

together at Wire Recording in Austin, Texas, to record this sparkling album. It's unclear how far and long-lived this trio will go, as a side project or frequent collaboration, but for now they are the Ragpicker String Band, evoking comparison to other great originals, like the Mississippi Sheiks. They even cover two Sheiks songs: *Lonely One in This Town* and *Honey Babe Let the Deal Go Down*. Expectedly, they take turns performing their selected songs split-duty, with the others falling behind and harmonizing with the leader. The result is American string band music at its best, showcasing traditional music of the golden era of the blues, but with modern sound quality—passionate and eloquently performed roots music for today. They hit the sweet spot, showcasing splendidly the power and beauty of traditional, acoustic blues.

Their debut album, aptly named **The Ragpicker String Band** impresses on multiple levels, foremost dazzling string-instrumental panache. The refined multi-instrumentalist Martin Grosswendt stands out masterfully with his amazingly clean lap and bottleneck slide guitar skills, playing every note with feeling, giving each note room to breathe and adding just the right touch to a song, holding

true to the old wisdom of Virginia bluesman Ernest Banks: "Never play a note you don't believe." He also pulls out the fiddle and mandolin on a few tunes, always exquisitely.

Mary Flowers is an outstanding traditional blues guitar fingerpicker and slider player, feeling perfectly at home in Piedmont, ragtime, Delta and any other subgenre. In the acoustic world, where very few women hold court, she is a true gem. She shines on *Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning*, the gospel blues made famous by Rev. Gary Davis and his disciples Hot Tuna. Her slide playing on her original tune *Bruno's Dream* is impeccable. She daringly pulls out Thelonious Monk's *Blue Moon* with Martin Grosswendt backing her with aesthetic and tasteful bottleneck slide. Yes, the Monk without piano, and she makes it fly.

Like many blues mandolinists Rich DelGrosso, one of the foremost proponents of the instrument today, likes to play songs associated with blues mandolinist Yank Rachell. The trio cut *Clean Up At Home*, *Black Mattie Blues* and *Milk Cow Blues*. DelGrosso holds his own on Dobro on Mary Flower's excellent *Baby, Where You Been* and plays mandola on *Motel Town*. A powerhouse in whatever

and respect for traditional electric blues.

Slow blues tunes like *Hobo Hilton* and the instrumental *Pain* are great showcases for Gordon's guitar chops. His solos are aggressive and energetic, but listeners can hear shades of Buddy Guy and Luther Allison in Gordon's playing. The rhythm section keeps a rock solid backbeat, and organist Rich Wenzel lends some lowdown atmosphere to *Hobo Hilton*. Much of **Woodchoppers Ball** is given over to high-octane slide guitar workouts. On the powerhouse shuffle *Chainsaw Boogie*, Gordon's howling tone and vibrato-drenched licks are clearly influenced by the late blues-rock master Johnny Winter. Gordon's take on the familiar warhorse *Stranger Blues* and a rendition of Koko Taylor's *Voodoo Woman* feature slide work reminiscent of Aussie guitar slinger Dave Hole's hyperkinetic style.

Gordon's approach to the blues can hardly be called delicate. Yet, listeners who don't mind a little guitar athleticism and macho swagger will find plenty to enjoy on **Woodchoppers Ball**.

—Jon Kleinman

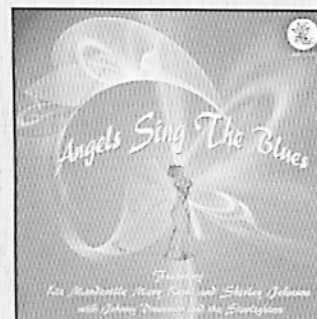
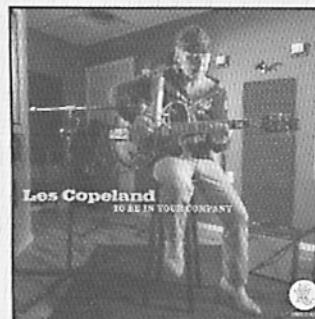
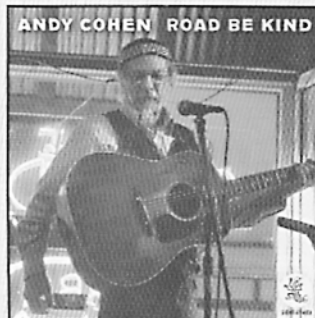
RAGPICKER STRING BAND

The Ragpicker String Band

Yellow Dog Records – YDR 2422

They are billed as "the fearsome threesome," "acoustic allstars" and "fingerpicking, harmonizing folk-blues supergroup," and it may be true. Mandolinist Rich DelGrosso, guitarist Mary Flower and multi-instrumentalist Martin Grosswendt are top performers on the acoustic blues scene, each accomplished virtuosos and superb players. Put them together in an ensemble and you have lightning in a bottle. They got

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