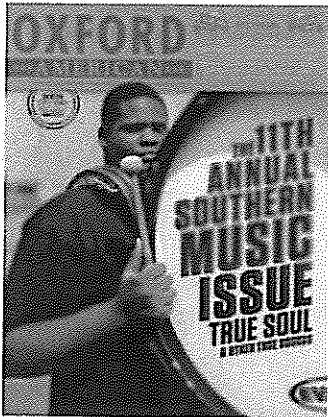


Southern Literary Review

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

Oxford American: The Southern Magazine of Good Writing, 11th Annual Southern Music Issue

March 2, 2010 By Allen Mendenhall



Review by Allen Mendenhall

Well, butter my buns and call me a biscuit because the folks at the *Oxford American* have done it again! Each year this literary quarterly, proudly published by the University of Central Arkansas, releases a Southern music issue.

This year the editors have introduced a new theme—The Southern State Series—because, according to founding editor Marc Smirnoff (no relation to the vodka distillery so far as I know), “We now expect, if not demand, surprises.” Fittingly for a publication out of Conway, Arkansas, the first of these pleasant surprises pays homage to Arkansas natives.

The issue offers not only the printed prose of several talented writers, but also a double-disc demo of foot-tappin'-fanny-shakin'-honky-tonkin' soul and sound. Bursting with improbable yet impeccable rhythms, refreshingly low-brow lyrics, twang, strings, and ol'-timey things, the CDs feature artists like Sonny Burgess, Billy Lee Riley, Larry Donn, Little Beaver, Maxine Brown, Sleepy LaBeef, and other notables among not-so-notables. One CD spotlights local artists (*Arkansas Masters*); the other includes an eclectic, hand-picked mix of musicians from various Southern regions (*Southern Masters*).

Some of the selections will make you unbutton your shirt, loosen your belt, and flail your body from side to side. Some, though, will tug at your heartstrings. No one genre dominates this mélange of gospel, rock, bluegrass, and blues. Whether wailing about home-sweet-home, prison melancholy, lonesome highways, lost love or love made, these artists are sure to connect.

Most Americans were shocked when the *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* soundtrack rocketed atop bestseller lists and won a Grammy for Album of the Year in 2001. Those of us raised on rockabilly, country and western, and family folk and gospel were shocked at the shock. "It's about time," we said, "please give us more."

And, bless their hearts, that's just what the *Oxford American's* editors did. This Southern music issue is the 11th of its kind. Many more, I hope, will follow.

Please do me a favor, y'all, and listen, as I did, to Smirnoff's suggestion: "If all you passionate listeners out there in audience-land delight in anything you hear on the CDs, please tell your friends about your discovery. Or please track down more music by the artist who catches your ear. Or root around in the artist's genre, if it's new to you. This is the way we keep art alive and moving."

Do this, friends, and I assure you, art won't be the only thing alive and moving.