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Brakemen tell their own stories

February 15, 2004

Jon Milan and Richard Pinkerton have a history of writing music together that stretches back to their teenage years in the '70s, about the same time the children of Dylan -- from Springsteen to Zevon to lesser-known lights like Elliot Murphy and Steve Forbert -- were beginning to come into their own. So it's not surprising their debut album as chief engineers of the Brakemen puts an emphasis on songcraft and old-fashioned musicianship.

Unfortunately, that combination can be branded "classic rock" if you happen to be around their age, but there's nothing remotely musty about "14 Songs."

Milan, who plays piano and sings most of the lead vocals with an assist from Pinkerton, is joined by Scott Clauser and Lou Simon on guitar, bassist John Dunn and drummer Todd Glass, not to mention a lineup of guests that speak to the band's eclecticism.

Vinne Dombrowski of Sponge takes over lead vocals on tough pop rocker "Perfect World," (which actually has a yeah-yeah chorus), while Nikki James adds harmonies to the Band-influenced "New Orleans, Grey Days." Thornetta Davis adds some trademark soul to the menacing "Pouring Rain." Johnnie Bassett duets with Milan on a minor-key rag titled "Blame It on the Weather," and, unless my ears are deceiving me, contributes uncredited guitar licks as well. As for that 15th song on "14 Songs," it's no mistake: It's John Sinclair growling out his narrative poem-tribute to Jellyroll Morton, "Jellyroll Blues," over some Morton-inspired playing by Milan.

By Terry Lawson, Free Press staff writer

 
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