

The year in albums by Wilmington bands, 2017

By Brian Tucker StarNews correspondent

A handful of albums by area bands and musicians that made an impression.

This year saw nearly one new album a week produced by Wilmington-area bands and musicians: 44 that I know of, which is on par with recent years.

Interestingly, much of the new material was either debuts (Holy Rivers, The Mighty Ollas) or sophomore releases (Teeth of England, Youth League), with quite a few albums recorded by Ian Millard (Mountain Thrower, Jesse Stockton). In addition, a lot of bands put out single songs, which suggests plenty of future albums in the works for 2018 and beyond.

Here's a sampling of notable albums released by Wilmington bands in 2017.

Jesse Stockton & Dream Machine, "No Hope for Humanity" -- After hearing Stockton's 2013 album "Thank You Very Kindly," I was hooked. On "No Hope for Humanity," released in February, you hear earnestness, ache and beauty, starting with the opening song "All I Can Be is Me." Stockton careens from bittersweet gems ("Pony Boy") and folky ragers ("Can You Hear") to experimental songs ("Social Remodification") and hit-single material ("Shake it Off").

A Bottle Volcanic, "Weird Magic" -- Dark, experimental indie rock. Artful and powerful, the album -- released in August and recorded by Ian Millard -- is at times restrained, at others psychedelic and combative. There's beauty in the chaos, and Mike Edwards shines on singular tracks like "Purple River" and "Howl."

The Valedictorians & J. Sales, "Frisbee on the Rooftop" -- The second EP from hip-hop duo Danny Louis Thomas and Cameron Tinklenberg is a collaboration with Jared Sales (Coastal Collective) and features Daniel Barrett and Tristan Burns. It features laid back, colorfully textured production that underscores varied vocals, as on "Long Road," a choice, hypnotic song. Thomas is part of Beats & Coffee, which released "Cookout Compilation" this summer). Earlier this year, Thomas released the EP "You Changed Up."

U.N.I.T.Y., "Living Inside My Head" -- Playing a mix of rock and R&B with hip-hop, jazz and gospel influences, this young Wilmington band released its first album, an EP, in September. Key tracks include the groovy, free-flowing "Built Fa Dis."

Chris Frisina, "Fences," and Patrick Carr, "When the Road Darkens" -- Folk music continues to move beyond what we think it's supposed to sound like. Frisina's "Fences" (September) is country-tinged and wistful, led by his enigmatic voice. (Choice track: "Pieces.") Carr's "When the Road Darkens" (October) feels like a dream, hazy and haunted, with his voice like a mix of Jim Morrison and Neil Young. (Choice track: Spare but elegant "The Crystal Coast.")

Purple Hearse, "Cesspool of Sin" -- Only seconds into hearing this trio's July EP, the hook was in pretty deep. Over three songs, their stoner, psychedelic vibe sounds like early-days KISS meets the background music in "Apocalypse Now" during the Do Lung bridge scene. Raw, Hendrix-y guitar, bashing drums and spaced out, soaring vocals make it a heavy and fun.

LST.1NE. "ARTIFAX" -- "ARTIFAX," released in July, is something we'll hopefully see more of -- instrumental albums, bey they of the hip-hop or indie rock variety. Here, Hayden V.I. Williams' beat tape reaches back to the '90s, mixing up steady beats, sampling and old-school sounds. Short in duration but long on personality, Williams brings together hooks and feel. Check out "Down" and "Summer in Love."

The Umphs. "Dialogue Bubbles" -- Emma Nelson's voice could make pages of office memoranda engaging. Like her solo album, Nelson's stellar vocal presence is unforgettable on this four-song EP released in February. Frank and gritty, it's also soulful, ragged and beautiful. Recorded by Sean Thomas Gerard (who also released a fine second solo album this year), these plaintive rock songs -- jangly guitar and piano that unfurls with carefree stride -- are inventive ("Creepster") and confessional ("Never in Love"). Choice track: "Transition City."

Randy McQuay. "My Kind of Blues." and Travis Shallow. "The Great Divide" -- Two Wilmington performers whose voices make them a category unto themselves. McQuay kicked off the year with this recorded-live, 15-track blues release that includes rollicking acoustic tunes about everything from lost love, rehab and even defiance (the excellent "Grinnin' in Your Face"). Choice tracks: "I Don't Care Where You Cook" and "I'll Sing for You." Shallow's October album is soulful and tender, his voice is like a raspier Kenny Rogers. Like his self-titled 2016 debut, Shallow recorded on analog tape, a production choice that enhances his already warm vocals. Choice tracks: "Stitch" and "The Great Divide."