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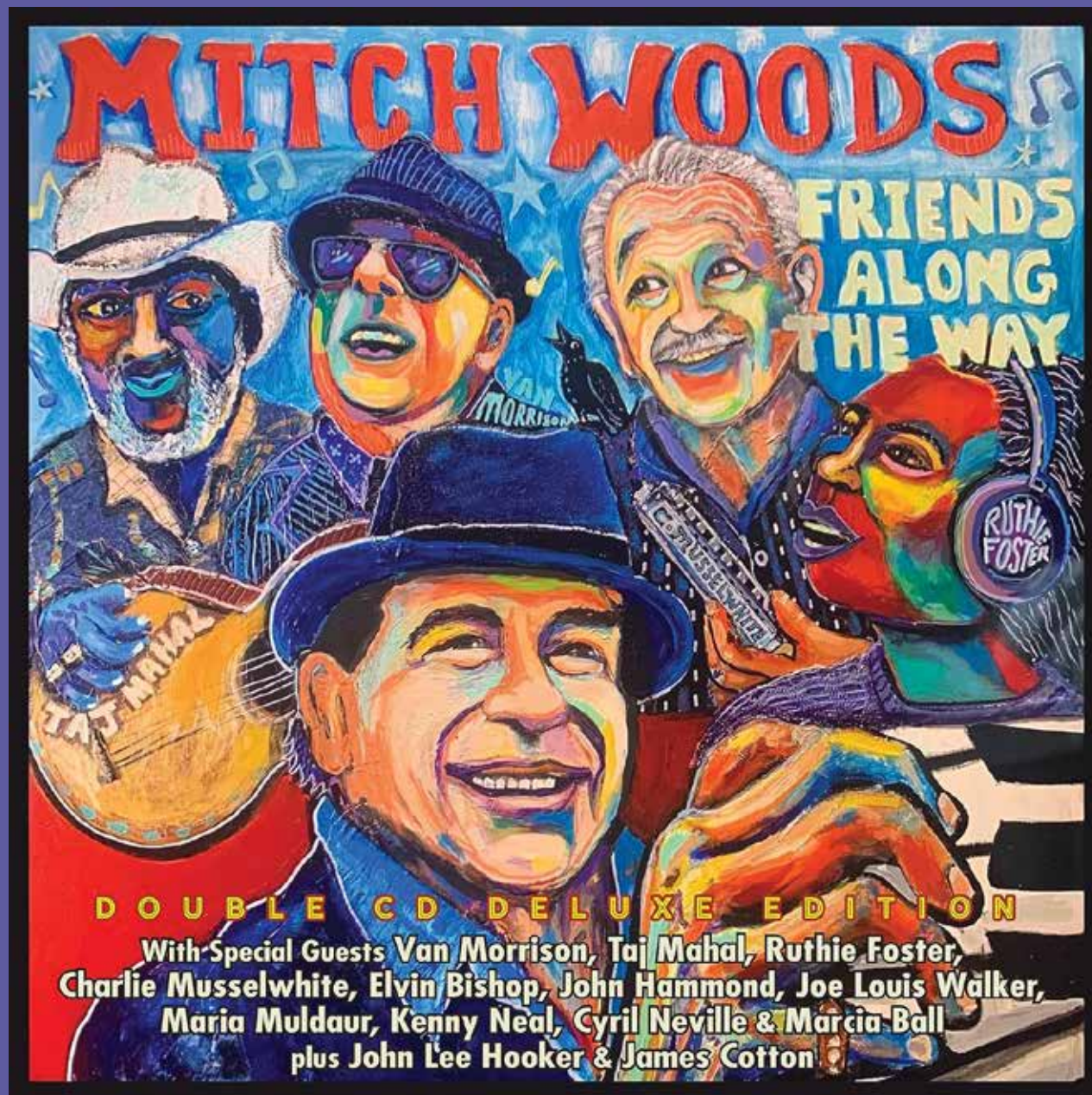
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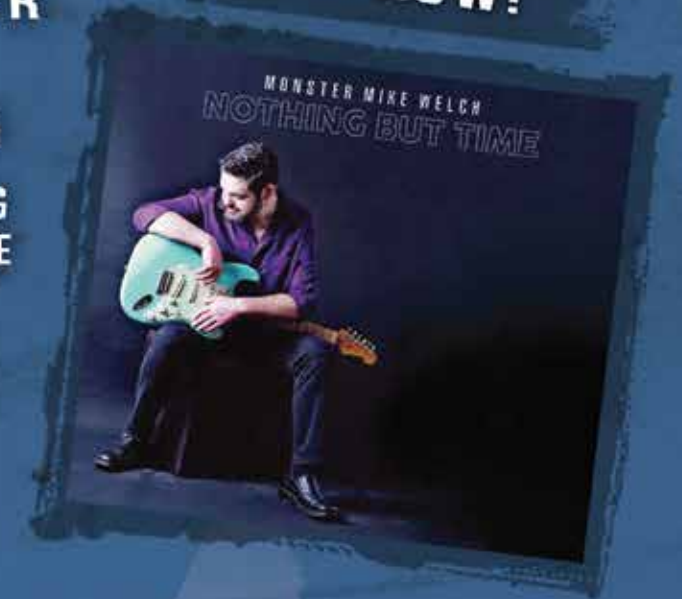
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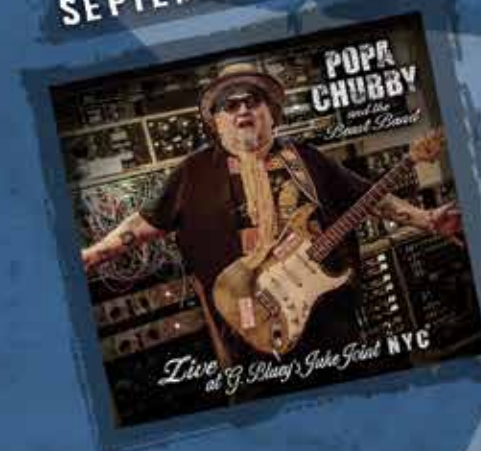


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# Mitch Woods

## *Keeper Of The Flame*

PHOTOGRAPHY © Art Tipaldi

By Art Tipaldi

Since the release of his 1996 *Keeper Of The Flame* CD, Mitch Woods has dedicated himself to the musical vision of enlisting A-list guest musicians to illuminate the aspects of the music he loves. His 2005 *Big Easy Boogie* called into the studio legendary New Orleans musicians in tribute to Fats Domino. His last record, *Jammin' On The High C's* in 2015, was a live effort recorded with a slew of big name guests sittin' in with Woods in his Club 88 piano bar venue on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. In 2017, Woods released *Friends Along The Way*. This year, he doubled the length of that single CD release with *Friends Along The Way, Deluxe Edition*, a two CD compilation. This follow-up record features more of the same – a roster of celebrity guests performing iconic blues and R&B tunes with Woods at the controls.

The guest list starts with John Lee, Taj, and Van and moves through every legendary blues performer you can think of. James Cotton, check. Charlie Musselwhite, check. Maria Muldaur, check. Marcia Ball, check. John Hammond, check. Elvin Bishop, check. Cyril Neville, check. Joe Louis Walker, Ruthie Foster, Kenny Neal, check, check, and check.

But this kind of effort is nothing new to Woods. Woods and his Rocket 88s have been at it since his debut CD, *Steady Date* in 1984 on Blind Pig, in the mid-1980s. From his days in the Bay Area during the 1970s, to his years living in New Orleans soaking up that city's piano traditions to his regular gig hosting Club 88 on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise to his traveling gigs throughout Europe hosting swing and boogie dance-a-thons, Mitch Woods has clearly earned the Keeper Of The Flame moniker.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you tell readers about how you came to record the various songs on the new record, especially how you recorded songs with Van Morrison and John Lee Hooker.

**Mitch Woods:** The album is called *Friends Along The Way (FATW)* for just that reason. All the musicians I invited to play are friends of mine. I released *Keeper Of The Flame* in 1996 in which I recorded duets with the Great American Blues Masters, John Lee, Earl King, Johnnie Johnson, Lee Allen, and James Cotton. I wanted to do a similar album, but with my contemporaries and so it led to *FATW*.

Van has been a friend for over 40 years since when he lived nearby me in Marin County, CA. I asked and he said yes. That was pretty exciting. John Lee was on my *Keeper Of The Flame* CD. I had met John at Sweetwater, a local club, and he asked me to sit in. We became friends; he recorded on my album, and then asked me to play on his album, *Boom Boom*. I wanted to keep his legacy alive so I added our track, "Never Get Out Of These Blues Alive" to *FATW*.

**Blues Music Magazine:** With a CD already released in 2017, why did you re-release *FATW* as a double record?

**Mitch Woods:** Unfortunately, the label that released *FATW* originally in 2017 decided to become a film company and withdrew all promotion and support from all their audio releases. Consequently it did not receive the notice and exposure it should have. Fortunately, I was able to get back my masters; since I had licensed it to them and decided I would issue it myself as a deluxe 2 CD package with five previously unreleased tracks. It is too great a record to be lost. I wanted to get it back out to those who haven't heard it. Also has a great new cover by artist Rob Gonzo.

**Blues Music Magazine:** As the piano engine driving the record, explain what your role is when you back the many different vocalists like Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, Taj, John Hammond, James Cotton, Maria Muldaur, Cyril Neville, Ruthie Foster, and others.

**Mitch Woods:** As a pianist, I can accompany my friends with melody, harmony, bass, and chords. The piano has it all and can bring out the best in these artists. I sing as well, but only on four or five of the cuts. Playing in duet or trio format has made it a very intimate album that brings out the best in all these great artists.

We all gathered around the piano, and it was so natural. As a matter of fact, when Van and Taj and I recorded (in New Orleans, btw) they had us set up very far apart. Van said, "No just let's all set up around the piano!" And that made it magical!

**Blues Music Magazine:** As you look back on the process for both releases, what were the biggest challenges you faced?

**Mitch Woods:** Since each musician was traveling or living in different parts of the country, the biggest challenge was scheduling. The tunes with Van and Taj worked out well because I was living in New Orleans at the time and both were coming to play the N.O. Jazz & Heritage Festival, so I could schedule the studio at that time.

