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A weekly trip through the new-release aisle of your local music store

July 22, 2000

NELLY

Country Grammar
(Universal Records)

For most of rap's short history, attention has focused on the great East Coast-West Coast battle, the sometimes violent tale of whether New York or Los Angeles is the dominant force. Cornell Haynes Jr. desperately wants to change all that.

Now, rapping under the name Nelly, the St. Louis-based Mr. Haynes tries to carve out a distinctive sound for flyover country. It's an odd blend of the languid beat of the West Coast and the propulsive vocal rhythms of Jamaican toasting.

Sometimes it works; sometimes it doesn't.

Nelly has a solid voice and can occasionally kick out a jam that sticks in your head — the title song and "Thicky Thicky Girl" could be radio hits if mixed to avoid the obligatory coarse language.

But Nelly's beats are strangely mechanical and sterile, excessively computerized perhaps. His distinctive voice also gets lost in a forest of overproduction. Pile onto that tiresome cliché about easy sex and expensive cars, and this album shows that the St. Louis sound still needs a little time to mature. — *Sean Scully*

JOSEPH ARTHUR

Come to Where I'm From
(Real World/Virgin Records)
Joseph Arthur makes the singer-songwriter into a refreshingly modern figure, reshaping and renewing it after years of abuse at the hands of earnest hacks.

Mr. Arthur, a native of Dayton, Ohio, has splashes of Radiohead, flecks of the Replacements and slivers of Beck, all played over echoes of Dylan and Donovan.

His new album is a trifle enigmatic — not for literal-minded fans of singer-songwriters in the Jewel mode — but Mr. Arthur never veers into pomposity or overt artiness.

His second album, on Peter Gabriel's Real World Records, is a worthwhile effort. A little too edgy perhaps for mainstream success, but probably destined to be one of those lost classics that influence the next generation of singer-songwriters — sort of a Nick Drake of the new century. — S.S.

STEP KINGS

Let's Get It On
(Road Runner Records)

The Step Kings are pretty much the musical younger brothers of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. Befitting their younger-generation status, they are angrier and a little bit harder — as if the Peppers were to do an album of Rage Against the Machine covers.

The New York City hard-core outfit can pretty much give the boot to any of their thrash-punk contemporaries. Like the Peppers, they are smarter and more lyrical than most of their competitors.

They subtitle their first major-label release as "Twelve Jolting Tales," which is overstating the case a bit. The songs don't really stand on their own as coherent stories, but a few do stand out as jolting fun.

The only major miss on the album is the band's superfluous cover of Pink Floyd's angry classic "Another Brick in the Wall." — S.S.