



HANS CHEW

Open Sea

AT THE HELM

8/10

New York-based Tennessean busts out the guitar jams on levitational fourth. By Rob Hughes

As he'll happily attest, Hans Chew's reputation is mainly built on his abilities as a pianist. 2010's terrific solo debut, *Tennessee & Other Stories...*, wove together R&B, blues, gospel, rock'n'roll and ragtime funk into a ravishing tapestry of American roots music, with piano as its defining texture. Successive releases – 2014's *Life & Love* and last year's *Unknown Sire* – were further manifestations of the same free-spirited approach, an extension of his earlier days manning the keys for the late Jack Rose and D Charles Speer & The



Helix. Sometimes, though, you need to fuck with the formula to stay engaged.

In Chew's case, he's chosen to return to a less-acknowledged area of expertise, the guitar, to drive the spontaneous visions of *Open Sea*. It's an album that reaches into the past for its guiding directive, informed by the exploratory zeal of Neil Young & Crazy Horse, Fairport Convention, early Fleetwood Mac and late-'60s psych-rockers Mighty Baby. The emphasis here is on jamming – lots of it – as Chew and regular guitarist Dave Cavallo create endlessly supple improvisations over bare song structures. One of *Open Sea*'s

operative texts is *Live At The Fillmore East* (1970), marked by the interplay of Danny Whitten's rhythm guitar and Neil Young's lead, riffing on themes and firing off at unexpected angles. "I wanted to take a typical Hans Chew song and really expand it," he explains. "I could

be Danny and Dave could be Neil."

There is, of course, much more to *Open Sea* than jams for jams' sake. Chew's new rhythm section of Jimmy SeiTang and Rob Smith, members of local New York collective Rhyton, are very much involved in the creative process too, bringing nuance and verve to these six songs, only one of which dips under the six-minute barrier. And then there are the keen melodies and pliable grooves, allied to Chew's strapping, oblique vocal lines, all of which keep things moving along with a minimum of drag. As does, incidentally, long-time engineer Jason Meagher, whose Black Dirt Studio specialises in recording on the hoof.

The vintage Fairport references, specifically the musical rapport between Richard Thompson and Dave Swarbrick, are most explicit on "Give Up The Ghost" and "Freely". The former flits between Band-ish country-blues, roistering rock and the kind of intuitive give-and-take – with Cavallo approximating Thompson's spidery modal guitar – that hoisted "Matty Groves" and "A Sailor's Life" to fresh heights. Similarly, "Freely" is nine minutes of gloriously unfettered folk-blues, its pagan heart enlivened

by a vampy piano figure (wisely, Chew hasn't dispensed with his usual instrument altogether).

"Cruikshanks" is a little knottier, its funky R&B venturing off into faintly prog territory, before meandering into the sort of semi-pastoral glade that was once the province of Traffic. Just when it seems to have levelled out, Cavallo lets fly a heroic solo that coaxes in one final, impassioned verse from Chew. The same wandering dynamic underpins the title track. As on portions of *Tennessee & Other Stories...*,

Brave, bold and captivating, the record has many and varied charms...

there's plenty of New Orleans in its deep, rolling grooves and boogaloo piano, though the more off-kilter passages cast a darker shadow, as if the band are playing a party at the end of the world.

This sense of disquiet is echoed in Chew's lyrics. "Open Sea" finds him adrift, metaphorically, tossing his fate to the four winds, unsure of what the future holds. The relatively concise "Who Am Your Love?", which glides in on a Southern blues motif, addresses the issues behind Chew and his wife's problematic attempts to start a family and the impact on their creative lives. "The mind prepares what the heart ensnares," he rasps, "Forever after/Out of the black it comes." Then there's what Chew calls "the ubiquitous stuff from the past that I can't seem to shake".