I was able to record a lot of the other musicians, Ruthie Foster, Kenny Neal, Cyril Neville, Marcia Ball, Maria Muldaur, and Elvin Bishop while they were in the SF Bay Area. Mostly at Studio D, a great studio near my home in Sausalito, CA.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What do you want listeners to come away with from *Friends Along The Way*?

**Mitch Woods:** I want them to really hear these great artists in an unplugged and intimate format without all the other instruments and hoopla. And, of course, hear me. This project carries on the true blues tradition of staying close to the roots and playing from the heart.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What have you gained as an artist from the process of sharing the studio with so many legends

**Mitch Woods:** I am proud to be a part of this great Blues Family and honored that all these wonderful artists were glad to contribute to my project and play with me as their equal.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What was it that drew you to the piano? How old were you?

**Mitch Woods:** My mom was a single mom. I grew up in Brooklyn. She would hire the building superintendent, who was African-American, to drive me to school when I was in first and second grade. One day we stopped off at his relative's house, and I heard someone playing boogie woogie piano. I said, "I want to do that!" Fortunately, my mom married my stepdad, Abe, who went out and got us a piano. I was 11 when I first started on classical piano.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you tell readers about the process to learn? What records were you learning from? What were the most important styles that attracted you?

**Mitch Woods:** When I was in college at University of Buffalo, I would jam around the clubs, and people said I sounded like the old boogie woogie guys. So I went out and bought all the boogie woogie records I could find. Champion Jack Dupree, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson were the guys that inspired me and everyone else.

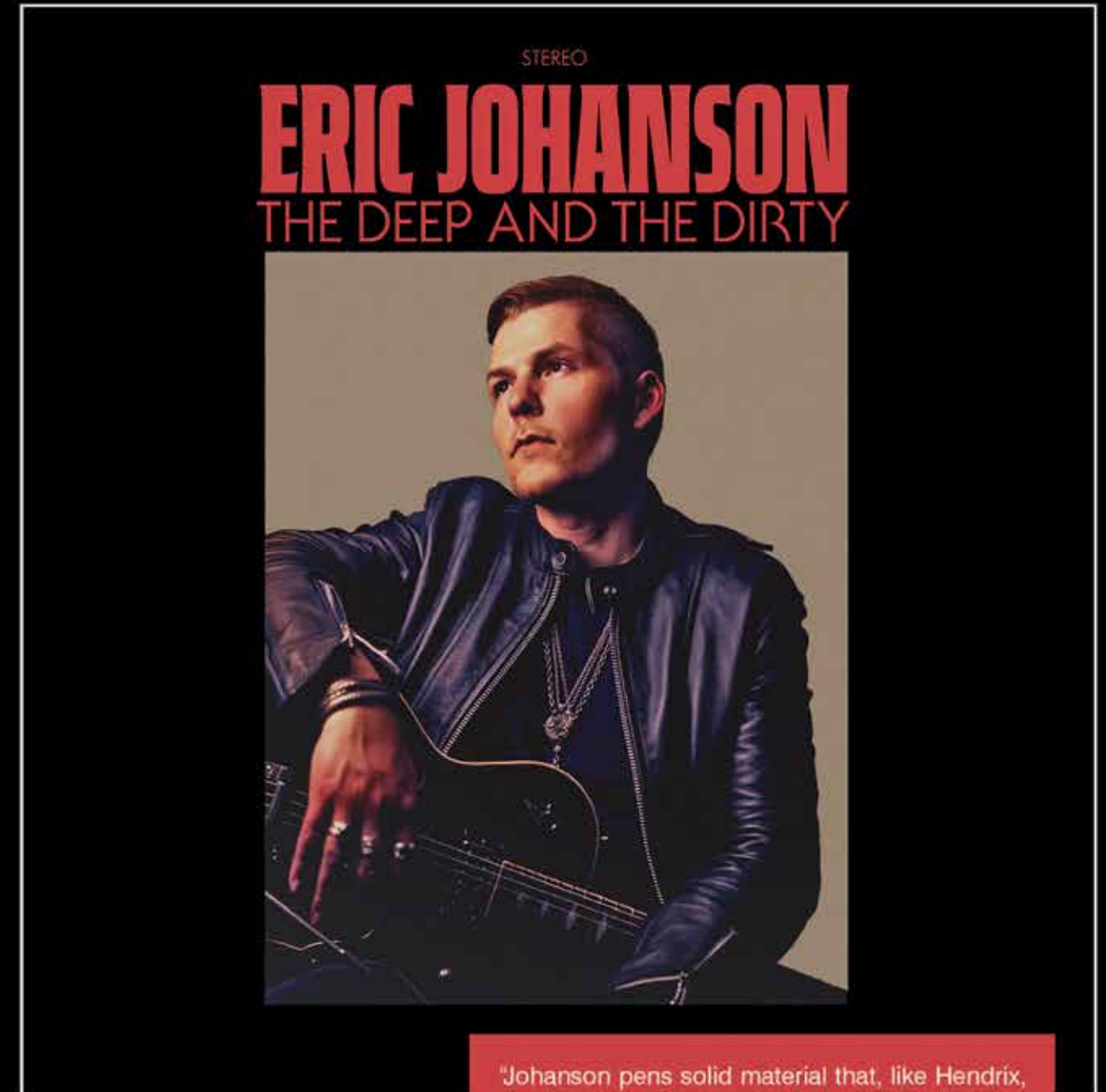
**Blues Music Magazine:** Speaking of styles, can you tell readers about the importance of the boogie woogie to blues piano?

**Mitch Woods:** I always tell people if you like Rock 'n' Roll, you will love boogie woogie, because it is the true roots of Rock 'n' Roll. Jerry Lee Lewis, Fats Domino, Little Richard were all boogie players that invented Rock 'n' Roll.

**Blues Music Magazine:** In addition to boogie woogie, blues lovers should know about the piano styles from New Orleans, Chicago, and Los Angeles. What are the essential aspects of each?

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*Blues Rock Review*

**Mitch Woods:** There are so many great piano styles from each city in the USA. Chicago: Otis Spann and so many others. They were more raw and usually accompanied blues harp or guitar players

New Orleans: my first love, Professor Longhair, Dr. John, Allen Toussaint. New Orleans has always been a piano town. They love their piano players, and it is an integral part of N. O. music. Piano and horns. Also Fess brought in the Caribbean Mardi Gras elements, and second line. There's a lot there.

L.A. was the West Coast Jump Blues, also a big influence on me. More piano and horn section. Louis Jordan (sax) was a big influence to me and almost every blues musician. I love Jimmy and Joe Liggins, Roy Milton, Roy Brown to name a few, and they all had piano players.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Why was the piano so important in early 20<sup>th</sup> century blues and jazz?

**Mitch Woods:** As I said before, piano covers it all. Melody, bass, harmony, plus if you can sing you have a career, which is my saving grace! Also early in the century every home had a piano in it, and it was the main form of entertainment.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Is there a piano renaissance in the early days of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

**Mitch Woods:** There has always been piano in the forefront of music. Billy Joel, Elton John, Alicia Keyes, even Liberace! There is a big boogie woogie movement in Europe these days. I play a lot of boogie woogie festivals that just have numerous boogie pianists from Germany, Spain, Austria, UK, and more.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What took you to locate in the San Francisco area?

**Mitch Woods:** My brother was working for Bill Graham (the promoter) back in the '70s and late '60s. He said there is all this music out in the SF Bay Area, you should come out.

So my girlfriend (aka The Red Hot Mama, our first band in CA) and I packed up the VW bus and headed west!

**Blues Music Magazine:** Tell us about your early recordings with Blind Pig Records.

**Mitch Woods:** Well, I have five albums with Blind Pig. It was one of the top blues labels in the '80s and '90s. *Steady Date*, my first, *Mr. Boogie's Back In Town*, *Solid Gold Cadillac*, *Shakin' The Shack* (all originals), and *Jump For Joy* (my swing record). There are lots of great songs on these albums, and I still perform most of them today.

BP was based in SF and Chicago. They heard me play when I first got the Rocket 88's together at legendary club, Larry Blake's in Berkeley where all the blues acts came through, and Robert Cray got his band from the house band. It was a great label and since sold to the Orchard, whom I put out *A Tip Of The Hat To Fats-Live at New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival*, my last CD. The Orchard is now distributing *FATW* on my Club 88 label.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What led you to form your own label? What are the pros and cons about label ownership?

**Mitch Woods:** After my disappointing deal with eOne on 2017's *FATW*, I decided I could do better myself. It's not an easy task. Basically you have to do everything. So you better be a good business person as well as musician. I hired my own publicist, Mark Pucci, and radio promotion, Michelle Castiglia. So I knew they would do a great job, and they are. But there are lots of details you have to take care of, and it helps to have someone who knows the biz to work with. Scott Burnett, who does the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise IT helped me immensely in getting the product organized. The Orchard is distributing it, so it is on all venues, digital and physical. Also you need a good website to sell through and promote.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What should readers

know about your tribute records – *Gumbo Blues*, *Keeper Of The Flame*, *Big Easy Boogie*, *Tip Of The Hat To Fats*, and even *Jammin' On The High C's*? Their importance to you, to the genres, to the artists honored.

**Mitch Woods:** Wow. That's a lot to talk about! I think the most you can say about my tributes is I respect my elders and founding fathers of this genre we call the blues, boogie woogie, and R&B, all the roots of American popular music. They have been my teachers, and I want to honor them and really keep that great music alive. Not in an imitative way, but truly using it as a foundation to build off of. That is the true way to keep this music alive.

It was the highlight of my career to play and record with the Fats Domino band, the founding fathers of Rock 'n' Roll, John Lee Hooker, one of the fathers of the blues, and so many of the other icons I got to play with.

**Blues Music Magazine:**

Can you tell readers about how you have created what I call "the Mitch Woods Franchise"? You are constantly booked around the world throughout the year. You have figured out to "have piano, will travel." Club 88, late night piano bars, traveling with local swing dancers, what's your secret?

**Mitch Woods:** Hah! The Mitch Woods Franchise, that's a first! My secret is persistence, and the fact that I can play piano, sing, lead a band, book the gigs, hire the promotion people, versatility plus I love playing, so I will do whatever it takes to get the show over. If it means coming out in my pajamas to play all night on the Blues Cruise or traveling half way around the world to play.

