

## Don Keller Fiesta

Don Keller Records (52 mins)

★★★★★

*US-based guitarist delivers a nostalgic 80s Congolese sound*



For the past decade the Seattle-based guitarist Don Keller has been making YouTube videos of himself playing

primarily Congolese rumba and *soukous* backed by drum loops. In 2016, he started composing songs for his debut album, which he has now released following a successful Kickstarter campaign.

Helping with the lyrics, vocals and technicalities is UK-based Congolese producer and musician Jeannot Bel, who sings lead on four tracks. Bel's voice is sweet and mellow, sounding reminiscent of Choc Stars and OK Jazz singer Carlito. Particularly appealing are the tracks 'One More Chance', 'Our Love' and 'Since You Went Away'. These songs really demonstrate Keller's accomplished guitar chops with some exquisite OK Jazz-style rumba phrasing aided by some tasteful saxophone. Also featured, on one track each, are singers Nyboma and Malage de Lugendo – two of Congo's finest. Four of the ten tracks are in a more Afro-reggae style. 'Little Citizen' has ironic French lyrics, aimed at a certain president's supporters, written and sung by Daniel Miller.

All in all the album is a great showcase of Don Keller's exceptional guitar talent – only slightly let down by some vacuous English lyrics in a couple of the Congolese songs.

MARTIN SINNOCK

**TRACK TO TRY** *Our Love*

## Liberation Project Songs That Made Us Free

Just Music (3 CDs, 115 mins)

★★★★★

*Celebrating the music that inspired social change*



With a predominantly South African cast among musicians from 17 other countries, this multicultural collection of freedom songs, old and new, is a highly worthy project. The three discs are smartly themed 'Celebration,' 'Introspection' and 'Inspiration' so that each has its own cohesive mood. Many of the 37 tracks are genuinely uplifting.

New arrangements of familiar songs including the Italian partisan anthem 'Bella Ciao' given a reggae beat, the Buena Vista Social Club classic 'Chan Chan' sung by Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera as a moody rock *en Español* number, and a nice township remake of The Specials' 'Free Nelson Mandela' all hit the spot. So do a brace of remakes of anti-apartheid anthems in Peter Gabriel's 'Biko' and Miriam Makeba's 'Soweto Blues', the latter sung in Italian for some reason. But there are a few stinkers, too, including a grating version of the World War II resistance song 'The Partisan', memorably recorded by Leonard Cohen, and the trad-folk song 'Shosholozza' inexplicably and excruciatingly rendered in prog-rock fashion. Several of the new songs work well, including a homage to Ray Phiri and Hugh Masekela and an exquisitely orchestrated instrumental tribute to Desmond Tutu, written by the Guinean *kora* player N'Faly Kouyaté. One is loathe to criticise such a well-intentioned project, but rather too many of the new compositions are lost in a homogeneous global-rock swamp.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

**TRACK TO TRY** *A Peaceful Man*  
(For Desmond Tutu)

## Olav Mjelva & Eli West Hand to Play

Olav Mjelva & Eli West (48 mins)

★★★★★

*Norwegian fiddle shuffles the Americana deck*



The Seattle-based guitarist and singer Eli West is well-known for his old-time Americana duo

with fellow singer Cahalen Morrison. West's partnership with the Norwegian Hardanger fiddler Olav Mjelva seems to be equally intuitive and assured. Guitar and fiddle blend effortlessly together, complementing each other in ascending and descending melody lines and riffs. Mjelva's playing is always unmistakably Scandinavian yet he comfortably drops in old-time American slurs, slides and hoedown bowing patterns, producing a seamless fusion. West sings on 'Hand to Play' and 'Isle of France', the latter being an English traditional song given an Americana treatment. West has one of those reedy yet robust tenor voices that is Americana through and through, seemingly precision-tooled for cutting across bluegrass stringed instruments.



Karen Cox

## Rhiannon Giddens with Francesco Turrisi There is No Other

Nonesuch (46 mins)

★★★★★

*Acoustic perfection that takes in everything from opera to folk*



Having only reviewed the wonderful Giddens-curated collaborative album *Songs of*

*Our Native Daughters* in #147, it's a surprise to welcome her back so soon. But there's no stopping the ex-Carolina Chocolate Drops singer right now. The ballet she scored with Italian multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi premiered earlier this year and now the pair have collaborated on this delightful collection, which traces the influence of Islamic culture on European and African-American music. Recorded in five days in Dublin with little overdubbing or editing, Giddens accompanies her powerful folk-soul voice on banjo, violin and viola while Turrisi – whose southern Mediterranean upbringing versed him in a rich

tapestry of Islamic/North African influences – contributes piano, accordion, lute, cello banjo and Arabic percussion.

Like many of Giddens' projects, the album's title is layered with sociopolitical meaning – the 'Other' referring to cultural marginalisation as their panoply of instruments tease out hidden and unexpected sonic connections on material that ranges from original Giddens compositions to a diverse set of interpretations that includes Ola Belle Reed's 'Gonna Write Me a Letter', Oscar Brown Jr's 'Brown Baby', the traditional Italian folk dance tune 'Pizzica di San Vito' and a memorably intense take on 'Black Swan' from Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *The Medium*, once recorded by Nina Simone. The results are acoustic perfection.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON

**TRACK TO TRY** *Black Swan*

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