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## **RICK & THE RAMBLERS, *I HEARD THE HIGHWAY... AND OTHER SWING TUNES FROM WESTERN VERMONT* (self-released, CD)**

— *I Heard the Highway* settles right into a nice-and-easy swing groove, and, thanks to some musical cruise control, doesn't stray far from it on these 11 tracks. This CD is a good addition to the collections of swing-dance novices, in fact, because none of the tunes is too fast to trip over. What's more, the sound is smooth, the playing flawless, and the production from Charles Eller Studios mighty pleasing to the ear. What's more, the "Western" in the subtitle means business.

Rick & the Ramblers is Rick Norcross — impresario of the annual Green Mountain Chew Chew, and lead vocalist/rhythm guitarist here — and a posse of fine local musicians. Though his lineup has changed over the years, the current members are Leo Roy on vocals and lead guitar, Jim Pitman on pedal steel and dobro, Chris Peterman on saxophone, Tom Buckley on vocals and bass, and Roy Cutler on vocals and drums. Taking a big leap from acid soul to country swing, former Belizbeha chanteuse Shauna Antoniuic contributes both lead and backup vocals. Roy and Cutler take the center mike on one song each — the latter on his own countryish "Snow in April," which closes the album.

Three of the other four Vermont-made tunes were penned by Leroy Preston, a founding member of Asleep at the Wheel who also weighed in on this production's final mix. His is the title track, a gentle, mid-tempo twanger on which Norcross'

country crooning matches the sorrowful slide of the pedal steel. Preston also contributed the aptly named "Bump Bounce Boogie," one of my favorites here. The song really does all three of those verbs, and is sung by Antoniuic in her sweet, girlish voice, with sax and steel responding to her vocal lines. Preston's "Lonely Night Song" is a swing number featuring the terrific David Gusakov on fiddle. Hearing him suddenly makes you wish he were present on all the other tunes, but this was it.

Antoniuic delivers Vermonter Colin McCaffrey's lyrically anxious "Never Get the Nerve to Call," and here one could wish for a little more full-throated vocal spunk than she's got. But this is a minor quibble; Antoniuic's honeyed tones are a welcome addition overall.

Another AATW alum, Ray Benson, wrote "Dance With the One Who Brung You," which shows off Cutler's sprightly drumming and one of many silky sax maneuvers by Peterman. Roy handily takes on the easy-listening Vince Gill tune, "I'll Take Texas," another highlight. It's hard not to like the tom-tom-driven "Cherokee Maiden," a Cindy Walker tune made famous by Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, among others. Roy's sassy guitar tone helps make this one an irresistible toe-tapper.

There isn't a single flat on *I Heard the Highway* — it's a good record for the road. But you don't have to go farther than the Burlington waterfront to hear it live, this Saturday night, when Rick & the Ramblers take the Chew Chew stage. Giddyup.

— Pamela Polston