I love traveling, love meeting new people, eating great food and sipping wine all over the world, so that's where I go. My music also appeals to not only the blues crowd, but to swing dancers. They want to hear jump blues, not Benny Goodman. I love to see people dancing at my gigs.

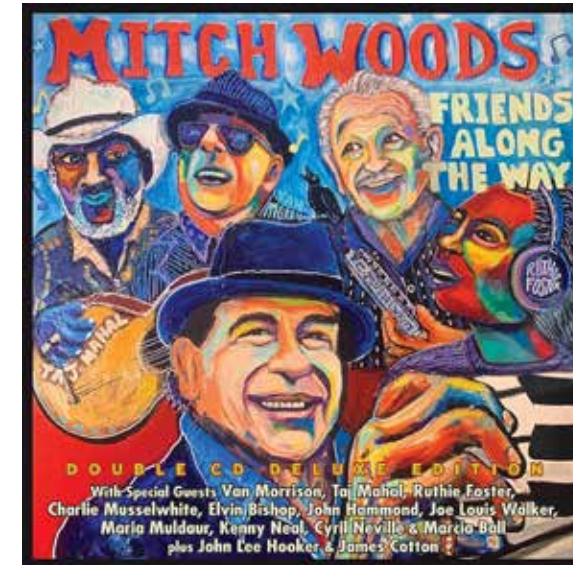
**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you look back and tell that eight-year-old in Brooklyn what significant gifts the blues and R&B and boogie woogie, and New Orleans music will give him in his life.

**Mitch Woods:** I certainly did not know what gifts would present themselves to me as I trod the path of blues, R&B, and boogie. I just knew that this is what I wanted to do with my life as it progressed. I can't tell you how many people respect the fact that I am able to make a living as a musician. I didn't think that just making a living was going to be a big marker of success. I am still ambitious, and that's another reason I put out *FATW Deluxe*, because I

want to keep working. There is no retirement for true musicians, and I am proud to be one of them.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What keeps your artistic passions alive in these days when a musician playing retro styles of blues, boogie, and R&B piano seems to go against today's modern pop culture.

**Mitch Woods:** I do what I love to do. Take it or leave it. Fortunately, enough people value and enjoy what I do, and it is sorely needed these days where there is so much negativity around. Who doesn't want to be around music that makes you feel good, puts a smile on your face, and makes you want to dance! Amen and boogie on! - **BMO**



## MITCH WOODS

### *Friends Along The Way*

Club 88 Records



I'm a mix-tape junkie. I enjoy making them so I can listen on a long car trip even if it means I have to jerry-rig my Walkman-style cassette player to the vehicle's audio system setup. This two-disc compilation has the same appeal for me. Meaning I can listen to splendid and varied artists one after another.

The difference between my mix-tapes and this recording is that every track has the mighty Mitch Woods pumping the piano

keys. Whether he tickles, caresses, or pounds the keyboard he blends with each and every featured musician or singer in a most satisfying way. Those of you with long memories may recall that *Friends Along The Way* first came out in 2017 (and was reviewed in BMM #16). This features all the same personnel, all the same songs, with the exception of five that didn't make the cut the first time around.

You have to wonder "Why?" They're all worthy. In fact, the entire package is joyfully listenable and highly entertaining. Woods was able to arrange for individual recording sessions with each artist, all personal favorites of his, all performed in duets or trios. This is a virtual hall of fame cast: Van Morrison, Taj Mahal, Charlie Musselwhite, Elvin Bishop, James Cotton, Joe Louis Walker, John Lee Hooker, John Hammond, Cyril Neville, Ruthie Foster, Maria Muldaur, and Marcia Ball. One song that particularly impressed me was "In The Night" with Ball and Woods; it's like being moshed by two pianos. Other personal favorites "Saturday Night Boogie Woogie Man" with Bishop; "Don't Dip In My Business" with Neal; and "Nasty Boogie" with Walker. But they're all outstanding.

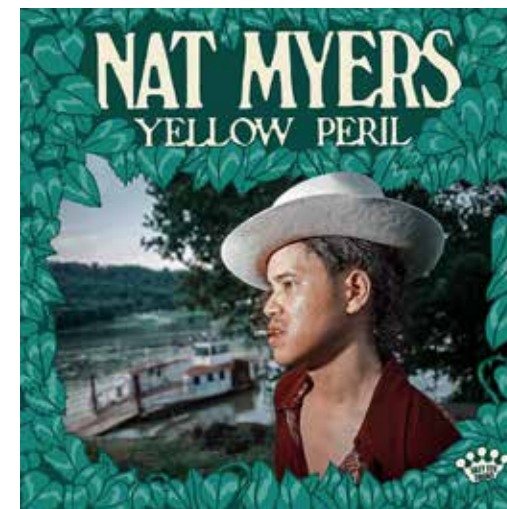
As he prepares to tour with his band, the Rocket 88s, in support of *Friends Along The Way*, this package should stimulate interest. Good timing, good release, good melodies, good tunes, good performances, good music. Highly recommended.

– M.E. Travaglini

## NAT MYERS

### *Yellow Peril*

Easy Eye sound



Nat Myers is another, young acoustic blues guitarist who has spent time studying and learning the earliest blues traditions birthed long ago in the American South. Myers, a 23-year-old Korean-American, comes to the genre with a teenage background steeped in the classic poetic stories of Homer, Shakespeare, and others. At the same time, Myers was listening to the day's popular street corner storytelling in punk and rap. As he was writing his own stories in verse, he began picking on the guitar his mother had provided.

And then he discovered that early blues was where he heard the same concerns he was reading, writing, and hearing. While living in NYC,

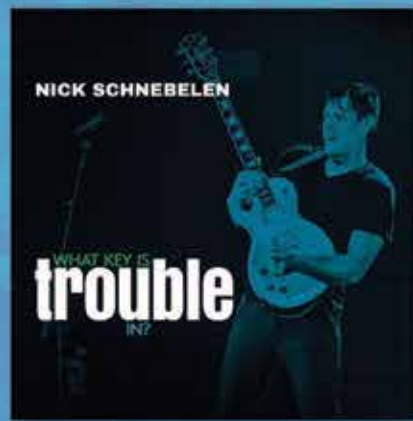
Myers began busking in subway stations, playing his originals and covers. Then social media took hold as the videos Myers uploaded (imagine Charley Patton telling Henry Spier that he'd uploaded videos of "Pony Blues" for him to watch!) which caught the ears of Easy Eye Sound's founder Dan Auerbach, who produced, added kick drum, bass, and vocals, and co-wrote eight of the ten originals

In both style and subject, Myers' tunes address the Paramount 78 blues of Patton and others who called out the social inequities of their day. When you listen to the title cut, "Yellow Peril," you can hear Myers replicate Patton's idiosyncratic playing and singing – heavy thumb plucks on bass strings, stretching syllables or inserting pauses, followed by a high E-string filling in those pauses. Lyrically, it has ties to Patton's "Mississippi Boll Weevil Blues," where Patton used this insect to represent Blacks looking for a permanent home as he sings, "Boll weevil, boll weevil, where's your native home lordy?" Here, Myers' story refers to Asians looking for their place (like Patton's weevil) in this American society and the racism encountered.

Throughout the record, educated listeners can hear music reminiscent of those early 20<sup>th</sup> century songsters from Piedmont to Memphis to Mississippi to Texas. The opener, "75-71," has the alternating bass feel of something John Hurt might play entertaining on the steps of the Avalon post office, while "Trixin" and "Misbehavin' Mama" recall the bouncy, guitar rag finger picking of Piedmont string masters like Blind Blake. His "Ramble No More" has musical wisps of "Catfish Blues" or "Two Trains Runnin'." And "Rosco" and the Delta dark "Undertaker Blues" (written with G.E. Hart, aka Alvin Youngblood Hart) feature Myers' deep vocals with a "Youngblood" Hart vocal delivery. The CD ends with "Pray For Rain," the album's most intimate musical arrangement, adding banjo, mandolin, and string bass.

Following today's young acoustic players like Willis, Nichols, Flemons, and Giddens who mine inspirations from the past, Nat Myers seems to have plotted an interesting and rewarding artistic course.

– Art Tipaldi



# ALBUM REVIEW

## ACANTHA LANG

### *Beautiful Dreams*

Magnolia Blue Records



Soul vocalist Acantha Lang is a New Orleans native currently based in London where her debut was recorded and released on her own label. It was co-produced by guitarist Emyln Francis who leads the superb band of keyboardist Andrew Nicole, drummer Mike Horne, percussionist Karl Vanden Bosche, and bassists Neil Raymond and Chris Hanby (two tracks); they are augmented by a five piece horn section and two backing vocalists.

This is a modern soul album without traditional blues of any type as her 12 co-written originals demonstrate. Her predominant stylistic influences are funk and Southern soul of the Stax-Hi Records-Malaco triumvirate. The Southern soul tunes are exemplified by "Sugar Woman," which encourages the title character to seek love rather than money and fame, "Come Back Home," a plea for her father to return home, and two more that offer hope and encouragement to the downhearted, "It's Gonna Be Alright" and "Carry The Weight."

One the funk side there's the introspective autobiographical title track, two queries about love and romance "He Said, She Said," and "Whatever Happened To Our Love?," a tale of woe about anticipating the challenge of personal troubles and the ability to persevere in "River Keep Runnin'," and the uplifting "Ride This Train" about impending better days. She also shines on the pop-tinged romantic ballads "Eventually" and "Keep On."

The sentimental paean "Lois Lang" is an homage to her resilient single mother of four and her challenging life in New Orleans dealing with Jim Crow and hurricanes and finding solace with the music of Dinah Washington. It features a brief spoken preface by her mother who is described as a "Creole queen sweet as sugar cane...an old school girl who lived with her heart."

Acantha Lang is a polished and passionate vocalist and thoughtful lyricist. Overall, I found her style to be sweet and smooth like Stax soul queen Carla Thomas and not as gritty and leather lunged as Etta James could be. Nonetheless, *Beautiful Dreams* is an auspicious debut and certain to please fans of modern soul.

