

New Recordings

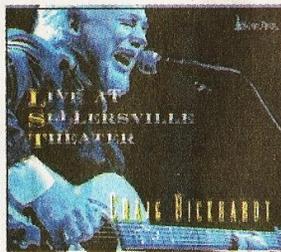
Ratings: ★★★★★ Excellent, ★★★ Good, ★★ Fair, ★ Poor

NEW RECORDINGS from H11

Country/Roots

Craig Bickhardt

Live at Sellersville Theater
(Stone Barn ★★★★★^{1/2})



One of the 12 numbers Craig Bickhardt performs on this live set, recorded in June at this wonderful Bucks County venue, is his lively little gem "The Real Game." In it the Haverford High graduate compares the pros playing baseball for big money to kids playing in a sandlot for the sheer joy of it.

Metaphorically speaking, you could say Bickhardt has been on both sides. Once a top songwriter in Nashville — in the '80s he penned four No. 1 country hits and

nine top 10s — he turned back to his own performing career when money started trumping creativity on Music Row post-Garth Brooks. He returned to the Philly area five years ago.

Here you can hear the singer and songwriter reveling in his freedom as he gets as close as possible to recapturing that sandlot purity. The accompaniment is minimal — percussion, cello, mandolin, lap steel, a little baritone guitar accompanying his own fluid fingerpicking on acoustic — but it mirrors the literate grace of Bickhardt's songs. Even in Music City he was never strictly country — folk and pop are also big elements of a sound that is more adult album alternative.

Presenting selections from his two solo albums as well as two new numbers and a Richard Thompson cover, Bickhardt displays an unerringly exquisite touch as he makes you cry, makes you laugh, and makes you think. And shows why he had to get back into "The Real Game."

— Nick Cristiano

Jazz

Ellis Marsalis

A New Orleans Christmas Card
(ELM Records ★★★★★^{1/2})

Just when you think there's no more to be squeezed from standard Christmas tunes, pianist Ellis Marsalis comes along to find the fat, soulful parts. The father of the marvelous Marsalis clan proves sweeter than Hawaiian bread and a better source of fiber. He gives the tunes respect, but manages to

throw some fairy dust on these often slinky interpretations.

Working with his drummer son Jason, bassist Bill Huntington, vibraphonist Roman Skakun, and singers Cynthia Thomas and Johnaye Kendrick, Ellis Marsalis makes these ditties consistently compelling with no show or bombast. Some pleasant glow arises from these straight-ahead proceedings, and the funky, New Orleans rhythms that animate "The Little Drummer Boy" are a bonus.

— Karl Stark

Top Albums in the Region

This Week			Last Week
Locally	Nationally		Locally
1	1	Michael Buble Christmas	1
2	2	Adele 21	2
3	3	Justin Bieber Under the Mistletoe	4
4	8	Andrea Bocelli Concerto: Live in Central Park	6
5	7	Drake Take Care	8
6	4	The Black Keys Minutes to Midnight	3
7	10	Amy Winehouse Lioness: Hidden Treasures	5
8	14	Rihanna Talk That Talk	10
9	13	Glee Cast Glee: The Christmas Album Vol. 2	13
10	5	Lady Antebellum Own the Night	—

SOURCE: SoundScan (based on purchase data from Philadelphia and Montgomery, Delaware, Bucks, Chester, Camden, Burlington and Gloucester Counties).
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