

MUSIC

Tilly and the Wall, near right, from Omaha, whose new album is "Bottoms of Barrels," and Death Vessel, far right, from Brooklyn, whose songs on "Stay Close" draw on bluegrass and country.



Tory Bonacci

PLAYLIST | Joey Burns

A Spanish Alchemist And an Italian Tom Waits

FANS of Calexico, a band from Tucson, know the thrill that can come from music that crosses borders: since the mid-1990's, the band has been blending pensive indie rock with alt-country and elements of mariachi. But Joey Burns, the lead singer, is even more eclectic in his listening habits, calling himself a "frustrated ethnomusicologist" whose tastes are broad and insatiable. During a recent European tour that found him adding to his pile of CD's, he spoke by phone with Ben Sisario about what he has been listening to.

Amparanoia

Amparanoia is the project of a Spanish singer named Amparo Sánchez, who is from Granada but moved to Madrid and got involved in the mestizo scene there, where she met Manu

Chao. The name refers to her "positive" paranoia about music — her idea for the group was to mix rhythms and styles from many backgrounds with crazy combinations, like rumba with ranchera, bolero with ska, and reggae with hip-hop. On her new album, "La Vida Te Da" (Wrasse), the sonic mixture is seamless. I hear a trace of blues and sadness in her melodies — turns out her inspiration to sing came from listening to Billie Holiday records as a child — as well as a raspy hint of flamenco and a jazzy, stream-of-conscious style of rap.

Tilly and the Wall

Earnest, passionate and enthusiastic, I love the intertwined call-and-response vocals, and the combination of pop, folk, lo-fi and electro rock. On its last album, this five-piece band from

Omaha held up its layered melodies with innovative percussion that came in the form of the tap-dancing stunner Jamie Williams. Its new album, "Bottoms of Barrels" (Team Love, to be released May 23), includes a rhythm section, though it still has plenty of space in the arrangements for the slashing guitars and wails of vocals to shine through. Variety is the key here, whether in a foot-stomping rock song, a slow ballad or even an electro-acoustic thumper like "The Freest Man." That song could be a look back to the 1980's, with synth and chorused guitar lines draped in black, but the vocals offer hope: "Don't drown yourself in all your old regret/ Because that heaviness will steal away your breath."

Death Vessel

Death Vessel is basically one guy, Joel Thibodeau, who is living in Brooklyn right now. He has this high-lonesome thing going on, and it's heavenly. His voice is very high — I'd call him a definite alto — and when you first listen to it you're not sure if it's male or female. As a songwriter, he's close to Bill Callahan of Smog or Richard Buckner, but he sounds completely different. On "Stay Close" (North East Indie), his songs are based on bluegrass and country music and have a nightmarish take on contemporary life; on "Deep in the Horchata," he sings: "Losing our voices, and guts we had to spill/ Now that you've dropped the A-bomb/ You've put a mute on cicadas' song." The name Death Vessel sounds full of metal and leather, but it's kind of beautiful, too. In Mexico, they celebrate the Day of the Dead, but it's really a celebration of life, cloaked in remembrance of people who have passed away. It's just in the way you interpret it.

The Concretes

One of my friends said that Sweden releases the most music per capita of any country in the world. And it's good music, too. The Concretes, from Stockholm, are a case in point. On their latest album, "In Colour" (Astralwerks), the vocals are what ground the overall sound, but what stands out is the creativity in the arrangements and instrumentation: trumpets, woodwinds, banjo, mandolin, background choruses, big guitars, organ and strings. It's the sound of the Scandinavian summer, with plenty of sun but also the occasional dark and moody storm. Victoria Bergsman, the lead singer, often paints landscapes where memories seem to drift away for a while, but, as she sings in "Tomorrow," "hang around to greet the future."

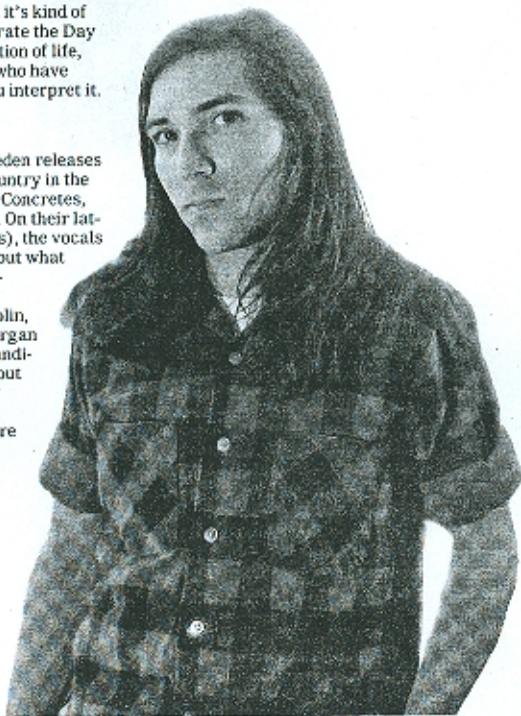
Liz Durrett

On her beautifully dark and bittersweet new album, "The Mezzanine" (Warm), Liz Durrett keeps the songs sparse in accompaniment — nylon-string guitar and spacey keyboard — to allow her lush and textured vocals to take on a full surround-sound

quality. She mostly does her own harmonizing, though some of it has a familiar sound: it comes from her producer and uncle, Vic Chesnutt. She's from Athens, Ga., one of the capitals of indie rock, though her songs also capture the gothic South in songs like "Creepyskudzu," with shadowy and mysterious spirits in her past that are "heavy as horseshoes thrown on the lawn."

Vinicio Capossela

"The Italian Tom Waits." That's what J. D. Foster, our producer, told me. And sure enough, Capossela's voice has that familiar gruff and growl. But he's tapping into a whole different world. He is exposed to a great deal of Eastern music, and you can hear the effect on him in his use of the melodic minor and instrumentation that includes percussion like the balafon and the strange combination of cello, banjo and prepared guitar. His new album, "Ovunque Proteggi," which is on Atlantic Records in Italy, at times feels like the soundtrack to "The Last Temptation of Christ," though he's also playing with some very theatrical elements that evoke 1940's big bands from the Riviera, cabaret from the 20's and some Cuban-style salsa. It seems more artists these days are tapping into Eastern music, whether from India or the Middle East. It's that Arabic bend in the melody that doesn't happen much in Western music, and using it opens up a whole gamut of new influences.



Liz Corso