- Thomas J. Cullen III

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# ALBUM REVIEW

DEUCE 'N A QUARTER

Keep Moving On

Self-release



With a lot of emphasis on “new” blues lately, it’s great to see a band successfully meld modern with classic. Along with that, Deuce ‘n a Quarter’s latest album provides a good mix of up-tempo numbers and ballads, the last one, “Why,” being a seven-minute ode about the tragic loss of bandleader Brian Peters’ daughter, Amber Evans, untimely death at 28. The song made me cry.

But all is not sad. The opener, “Swinging At The Blues,” one of nine originals on the 11-track disc, is (as the title implies) a swinging get up-on-the-dance-floor number, no matter what

financial or other problems one might have. Peters, who plays a mean harp and does smooth vocals throughout the record, starts us off right. There’s also some fantastic guitar work by Keith Colbert, especially on “Doing Wrong.”

The great Kenny Neal helped record the album at his Baton Rouge studio, wrote three songs, and plays guitar on several songs. “I’m Not Alone,” with thoughtful lyrics – brooding and melancholy-features some nice harmony from the band, which also consists of Tim Kevorkian (keyboards), Andre Scott (drums), and Marting O. Brown (bass.) Additional musicians include, Brandon Adams (keyboards, piano, organ) and Dwight Carter on bass. All band members remain tight and steady on all tracks.

Peters said he was dealing with a lot of personal issues during 2019 and 2020, when he wrote most of the music, but prefers all of his work to feel like classic blues with a fresh take. He did not plan to release “Why” which he wrote for himself and his son, but Neal encouraged him to release it, and led to their friendship.

Two of the best classic sounding cuts are “All She Wrote,” a fast-paced harp-laden swinging number reminiscent of Little Walter, and “Blues Mobile,” (written by Neal) a super up-tempo road song that also gets you moving and name checks Muddy Waters and Route 66. Then there’s the cool slow blues, “Sun Kissed Wheat,” filled with wonderful harp solos and the funky “Blues Leave Me Alone,” also written by Neal.

“Why,” closes the album. It is both sorrowful and hopeful, with lines like, “Although how hard I try/I’ll never know why” as the refrain. He discusses old memories and photographs. Get a tissue. The whole album is in memory of Amber, and there’s not a bad song on it.

– Karen Nugent



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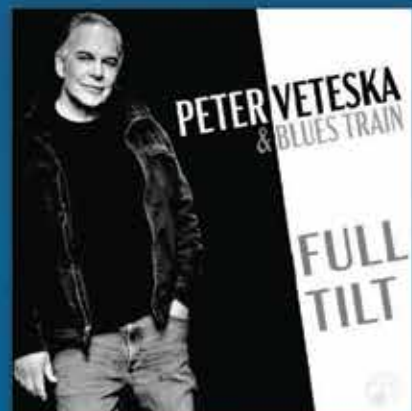
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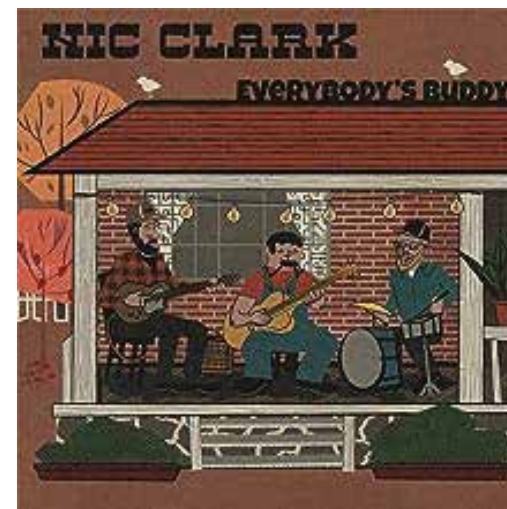
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# ALBUM REVIEW

NIC CLARK  
*Everybody's Buddy*  
Little Village Foundation



With Nic Clark's second release on the Jim Pugh's Little Village Foundation label, the full gamut of his talents are on display, particularly his smooth, easy-on-the-ears vocalizing in addition to his notable skills on harmonica and guitar. Perhaps the most impressive aspect of his artistry is his poignant songwriting, as witnessed across 11 beautifully crafted original tunes.

The lone cover is J.B. Lenoir's "Good Advice," which simmers at a low boil until Clark unleashes several bold statements on his harmonica. "Don't Count Yourself Out" mines the territory where blues and rockabilly cross paths, an upbeat reminder to keep the faith, anchored by George

Sluppick's sturdy drum patterns. Listeners get glimpse of Clark's world on "Laughing At The Rain," as he shares his sunny, resilient approach to life despite personal tragedies and major health issues. His harp blowing shows his intimate understanding of the Jimmy Reed style.

Clark gets a helping hand from DaShawn Hickman on pedal steel guitar for the somber "Flying Blind," with the singer offering support for those struggling with life to move beyond cutting and hurting oneself. Hickman's pedal steel and Charlie Hunter's hybrid guitar intertwine seamlessly on "She's A Fighter," Clark's tribute to a friend battling her own health issues. "Anxiety Blues" has a stripped-down arrangement and some fine guitar picking from Clark, with lyrics that chronicle his quest for peace of mind. His gentle advice to a friend also struggling with panic attacks highlights the ballad "Breathe Slow."

The title track has plenty of backporch feel to it, as Clark expounds on how his friends make life worth living, punctuating the message with some fine country blues harp licks. "Hurricanes" is another reminder that we are not alone, able to escape the captivity of the seemingly endless pain. Clark injects plenty of his positive nature into the comforting sounds of "Try To Understand," a catchy song with a touch of reggae thrown in. The album's longest track, "How I Met The Blues," is minor key, slow blues classic recounting the death of Clark's cousin. His chilling performance on the vocal and harmonica hits home with gut-wrenching intensity.

Recent years have brought a resurgence in interest for blues music from younger artists. Add Clark's name to that growing list. He has been blowing harp on stage since he was 12 years old. This album shows that he has learned plenty in the intertwining years, with a refreshing personal approach that makes this release a reverent tribute to positive affirmation.

— Mark Thompson

# ALBUM REVIEW



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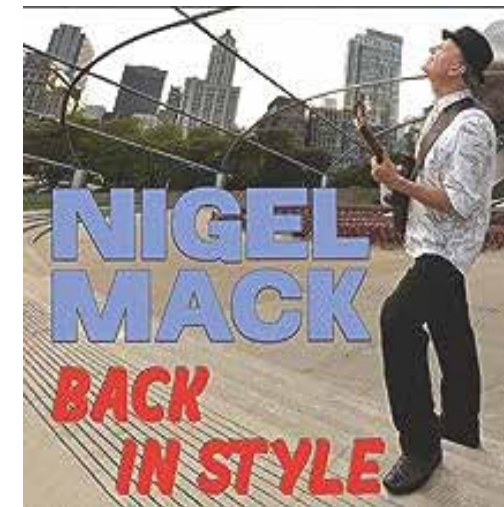


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## NIGEL MACK

### *Back In Style*

Blues Attack Records



Nigel Mack's personal and musical history is a geographic adventure. Born in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan, he lived for years in Vancouver, British Columbia. In 2003, at the behest of Chicago blues artists who had seen him perform, he moved to the Windy City. He has toured throughout Canada and performed in all 50 U.S. states, and played multiple times at the Chicago Blues Festival.

Mack's new album, his fourth, is a compendium of a dozen original tunes featuring Mack doing all the singing and playing harmonica and guitar. Confirming his

wide geographic influences, it includes songs with Hawaiian and Latino motifs. More than a dozen musicians participate, and all acquit themselves admirably in service to the songs. Horn players Lise Gilly (saxophone) and Victor Garcia (trumpet) lend zest to several tunes, and the contributions of the several keyboard artists are pithy and swinging. Kudos also to the producer and recording engineers for making the thumping, boiling drum and bass clearly audible.

There is one track, "Blues Enough For You," handled solo by Mack. In it, he plays harmonica and both slide National Resophonic and acoustic guitars. The result, combined with his clever lyrics and strong vocal, is one of the high spots of the set. His prowess on slide is likewise heard on the lone instrumental, "Redemption," with its strong Hawaiian vibe. It's also evident on "Jalapeno Peppers," again with appealing lyrics: "She had an ice-cold cerveza in hand/Wiggling' her toes in the sand...She's smokin' hot/Wearin' that tight red sweater/And eatin' jalapeno pepper...."

There is also a rousing rave-up of the Elmore James classic, "Dust My Broom," to which Mack wrote new lyrics and which he chose to call "Highway 69." It's followed by "Damn You Mr. Bluesman," at almost five minutes the set's longest track, with some fine syncopated drumming by Andrew "Blaze" Thomas. "A Place To Call Home" is a zippy, mid-tempo shuffle, and "Shangri-La Girl" is an unconstrained rocker with notable horn and piano additions that may well be adopted by such horn-driven bands as the venerable Roomful of Blues. The set closes with "Just One Man," another fine shuffle, Mack's single note guitar fills meshing well with the swirling organ of Daryl Coutts.

