel as well as a new album of spare, sawdusty country songs that cycle through like a sad lover's waltz across the mortal coil of memory and loss. Harkening to the work of his mentor-heroes Townes Van Zandt and Guy Clark, Earle's latest is yet another departure, or rebirth, in light of his recent recordings; as with the Hank Williams' lyric inspiring the album's title, the songs sound like they were recorded in a bootlegger's shack during the dog days of August, with little but foot stomps, fiddles and Earle's gruff, wizened voice calling the tune; it could almost be *Copperhead Road Unplugged*, though, honestly, there is nothing unplugged about the quality of his songwriting. The man is electric, wired to life's raw currents and good to go. Always.

So, no, don't take him for granted: Steve Earle is coming to town, and the revolution starts now.

Steve Earle and Allison Moorer play 8 pm Friday, July 1, at The Shedd; \$33/\$35.

— *Rick Levin*



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