

LAST FOREVER

Trainfare Home
(Nonesuch Records)

Last Forever is a refreshing surprise. They make traditional songs sound fresh and exciting without sacrificing any of the music's integrity.

In the best tradition of troubadours, keyboardist Dick Connette takes songs, or sometimes even just scraps of songs, completes them and makes them his own. Singer Sonya Cohen takes her lush and confident voice and gives the songs an accessible and authentic folk edge.

Surrounded by a shifting cast of first-rate backup musicians, Last Forever manages to transcend mere revivalism and deliver a fresh and engaging take on some great American classics.

The familiar works include a rendition of "Casey Jones" and, amusingly, a version of "Duke of Earl," which works despite the radical shift of genre from doo-wop to folk.

Meanwhile, Mr. Connette has drawn from a wide variety of sources to create original songs rooted deeply in classic American folk. They range from "Diamond Joe," a song inspired by a 1930s field recording of a Southern prison song, to "John Doe #24," based on a sad song related to a recent death in New York but sung to the tune of an old Leadbelly standard.

This is an album worth crossing the street to find. — S.S.

LISA MOSCATIELLO

Second Avenue
(Wind River Records)

Lisa Moscatiello is a longtime favorite in the Washington-area music scene, and her second solo release should be no disappointment to fans.

Her warm, rich voice can veer from traditional Irish folk songs to modern-sounding pop. She can write a clever song on her own, with several good examples on her current album, or put her own stamp on traditional favorites, in this case "Lass of Glenshee."

The Arlington native can even take a pop hit, in this case "Love Is a Stranger" by the Eurythmics, and make it a credible folk piece.

Unfortunately, Miss Moscatiello has yet to break out of the modern folk-rock sound. Her songs are a comforting addition to Mary Cliff's laconic weekend radio show on WETA, but they lack a passion or distinctiveness that would propel her beyond that enjoyable but rather narrow specialty. — S.S.

"Now Hear This"
Feb. 17, 2001

A3

La Peste
(Sony Music Entertainment)

A3's first release on their new record label does not even come close to capturing the spooky, mind-blowing power of their last release, Geffen's "Exile on Coldharbour Lane." But topping that little-known masterpiece would be a tall order for any band.

Larry Love and D. Wayne Love, the strangest English boys in rock 'n' roll, are back with another collection of old-time, down-home Southern gospel electronica that will have your feet tapping and your sinful soul soaring.

The duo trade in their native England as Alabama Three, but they are forced into the shortened version in the United States by the homophonic similarity to has-been country band Alabama.

A3's last album sold hardly any copies when it was released in 1997, to the point that Geffen dumped the pioneering group, making "Coldharbour Lane" probably the finest album of the 1990s that nobody heard.

But after being consigned to remainder-bin oblivion, the group was rescued by David Chase, producer of HBO's "Sopranos" series, who made their weird and hypnotic "Woke Up This Morning" the theme song of his weird and hypnotic gangster drama.

The new album, released in the wake of that belated success, has some of the same elements: DJ beats over oddball, alcohol-fueled gospel of a distinctly Southern fried flavor. At its best, it almost recaptures the magic of "Coldharbour Lane," particularly the opening track called "Too Sick to Pray."

Yet the album can't quite sustain the bad-moon-rising spookiness that made A3's last album such a transcendent piece of work.

Let us hope A3 will recover their lost mojo for their next album. — S.S.

DOLLY PARTON

Little Sparrow
(Sugar Hill Records)

In the shadow of Dolly Parton's larger-than-life persona, it is easy to forget that she is a very fine traditional country singer, with more than a little flair for traditional bluegrass.

The bodacious country star reminded us of her roots with her Grammy-winning album "The Grass Is Blue."

She tries to follow on that success with "Little Sparrow," a largely successful collection of original bluegrass songs coupled with a few bluegrassified standards.

The title track, written by Miss Parton, leads the pack in preserving the genre's traditional gloomy and bluesy feeling with a tale of a woman done wrong. A few little oddities also present themselves, such as her strange, yet effective, update of Collective Soul's pretentious hit "Shine."

Even Cole Porter's familiar "I Get a Kick Out of You" gets a little bump from Miss Parton's infectious good nature.

With the help of country standouts such as Alison Krauss, doing a good-natured turn as a backup vocalist, Miss Parton manages to remind us why she is one of the most likable and authentic personalities in country music. — Sean Scully