- Dan Stevens

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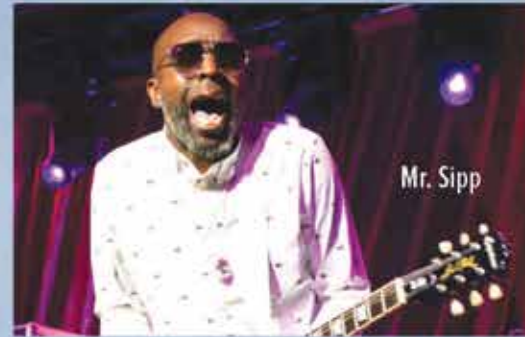
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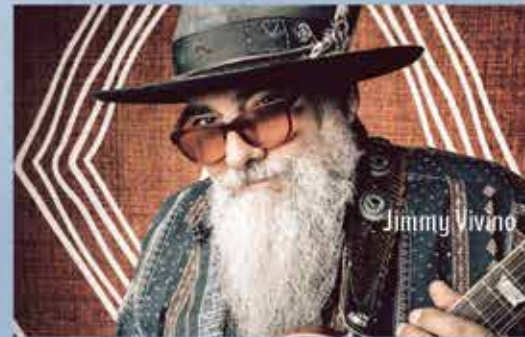
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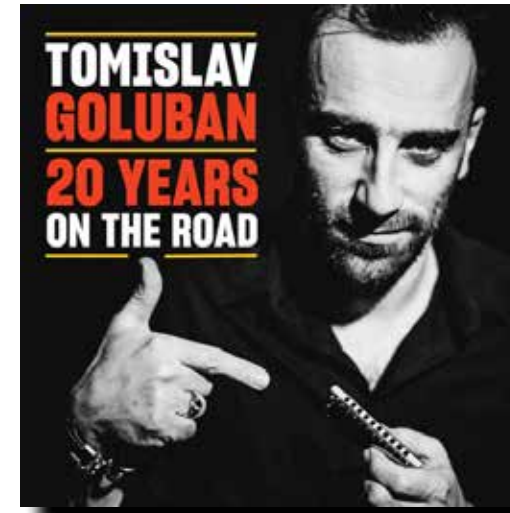


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Lil' Ed

**TOMISLAV GOLUBAN**  
*20 Years On The Road*  
 Blue Heart Records



Blues concerts over Europe and the US along with 13 prior CD releases helped forge Tomislav Goluban's 14<sup>th</sup> release, *20 Years On The Road*, as a 14 track love song to his fans and to those who should seek out his talents. His talents are many: songwriter, singer, blues harp player, D.J., and he has developed the program "The Harmonica In Blues" for school children in his native Croatia. His founding of the Croatian Blues Forces National Blues Society enabled them to receive a Keeping the Blues Alive award in 2019.

As a prelude to showcasing his guest vocalists, "Express Ride" is a high speed instrumental that unleashes his harp and his talented back up musicians. It seems to set the tone for the CD as their capable background provides a wonderful musical environment for the guest vocalists. In "Blow Junkie Boogie" Goluban sings and name checks several spurious habits of others, but states *his* main pleasure by singing, "I'm just a junkie for the *boogie woogie* blow!" He considers this his theme song as it demonstrates the captivation of his harp playing to be the thing most dear to his heart.

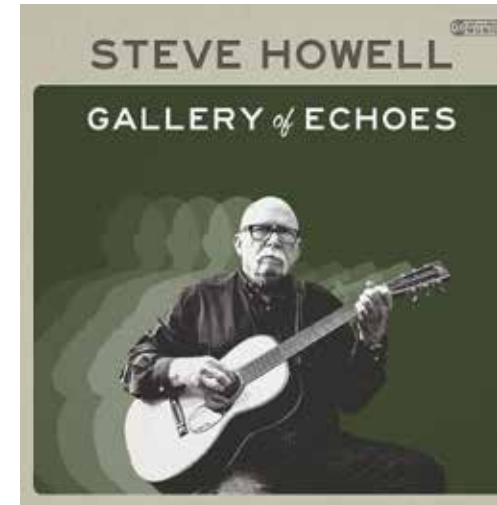
The sound of a low tuned harmonica embellishes Skylar Rogers' take on "Searchin' For My Baby" as it complements nicely with the other instruments. Three different backup bands were recorded live in studios in Croatia and Austria with guest vocalists who included Malaya Blue, Ryan Donohue, Greg Martinez, Crooked Eye Tommy singing one, while Skylar Rogers, Kelly Zirbes, and Mark Cameron are given two songs each to release their vocal talents. Goluban's harp skills are enviable; he demonstrates the full ranges of his instrument and plays fills and trills with precision.

"Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose playing my hand-- got those Gambler's Blues!" lyric sets the table for Cameron's vocals coupled again by Goluban's seductive and low register harp playing on "Gambler's Blues." All the tracks are good listening and I found Kelly Zirbe's vocals especially pleasing on "Everybody's Fear" and "Hittin' The Road Again." Recording songs from his previous albums live in studio has given them new life. He closes out this two decade gift of music by singing Sonny Terry's "I Love You Baby" as an homage to his deep respect for that talented harp player who greatly influenced his craft and for his fans. Please give *20 Years On The Road* a listen and you will love it too!

– Pete Sardon

# ALBUM REVIEW

**STEVE HOWELL**  
*Gallery Of Echoes*  
Out Of The Past Music



This solo recording by Steve Howell and his tenth CD overall has him playing a brace of Collings guitars which the late Bill Collings described to me at a former NAMM show as, "instruments that most musicians can't afford." Howell also wields a Thompson guitar which also is pricey and a veritable cannon of sound.

At age 15, Howell eschewed the sounds of strummed guitars for the more expressive and difficult finger style picking that graced the blues of artists like Reverend Gary Davis, Mississippi John Hurt, Robert Johnson et. al. His talents perfecting this style of playing has propelled him to date with offerings of these wonderful songs

from the past. In *Gallery Of Echoes*, Howe performs "Stocking Feet Blues" and "Easy Rider Blues" by Blind Lemon Jefferson, "Twelve Gates To The City," "Sit Down On The Banks Of The River," and "Sally, Where'd You Get Your Liquor From?" by Rev. Davis along with "Statesboro Blues" by Blind Willie McTell.

The most poignant track is "All My Friends Are Gone" in which Howell replicates Stefan Grossman's arrangement of this traditional song. His version gives Dave Bromberg's version of "Delia" (with similar lyrics) a run for its money. His vocals feel intimate and, although he has recorded in the past with other musicians, this solo effort succeeds in emphasizing his delicate and precise finger picking talents and emotive phrasing of each song.

If you play finger picking guitar, you'll want to replay "Mississippi Blues" a William (not Willie) Brown instrumental originally recorded by Alan Lomax with this "echo" in Howell's gallery bringing it new life in the present. Howell has taught guitar in the past and, if his students have learned his craft well, hopefully they will share their newly learned guitar skills with the next crop of aspiring finger picking guitarists. Closing out the CD is "Dallas Rag," an instrumental recorded in 1927, which, in 2023, is showcased by Howell's exquisite playing on one of his high end guitars.

Howell writes on his CD insert, "Enduring thanks to Blind Lemon Jefferson and the Reverend Gary Davis." Should they be alive today, they surely would be thanking him for crafting their songs for future generations. Fellow guitarists out there, if you want a new musical challenge, purchase his music instructional book, *Fingerpicking Early Jazz Standards*, which is available on Amazon. If well-played acoustic blues are a delight for you, *Gallery Of Echoes* should be considered.

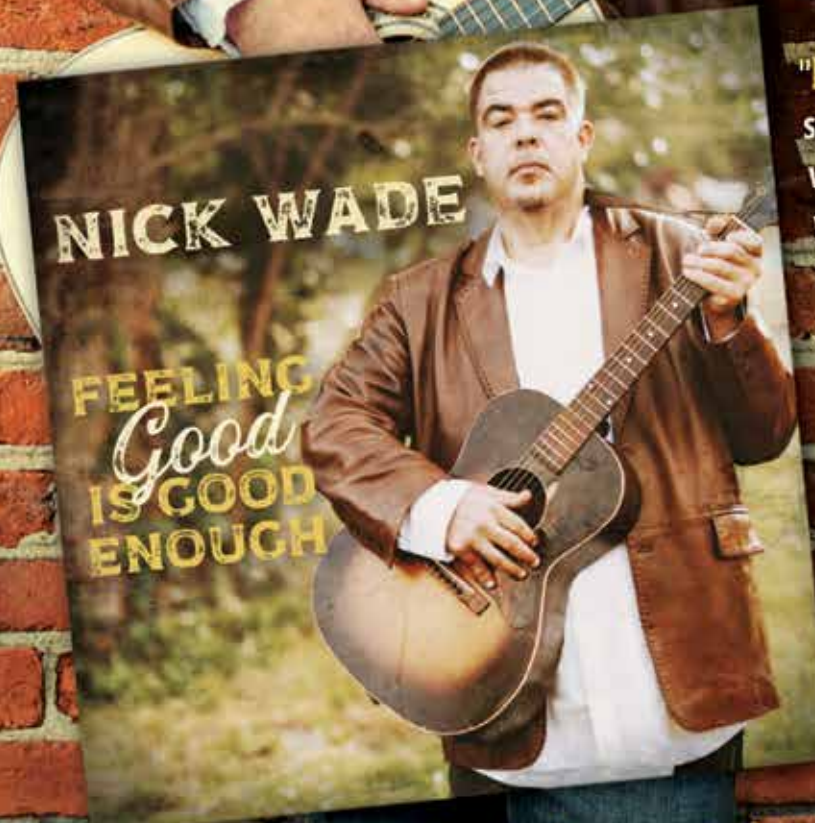
— Pete Sardon

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"Coming from a musical family, master guitarist **NICK WADE** continues in the tradition with this strong outing of classic and original acoustic blues. His sincere dedication to the history, heritage, spirit and the truth of the blues is both uniquely impressive and what's needed in this world today." - Corey Harris



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**JOANNA CONNOR**  
*Best Of Me*  
Gulf Coast Records

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Despite releases on several major labels earlier in her career, Joanna Connor never quite captured the attention of the wider blues audience. Acquiring two weekly gigs in several well-known Chicago clubs allowed her to stay close to home while raising her two children. Her 2021 release, *4801 South Indiana Avenue* on Joe Bonamassa's Keeping The Blues Alive Records, made it clear that her guitar work is as captivating as ever.

Her new album finds her on Gulf Coast Records, run by Mike Zito and Guy Hale. They wisely had Connor record with her band, giving the proceedings several extra layers of tightness that comes from deep familiarity with the ten originals and one cover. Her songwriting partner on most tracks is Shaun Gotti Calloway, who consistently lays down some deep grooves on his bass guitar. Jason J Roc Edwards is the other half of the crack rhythm section, adding taut accents with his expert stick work. Dan Souvigny handles the rhythm guitar duties, and plays keyboards on three tracks, while Curtis Moore Jr. plays a variety of keyboards throughout the project.

The opening declaration from Frank Pellegrino, of Kingston Mines fame, reminds listeners that Connor embodies funk, soul, and blues, with plenty of love in her heart. Once the band kicks in on "House Rules," Connor immediately proves the accuracy of his assessment. The Grooveline Horns spice up the arrangement, with guest Eric Demmer contributing some hearty saxophone solos. "Pain And Pleasure" glides along with a soulful strut, giving Connor and guest Josh Smith space for a dynamic guitar dialogue. The title track wraps a sorrowful Connor vocal into a swirling musical landscape that forces listeners to feel every bit of her despair.

