

Best of 2002

Rootsy music leads the pack in the Green Mountain State

By Tom Huntington
Free Press Correspondent

It's been a good year for Vermont CDs, so much so that it's downright difficult to pick a Top 10 without leaving out more than a few worthy offerings that would be fit to stuff stockings. Rootsy music takes the cake this year with some rock, jazz-funk and hip-hop flavors rounding things out. Here's my highly biased list in order of release:

■ **The Cancer Conspiracy: "The Audio Medium."** The Cancer Conspiracy might be over, but the instrumental prog rock trio sure kicked the year off in style back in January with its first — and apparently last — full-length album. Though the little band with a big, beautiful noise called it quits over the summer, this local classic is still available on CD and — even better — on vinyl.

■ **Starline Rhythm Boys: "Honky Tonk Livin'."** "Somebody up there loves me," sing the Boys on one of the album's many catchy cuts. Following the May release of this stellar CD, there's been a whole lotta love for the Burlington honky-tonk trio — and not just in local circles. In August, it became the most popular disc being played by independent Americana DJs around the world and stayed there for more than two months. Hats off to my pick for Best Vermont Band of 2002. *Upcoming show: Dec. 31, First Night Montpelier.*

■ **Steph Pappas: "3 Wishes."** Known for her blistering guitar work and well-traveled tales, Pappas tones it down a few notches with stunning results on this July release. Pretty acoustic licks join gorgeous violin and soaring trumpet accompaniment for a sound that's as distinctive as her husky, Joan Armatrading-like vocals. Pappas is a true original. *Upcoming shows: Friday, 135 Pearl; Dec. 31, First Night Montpelier.*



Catch the Starline Rhythm Boys, Tom's pick for Best Vermont Band of 2002, at First Night Montpelier.

■ **Eye Oh You: "Just a Typical Red Square Thursday."** It might be a little rough around the edges, but this July release still manages to capture the live magic of the Burlington hip-hop trio's popular weekly romp at the downtown hotspot. Those who think high quality hip-hop doesn't exist in Vermont "Oh" it to themselves to check it out. *Upcoming show: Tonight and every Thursday at Red Square, Burlington.*

■ **Paul Asbell: "Steel String Americana."** Burlington guitar legend Paul Asbell digs into "the roots of 'classic' American guitar" with mesmerizing results on his long

overdue solo debut, released in August. Asbell makes his National steel and acoustic guitars sing on everything from country blues to flat-pickin' folk to breezy jazz, and delivers some soulful vocals of his own on several cuts. The duet with Sandra Wright seals the deal. My pick for Best Vermont CD of 2002. *Upcoming show: Dec. 31, First Night Burlington.*

■ **Karen McFeeters: "Bachelor Girl."** "I just want to sing," declares Burlington pianist Karen McFeeters on the opening track, and sing she can. McFeeters' voice soars throughout her impressive debut, which mostly consists of introspective, Joni Mitchell-like numbers with a few sunnier, upbeat songs

thrown in. Solid songwriting and a bang-up batch of guest musicians make this August release a standout effort. *Upcoming show: Dec. 31, First Night Burlington.*

■ **Vorcza Trio: "Maximalist."** Originating as an informal jazz trio, Vorcza brings an improvisational approach and an organ-driven groove to its soulful, funky stew. Frequent performances have instilled a seemingly innate rapport among the area musicians, who shine the brightest at their high-energy live shows. Still, the group's debut, released in September, is an infectious effort that both jam and jazz fans can celebrate. *Upcoming show: tonight, Valencia, Burlington; Friday, Mad Mountain Tav-*

ern, Waitsfield; Saturday, Red Square, Burlington; Feb. 27, FlynnSpace, Burlington.

■ **Patrick Fitzsimmons: "Dance."** The former From Good Homes drummer and recent South Burlington resident's rhythmic sensibilities are back in business on his stellar sophomore effort, released in October. Sunny pop anthems shine the brightest, though some of the album's moodier moments provide a poignancy that's delivered with unflinching conviction. Fitzsimmons brings a unique approach to guitar, and he's definitely not your average singer-songwriter. *Upcoming shows: Friday, 135 Pearl, Burlington. Jan. 18, Higher Ground, Winooski.*

■ **Diane Zeigler: "Paintbrush."** She might not be sizable in stature, but Montpelier's Diane Zeigler is a genuine giant among Vermont singer-songwriters. Her third album, released last month, is a striking collection of country-tinged torch and twang that features a full band sound behind Zeigler's powerfully crystalline voice. Decidedly upbeat and earthy, the album also offers some gentle laments as only she can deliver them. *Upcoming show: Dec. 31, First Night Burlington and Montpelier; March 22, Middle Earth Music Hall, Bradford.*

■ **Mark LeGrand: "All Dressed Up."** Similar to the Starline Rhythm Boys recent success, Montpelier singer and bassist/guitarist Mark LeGrand is starting to get popular in similar worldly circles. The reason? His latest solo offering, released last month, is a genuine gem of an album with a vintage country vibe that'll have you singing along to lovelorn laments and "Cheating Songs." A full clip of fine musicians dress up LeGrand's laid back and distinctive vocal work. *Upcoming show: March 7, City Hall, Montpelier.*