

indie-rock bliss, tapping into the communal spirit you capture most easily by renting a cabin and jamming with your buds. But more than a cohesive statement, *The Hard Quartet* inevitably sounds like four interesting musicians (Malkmus, well-traveled singer-guitarists **Matt Sweeney** and **Emmett Kelly**, Dirty Three drummer **Jim White**) throwing their interesting songs at each other—and that messiness is essential to the charm. Malkmus' songs offer the most weirdness and noise, from the singalong fuzz-rock of "Chrome Mess" to the woozy twinkle of "Hey" and the hanging-on-for-dear-life churn of "Six Deaf Rats." But they feel more locked in during the beautiful moments—the shaggy Wilco-meets-Beatles chorus of "Rio's Song," the harmony-kissed power-pop of "Our Hometown Boy," the minor-key wooziness of "It Suits You." Now comes the true test for band status: stability. Let's hope there's more. **Ryan Reed**

Jazzmeia Horn

Messages EMPRESS LEGACY



Messages takes its title seriously. "Voicemail," one of the key tracks on **Jazzmeia Horn's** fourth album, commences with the swingin'est outgoing message you're ever going to hear. Shooehorning in more than a dozen actual hellos left in the singer's inbox ("Hi, Mommy, love you so much! Call us back!"), it slips into an otherworldly scat section, reiterates its intro ("You've reached the voicemail blues") and makes you wish that her voice was a standard option from your provider so you could get rid of that drab one you have. But "Voicemail" is something of an outlier; throughout *Messages*, Horn's got plenty more that she needs to say and a vocal delivery so engaging, lithe and full of surprises that you'd be happy to hear her sing her grocery list. "My messages are for freedom, the freedom of expression," she states in the album's promo material, "For healing...for reconciliation... for exposing... for movement." Accompanied by a trimmer band than she used on *Dear Love*, her 2021 offering, Horn imbues these songs with pearls of knowledge and wisdom. "Tip," with its go-stop-go-again pacing and finger-snapping cadence, implores the listener to "Pop into being, give your life another meaning/ Lock with the



Dawn Richard and Spencer Zahn

groove do be quick but don't assume," while in "Submit to the Unknown," Horn does just that, incorporating a cappella biblical recitation, birdcall, wordless vamping and, as the song proper kicks in, a challenge—"to come on a journey with me." If all of this seems, in theory, to be just a tad too precious, then rest assured it's not: Horn's voice is a most inviting instrument, easy on the ears, and she makes certain to tuck her truths into enticing melodic settings. "If you just give all that you have to give, it doesn't matter what the message is," she insists on "Sing Your Own Song." Perhaps that's a contradiction of the bottom-line purpose of her album, but devouring what Jazzmeia Horn expresses is never less than gratifying. **Jeff Tamarkin**

Dawn Richard and Spencer Zahn

Quiet in a World Full of Noise

MERGE



"I feel like sometimes artists breathe too heavy on a record," avant-soul singer **Dawn Richard** told *Relix* in 2022. And on *Pigments*, her first LP with multi-instrumentalist **Spencer Zahn**, she wanted "to be OK with being silent." Mission accomplished. That album drifted through soothing patchworks of ECM-leaning ambient jazz, with woodwinds and keys framing her meditations on color. As the title implies, the duo's follow-up record exists in a similarly ghostly space—often even quieter and more evasive, with Zahn's arrangements largely pared back to reverb-washed piano, strings and bass. Sometimes that fragility makes you lean in closer: The title piece is a wonder of art-jazz atmosphere and melismatic R&B crooning,

carried by Richard's self-affirmations ("I loved myself when nobody felt the same"). And, on "Life in Numbers"—amid streaks of reversed noise and reverb that seems to originate from no particular source—her whispered vocals often dissolve into a transfixing creak. But after a while, this wispiess can start to test the patience, like on the drifting "Diets" ("I got rid of all the people who weren't good for me / I drop my fake friends like I drop calories," she sings over arpeggiated synth and out-of-tune piano that seem tonally disconnected from the message). *Quiet in a World Full of Noise* can be monochromatic, but its threadbare atmospheres are undeniably beautiful. **Ryan Reed**

Various Artists

Long Distance Love - A Sweet Relief Tribute to Lowell George

FLATIRON RECORDINGS



Released 45 years to the day after Lowell George's death and benefiting Sweet Relief, *Long Distance Love* is the latest well-deserved tribute to the Little Feat founder. Featuring contributions from a cross-generational cast that ranges from **Elvis Costello**, **Larry Goldings**, **Dave Alvin** and **Ben Harper** to Dawes' **Taylor Goldsmith**, **Jonathan Wilson** and **Inara George**—Lowell's daughter who performs in *The Bird and the Bee*—the set is a testament to his continued influence across the board. **Mike Viola** opens the album with "Trouble," an electric guitar-led take on the accordion-driven acoustic number that appears on Feat's iconic *Sailin' Shoes*. **Joachim Cooder**, whose own revered father, Ry, played slide guitar on Feat's "Willin'," shares a smooth and insistent interpretation of "Cold, Cold,

Cold," which happened to be included on the same album. Costello's rendition of the title-track provides his unique, yet familiar spin on one of George's many show-stopping songs. Harper's "Roll Um Easy" would have been right at home on his career-making 1995 release, *Fight for Your Mind*. Goldsmith and The Bird and the Bee follow suit with their respective "on brand" takes on "Sailin' Shoes" and "Teenage Nervous Breakdown." And in

one of the album's standout offerings, singer-songwriter **Madison Cunningham** delivers a subversive and striking twist on "Love Needs a Heart," which George co-wrote with Jackson Browne for the latter's iconic 1977 release, *Running on Empty*. **Matt Hoffman**

Oso Oso

Life Till Bones

YUNAHON ENTERTAINMENT LLC



In 2024, it's fashionable to throw around "emo" as a descriptor, reflecting the tastes of younger music critics shaped by early Jimmy Eat World, Bright Eyes and Death Cab for Cutie. **Jade Lilitri**, the mastermind of Long Beach act **Oso Oso**, certainly makes music in that lineage, wringing maximum angst from tear-streaked choruses and scrappy, homespun indie-rock riffs. But Lilitri also carries on the legacy of vintage power-pop—very few of his peers have his understanding of hook architecture, realizing how a perfectly placed vocal harmony or rhythm arrangement can elevate an otherwise good song into the stratosphere. *Life Till Bones*, the fifth Oso Oso album, is his most complete proof of that skill set: Like a huge-hearted episode of a classic sitcom (and at 29 minutes, this is basically the same length), it's filled with moments that punch in the gut and stick in the brain. Many critics have framed *Life Till Bones* as a kind of return-to-basics after the subtly more experimental *sore thumb*, which graced many a "best-of" list in 2022. But the differences are mostly in production and arrangement: The new record feels more cohesive and less exploratory, with Lilitri's musings on love and death filtered mostly