The horns return on "Two Of A Kind," a funky rocker complete with one of Connor's red-hot guitar soliloquies. The lone cover, the classic "Mercury Blues," is a feature for Connor's blazing slide guitar skills while the jaunty "Highway Child" finds her sharing the spotlight with Bonamassa for another guitar rave-up. Zito makes an appearance on guitar on "Shadow Lover," as Connor pleads for some loving caresses.

The closer, "Shine On," is a hard rocking tune with key contributions from Gary Hoey on guitar and Jason Ricci on harmonica. But it is the six-string magic from Connor that leaves a lasting impression, just as she does throughout this fine album that showcases her many talents in fine fashion.

- Mark Thompson



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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Summer 2023 Print Edition Released July 2023

DUKE ROBILLARD & HIS ALL-STAR BAND

*Six Strings Of Steel*

M.C. Records

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Duke Robillard's latest album circles back to the music that first inspired him as a teenager – including the first song he ever learned to play on guitar – and fast forwards to a couple of newly penned songs that broke a self-described writer's block.

Throughout the aptly titled *Six Strings Of Steel*, Robillard offers plenty of examples of his wide musical palette. The 12-track album is bookended by a pair of guitar-driven instrumentals: jazz guitarist Barney Kessel's "Get With It!" and Link Wray's "Rumble." The latter is that first song a young

Robillard learned to play and one he remarks in the liner notes, "marked the beginning of a revolution in the electric guitar."

With "Love Struck," Robillard revisits a Chuck Willis song he first recorded in 1977 on the first album by Roomful of Blues, the Rhode Island band he co-founded. He sang the lead on that version, but for this update he recruited vocalist Chris Cote to do the honors. Cote, along with fellow bandmates Marty Ballou (bass) and Mark Teixiara (drums) co-wrote with Robillard "In Perfect Harmony," a straightforward love song Robillard dedicates to his wife, Laurene.

Ballou and Teixiara also teamed up with Robillard to write the album's other original, "Groovin' In The Swamp," an instrumental Robillard said was "meant to be a Telecaster feature for two of my earliest heroes, James Burton and Steve Cropper." It sounds more like an outtake from a Creedence Clearwater Revival album. Surely, John Fogerty also aimed to emulate Burton and Cropper.

Robillard alludes to his association with Bob Dylan (most notably appearing on the 1997 *Time Out Of Mind* album) with a cover of "Watching The River Flow," which features a great vocal take from Cote and fiddle solo from Asleep at the Wheel's Katie Shore. While Robillard leaves the singing to Cote on most of the vocal tracks, he lends his voice to a couple of songs, including the lighthearted "Lima Beans," originally written and sung by Eddie Ware for Chess Records in 1951. (Robillard notes that none other than Chess harmonica star Little Walter Jacobs played guitar on the original recording.)

As always on Robillard recordings, horns compete with guitars for dominance. Long time collaborator Doug James contributes baritone and tenor sax, sparring with Robillard on the instrumental "Billy In The Lion's Den."

– Michael Cote



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**BOB MARGOLIN**

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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Summer 2023 Print Edition Released July 2023

**JOHN PRIMER**

*Teardrops For Magic Slim (Live At Rosa's Lounge)*

Blues House Productions

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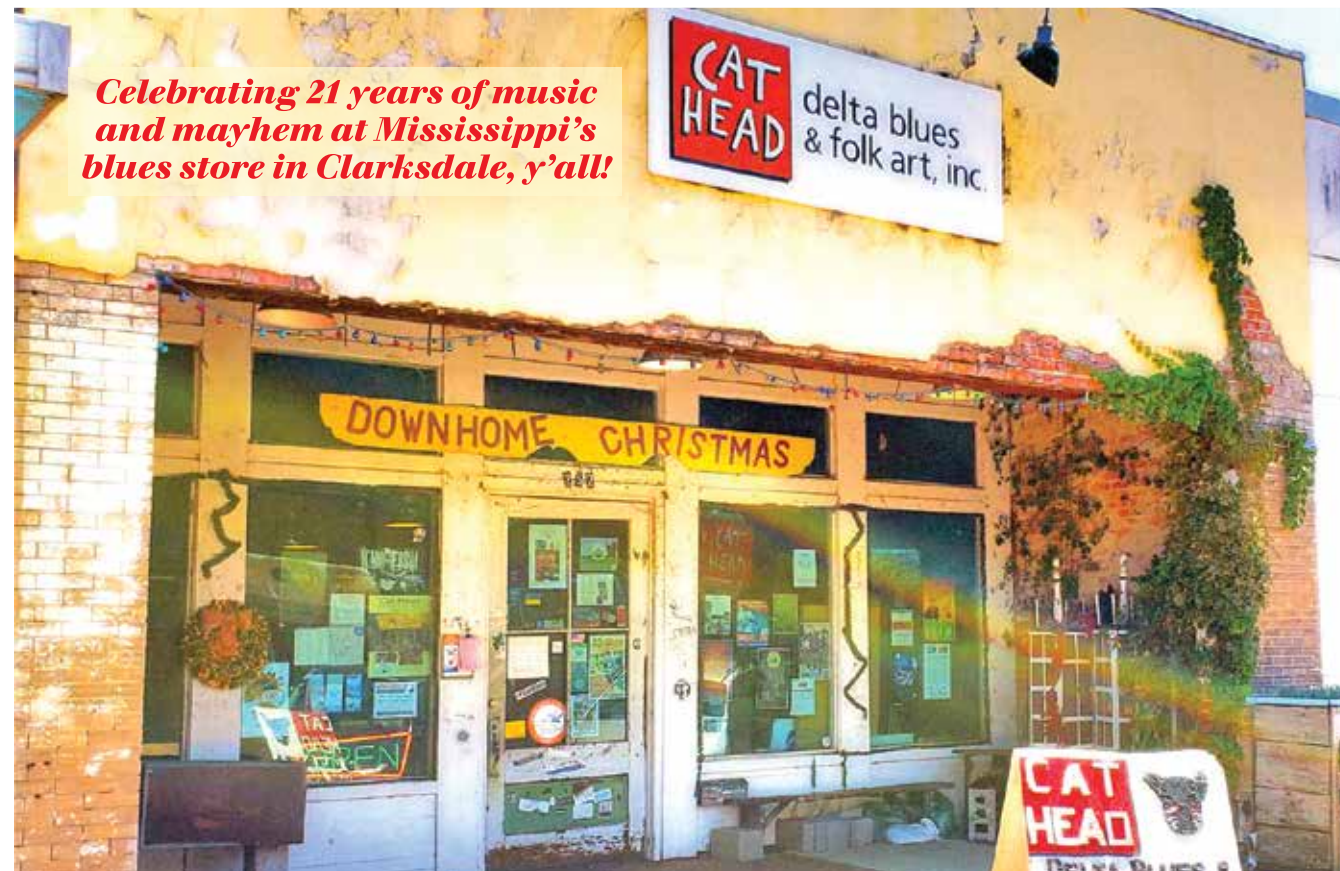
If *Teardrops For Magic Slim* wins a BMA, a Grammy, and an Oscar for Best Performance by a Mortal in the Role of Everything About Chicago Blues That Changed Pop Culture, John Primer would still deserve more. *Teardrops For Magic Slim* is more than the tribute any artist would dream of receiving; it's an historically rich labor of love and a resonating reminder of the Brits' regifting of the blues back to America; it deserves the Nobel Prize for The Blues.

Hats off to Magic Slim, an icon of Chicago blues, for hosting Primer's epic tour of duty as the genre's most illustrious Teardrop this side of "The Sky is Crying," and for inspiring a work that is truly monumental. Slim made Chicago blues a celebration of what electricity could do for a guitar, while keeping his music as much a part of Mississippi as an Off can next to a Tunica dealer. Primer and the reunited Teardrops deliver all that, and something way more significant: the humanity of Chicago blues.

It's Primer's voice weaving his soul through the Temple of Blues that is Rosa's Lounge like sacred vapors, conjuring Muddy, Elmore, and Sonny Boy as they cook that petrie dish, chemically and spiritually conjoining the South Side to the South. What we hear is what the radio brought to Chris Youlden, Peter Green, all them cats, all the way from Sweet Home Chicago. It gave Relf and Burdon and Jagger their swagger, their identities, their voices: everything we skimmed off the crests of wave after wave of the British Invasion, music that'd been playing for a decade every night down the street, and a world away at the Zanzibar and Silvio's: every draggin' tail and every kickin' mule.

From "Buddy Buddy Friend," featuring Primer's playing at its most exquisite, to "Troubles Of My Own," a song so atmospherically rich, it's basically its own universe, Primer delivers the gruelingly endearing agony of the blues intact from 23rd and Michigan with a joyful heartfelt authenticity that hasn't been replicated since Czyz became Chess. *Teardrops For Magic Slim* is a love letter written in a language seldom spoken as eloquently as John Primer, evoking echoes of the BBC's seldom-appreciated turn as messenger of the Gods.

– Terry Abrahamson



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## BOB CORRITORE

### *Women In Blues Showcase*

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Finally, here is a great collection of women blues singers, some of them sadly no longer with us, expertly recorded and showcased on *Bob Corritore & Friends: Women In Blues Showcase*. The singers and the tracks flow seamlessly into one another on this well-mixed, well-engineered recording.

The women are all here in fine voice: Barbara Lynn, Koko, Carol Fran, Francine Reed, Diunna Greenleaf, Valerie June, and Shy Perry. I've had the pleasure of seeing Koko Taylor many times in New Jersey and at the Chicago Blues Festival over the years, but for me, this album brings back memories of trips to Austin in the 1990s for Clifford Antone's annual Antone's anniversary parties in mid-July, when one could enjoy some cold spring swimming or golf during the hot dry days, and some great music and barbecue at night.

It was there, at the old club on Guadalupe, that I first heard and saw Barbara Lynn, a formidable guitarist and singer-songwriter, and late Carol Fran with her partner, Clarence Holliman. While many people at that time might not be as familiar with a singer like Francine Reed, thankfully, another big roots music aficionado from Texas, Lyle Lovett, took her on several national tours with his band, so she picked up new fans that way. Make no mistake, the only thing more difficult than making it as a blues singer is making it as a jazz singer.