"Give Up The Ghost" contains veiled references to the drug abuse of his twenties (he finally cleaned up some years prior to his debut LP) and strained familial relationships. The ebullient "Extra Mile" – a meeting of whiskery country-funk and speakeasy jam, like something Bobby Charles or Bobby Whitlock may have cooked up in the early '70s – addresses his relationship with his father, who died of cancer when Chew was just 14. It's a song of lasting paternal love and unbroken bonds, even in death, his memory a source of artistic fuel that Chew continues to draw from: "I've spent all my life tryin' to see his song was sung." Brave, bold and captivating, it's a perfect illustration, in miniature, of *Open Sea*'s many and varied charms.

SLEEVE NOTES

1. Give Up The Ghost
2. Cruikshanks
3. Open Sea
4. Who Am Your Love?
5. Freely
6. Extra Mile

Recorded by: Jason Meagher
Recorded at: Black Dirt Studio, New York
Personnel: Hans Chew (vocals, guitar, piano), Dave Cavallo (guitar), Jimmy SeiTang (bass), Rob Smith (drums)

AtoZ

This month...

- P18 BILLY BRAGG
P19 DAN MICHAELSON
P20 JIM JAMES
P22 ANGELICA ROCKNE
P23 JON LANGFORD
P27 NOEL GALLAGHER
P28 ROBERT FINLEY
P29 VIRGINIA WING

ALIEN STADIUM Livin' In Elizabethan Times

DOUBLE SDX

7/10

Alien synth-pop voyage from Messrs Mason and Duffy



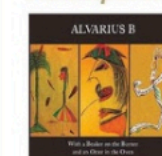
In which Steve Mason (from The Beta Band) and Martin Duffy (from Primal Scream) presumably get baked, listen to Jeff Wayne's *War Of The Worlds* and decide to make their own orchestral concept album sung from an alien's point of view. It comprises four lengthy tracks, from the woodwind-assisted Led Zep-sized rocker "This One's For The Humans" (where contemptuous aliens gleefully watch mankind fall) to the one-chord motorik Krautrock of "The Visitations" (where an Austin Allegro prompts them to wish humans would "die die die"). Best of all is "The Moon Is Not Your Friend", in which a McCartney-style guilty pleasure is bookended by terrifying space-age FX. JOHN LEWIS

ALVARIUS B With A Beaker On The Burner And An Otter In The Oven

ABDUCTION

8/10

A Bishop brother and his poker face



As one-third of the late, great psychedelic surrealists Sun City Girls, Alan Bishop (aka Alvarius B) knows all about getting real loose – unrelenting explorers, they did more than most anyone to connect majority-world music, warped psychedelia and lo-fi scum rock. So, it might be a surprise to hear Bishop playing it comparatively straight on his latest, a double-disc or three-LP set of devilish folk hymns, cranky home-blown rockers and heartbroken acoustic laments, pierced by his acid tongue. With members of Master Musicians Of Bukkake and Invisible Hands joining in, it's no surprise everything gets wilder as it goes along. JONDALE

Q&A

Hans Chew "The songs just started pouring out"

What was the catalyst for *Open Sea*? I read a couple of blogs – *Shakey*, about Neil Young, and the Bert Jansch one, *Dazzling Stranger*, which had a ton of stuff about Davy Graham – and they really inspired me to start playing a lot more guitar. I'd also been hanging out with the guitarist Michael Chapman, who'd shown me an open C tuning of his, hence the album title. The songs just started pouring out.

How much of the music was improvised? My concept for the album was let's not overcook it, let's do a raw record where we get in there and try to catch some magic. None of those jams are structured at all, it's all just happening on the fly. We had the verse and chorus worked out, but after that it was wide open. The rhythm section of Rob Smith and Jimmy SeiTang really fancied themselves as Derek & The Dominos. It was an exercise in allowing our egos to be laid out there naked. It was really freeing.

What about the lyrical themes of the record? In 2015, when I was writing these songs, my wife and I were trying to start a family. We went through several miscarriages, and on some levels, it felt like we were out there in the open boat: "Where are we going? Is there something wrong with me? Am I part of the problem?" All those sorts of emotions. So, in a lot of ways, it was kind of a dark place I was coming from. INTERVIEW: ROB HUGHES