A young Barbara Lynn opens the anthology with "You're Gonna Be Sorry," and a young Koko Taylor sounds terrific here on "What Kind Of Man Is This." Ditto for Greenleaf on Willie Dixon's classic "Don't Mess With The Messer." With 36 musicians recorded here, good people like John Primer, Doug James, Bob Stroger, Kid Ramos, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, and dozens of others, you may find yourself listening to this disc again and again in your car or home stereo, "discovering" things you didn't hear the first or second go-round.

– *Richard J. Skelly*

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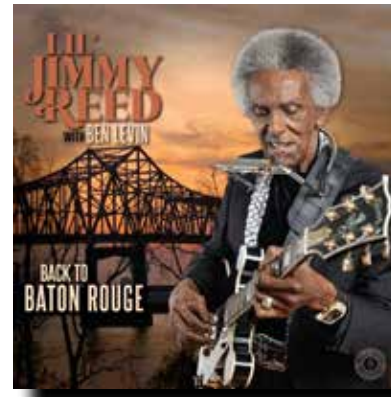
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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Summer 2023 Print Edition Released July 2023

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**LIL' JIMMY REED**  
*Back To Baton Rouge*  
Nola Blue



Louisiana native Leon Atkins has been performing as Lil' Jimmy Reed for over 60 years. He's recorded three albums on small labels before *Back To Baton Rouge*. At 84, he's poised to reach a wider audience with this set of five old school covers and five originals. Recorded in Cincinnati by producer/pianist Ben Levin who leads the band of his guitarist father Aron, bassist Walter Cash, Jr., and drummers Ricky Nye (three tracks) and Shorty Star (seven tracks).

Jimmy Reed (1925-1976) remains one of the most important blues artists of all time. His extensive oeuvre has been covered by numerous artists of various genres. According to Will Romano's *Big Bossman: The Life And Music Of Jimmy Reed*, Reed sold more records than Chess' big four of Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Howlin' Wolf, and Sonny Boy Williamson combined.

Accompanying himself on guitar and racked harmonica, Lil' Jimmy Reed sounds remarkably like his hero, but they're not the exactly the same. His vocals aren't as languid, and there is a slightly brisker tempo to the Jimmy Reed songs that he covers. The instrumentation isn't as sparse as Jimmy Reed's either. Reed recorded with just harmonica, guitars, and drums most of the time. Occasionally, he used a bassist, and rarely a piano during his Vee-Jay tenure (1953-1965). Thus, the sound here is more full-bodied thanks mainly to Ben Levin's robust playing.

Kudos to LJR for eschewing classics like the much covered "Big Boss Man," "You Don't Have To Go," and "Baby What You Want Me To Do." Instead there are lesser known gems like "Down In Virginia," "A String To Your Heart," and "I'm The Man Down There," an answer to Sonny Boy II and Elmore James' "One Way Out," and G.L. Crockett's "It's a Man Down There." Slim Harpo's rumba rocker "Mailbox Blues" and Joe Liggins' R&B shuffler "In The Wee Wee Hours" round out the covers.

LJR's homage to the Levin's hometown "Cincinnati's The Place To Be" is slinky funk. The Levins composed the Reed-like "Wish You Wouldn't" and with LJR co-wrote "Engine Light" reminiscent of Howlin' Wolf's "Smokestack Lightning," and the autobiographical slow blues "They Call Me Lil' Jimmy" and "Back To Baton Rouge." The only quibble is the 35-minute length. A few more lesser known Jimmy Reed tunes or a few more swamp blues nuggets would be welcome. Nonetheless, this crisp, concise collection is a flame keeper triumph for Lil' Jimmy Reed and a candidate for Traditional Blues Album of the Year.

- Thomas J. Cullen III

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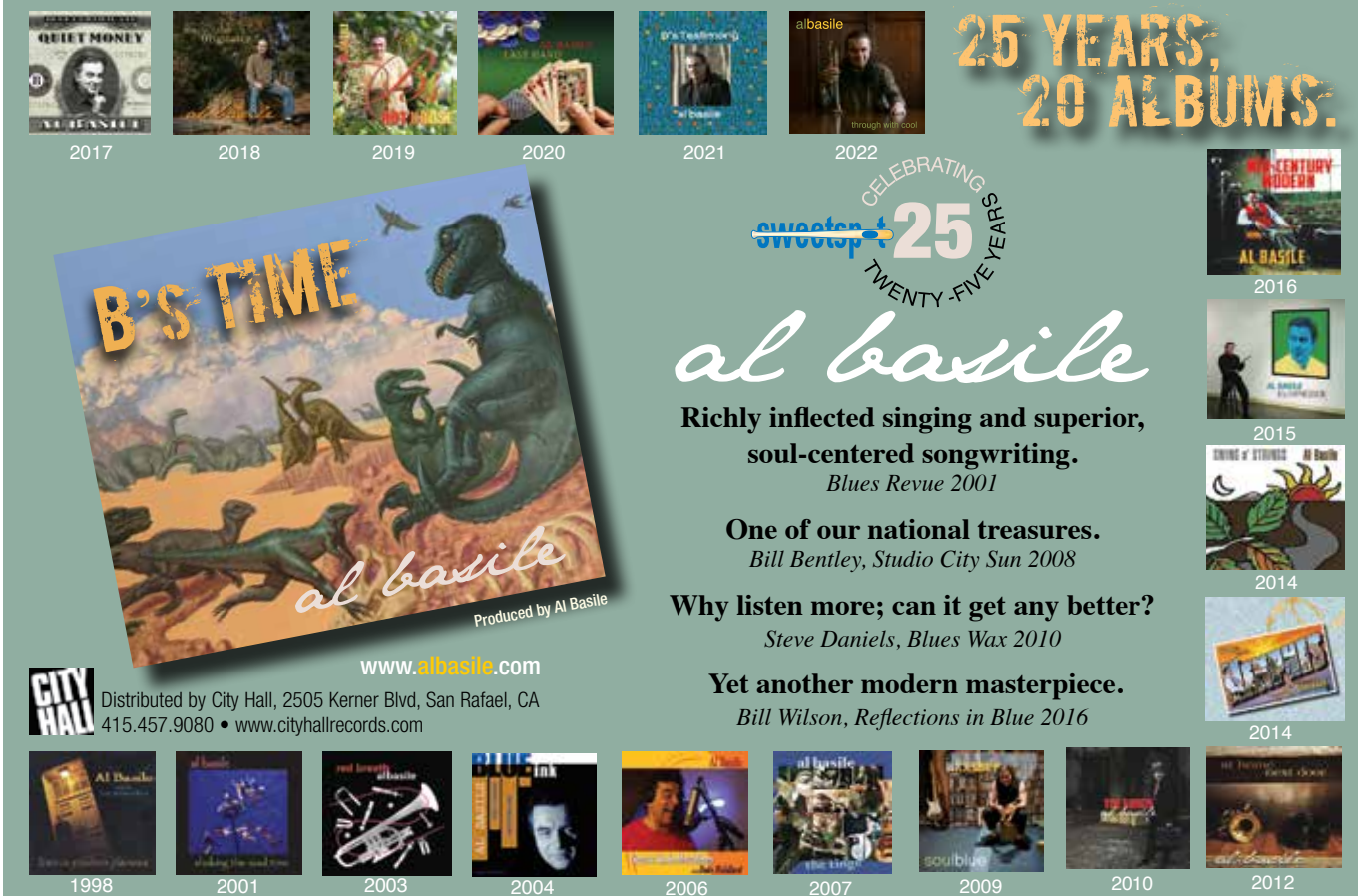
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**DOUG DEMING & THE JEWEL TONES**  
*Groovin' At Groove Now!*  
Endless Blues Records



On so many levels, this live recording was a long time in the making. First of all, Doug Deming and his Jewel Tones is perhaps the genre's hardest working band. For more than a decade, he and the band have regular Thursday through Sunday gigs at a variety of venues in his Florida stomping grounds. So one would think that a live recording could have been released years ago.

Enter the Basel, Switzerland's The Groove Now! concert. Deming was hired to play the event in 2020. Guess what happened next: COVID. So the gig was postponed until Europe opened in 2021. Deming added a roster of guest artists to regulars Andrew Gohman skilled in subtlety and energy on bass and Zack Pomerleau on drums and harmonica. By adding Terry Hanck and Sax Gordon (saxophones) and Bill Heid (keyboard), Deming and the Jewel

Tones morphed into a diamond-studded Basel blues performance.

The set was recorded and, upon further review, deemed perfectly suitable for a live CD release. Veteran Deming show goers will recognize the four+ minute format of these 11 tunes. High energy start, dense and complicated instrumental solos, followed by an over the top climactic ending, all held nicely together by Deming's expansive guitar knowledge of blues, R&B, jazz, jump, and early '50s R&R. His opener, "East Side Hop" starts the show with a call to the dance floor. Each artist's solo weaves in and out with Deming's delightful chording as the constant. (Follow that chording throughout.) The set follows with the bluesy "Only Time Will Tell," featuring Pomerleau's unique drum and Chicago-styled harmonica. Also Pomerleau's double reeds and skins duty is featured on Willie Dixon's "Oh Baby." Tell me the last time you've seen a drummer who can expertly handle an in-the-pocket shuffle and Chicago blues harmonica at the same time!

Every Deming show features the band's '50s rock 'n' roll energy on the Fats Domino classic, "I'm Ready." Here, the spirited reed work of Sax Gordon drives the engine. The frantic Jewel Tone pace slows with the dreamy, R&B ballad, "Every Night When I Get Home." Pay close attention to the warm tones Deming coaxes from his archtop and how the piano and saxophones reinforce the mood.

Two other Deming set list regulars, "Bloodshot Eyes" and "Mamma Didn't Raise No Fool," come with all the muscle the band brings every week to its Florida regulars. "An Eye For An Eye" is the band's deepest blues, with Pomerleau's harp in a starring role again, sounding like any Muddy Waters' 1950s style Chess recording.

For years, every blues fan living in the Sunshine State has followed this inspired trio at its weekly gigs. This live outing is the perfect way to either take the show home with you or experience a Sunday afternoon show at the Cortez Kitchen eating a grouper sandwich with a cold, long neck.

— Art Tipaldi

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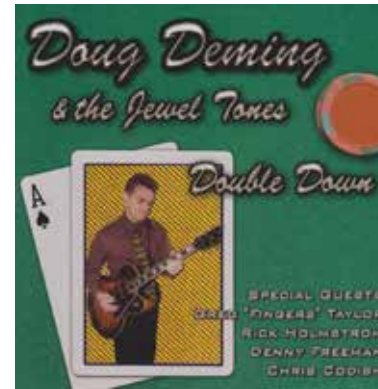


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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Summer 2023 Print Edition Released July 2023

**DOUG DEMING & THE JEWEL TONES**  
*Double Down – Twentieth Anniversary Reissue*  
Blue Bella Records

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With a chance discovery of a forgotten 8MM Hi-Def video recorder, guitarist Doug Deming also rediscovered a matching tape with a recording of the record release party for his debut album, **Double Down**, some 20 years ago – and what a party it was!

The Detroit blues community was well-represented, with Lazy Lester, Kim Wilson, and Rick Holmstrom part of the festivities. Deming arranged to have the audio files stripped off the tape, selecting some of the live tracks to add to this special release, which is being issued on Blue Bella Records, the label run by guitarist Nick Moss.

The four bonus live tracks jump with plenty of swinging energy from the solid rhythm section of Bob Connor on upright and Fender bass plus Jason Cittinger on drums. But the real treat is hearing Greg “Fingers” Taylor blowing up a storm on harmonica, setting Deming up for some equally scintillating guitar forays. If you only know Taylor from his work with Jimmy Buffet, his hearty blowing on “Black Jack,” or his impressive up-tempo excursion on “Goodbye Baby” serve as reminders that he was masterful blues harp player. The slow blues “Let Me Be” provides an additional testimonial to the depths of his talent.

The 12 original studio tracks span the gamut of Deming’s musical palette. The fact that many of songs are still featured in his live shows highlights their staying power. Whether he is testifying about late night loving on “On The Midnight Shift,” delivering a mesmerizing guitar solo on the up-tempo instrumental title track, or bemoaning a mistreating woman on the slow blues classic “It’s A Crime,” a track steeped in the T-Bone Walker legacy, Deming impresses at every turn.

“Mr. Blues” is a rousing shuffle, with Brian Miller getting a deep tone on his harp in response to a biting solo from the leader. The studio version of “Black Jack” proceeds at a slower pace without losing any of the power of a groove that always fills the dance floor. Instrumental support was provided by Dale Jennings on upright bass, Don Gruendler Jr. on drums, Denny Freeman on piano, and Chris Codish on organ.

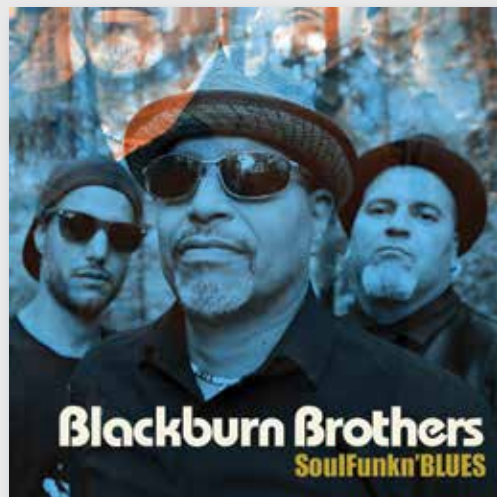
Two decades later, Deming is touring internationally with four additional recordings under his name, including a new live set. The lessons he learned backing Taylor, Lazy Lester, Wilson, and Gary Primich, combined with his passion for all things that swing, from Walker to Ella Fitzgerald, continue to be firmly ingrained in his musical approach. This Anniversary set gives us a glimpse of the past, leaving no doubt that all of the hallmarks of Deming’s vibrant style were there right from the start.

– Mark Thompson

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**BOB CORRITORE & FRIENDS**  
*High Rise Blues*  
 VizzTone



Bob Corritore's "Friends" include (get ready for it) Jimmy Rogers, Magic Slim, Chico Chism, Luther Tucker, Koko Taylor, Manuel Arrington, Eddie Taylor Jr., Sam Lay, John Primer, Pinetop Perkins, Bo Diddley, John Brim, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, Eddy Clearwater, Bob Reid, and Lil' Ed. The 14 recordings were done by Corritore from his studio in his Rhythm Room Club in Arizona and, after listening to each song, Corritore should continue to release more, if not all, of the recordings from his vault.

Corritore wasn't just a passive listener/engineer in these recordings as his harmonica is included in the backing bands. As you listen throughout *High Rise Blues* you'll enjoy the continuity of Corritore's blues harp skills, as it is the instrument that weaves these 14 tracks together. The guitar playing is pure Chicago, oftentimes with single note blues phrasing. The most salacious track is Manual Arrington's "Candy Bars," where he name checks a score of different confections that are pure delicious double entendre. Not to be outdone by Arrington, Pinetop Perkins performs "Grinder Man," which discusses the pleasures of the flesh, not candy.

As these artists had originally cut LP recordings, most of these songs fall in around the three-plus minute time in length, which was also conducive for 45-rpm recordings. John Primer, however, recorded an angry six-minute "Why Are You So Mean To Me." The band seems to sense the tenor of his tale and ratchets up their playing accordingly for a truly outstanding track.

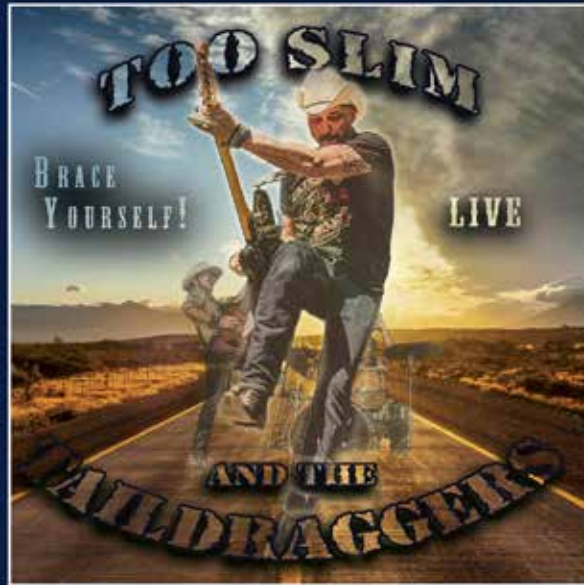
Eddy Clearwater and Bob Reid also breach the six-minute mark with an upbeat "Sail A Ship" tune. Lil' Ed closes out the disc with his seven-minute "Caught In The Act," a lament about unfaithfulness. If this set had been recorded live on-stage with each act following the other at one gig, you'd be knee deep in a head-cutting contest as each track is a gem.

Let me stop for a second and describe the recording. I don't know what techniques Corritore used, but these vaunted singers ply their vocals into a tightly supported backing band that is produced so well that each performer sings as if they were young once again.

Not only would I highly recommend purchasing *High Rise Blues*, I'd be on the lookout for any new "From The Vaults" offering by Bob Corritore. A big THANK YOU is in order.

– Pete Sardon

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**GRAINNE DUFFY**  
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Three years ago, I reviewed Grainne Duffy’s release *Voodoo Blues* and labeled it, “no-holds-barred blues rock.” Well, she is back, in tandem with her guitarist husband Paul Sherry, for more of the same: nine original songs clocking in at a little over a half hour. The set again relies on its greatest strength, Duffy’s powerful vocals. Contributing essential ensemble backing are guitarist Marc Ford, with his son Elijah Ford on keyboards and bass and JJ Johnson on percussion.

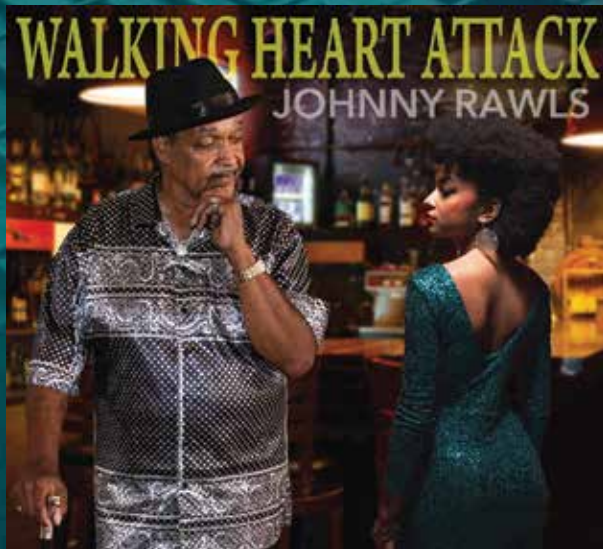
Kicking off the festivities is “Well Well Well,” an unapologetic rocker replete with alternately crunchy and droning lead guitar. The title track then slows the beat, lead guitar lyrical rather than bombastic, with Duffy’s singing bringing to my mind the vocal character of contemporary blues women Beth Hart, Ghalia Volt, and Susan Tedeschi. “What’s It Going To Be?” is a jaunty track affording Duffy the opportunity to inject the merest hint of country twang into her vocal while also delving into a high falsetto range. She maintains a similar approach on “Running Back To You,” an amalgam of 1950s pop, country, and Motown soul.

Variety is introduced on “Rise Above,” an insistent drum cadence the foundation for Duffy’s supple vocal, enhanced here by the presence of several harmonious backing vocalists. The five minute long track, “Sweet Liberation,” evokes memory of the pop classic “Sweet Inspiration,” with syncopated lead guitar riffs and a succinct but effective mid-song solo by Marc Ford. The somewhat ponderous but still effective “Hold On To You” benefits from the addition of guest keyboardist Peter Levin, and “Yes I Am” makes a 20-second feint as a slow blues before morphing into an unabashed rocker with stinging guitar accentuating Duffy’s vocal.

The set ends with “Killycrum,” a tribute to Duffy’s home area in Ireland, this time acoustic guitar as foundation. (Liner notes neglect to identify which of the three guitarists, Ford, Sherry, and Duffy, is lead on each track.)

– Dan Stevens

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## Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Summer 2023 Print Edition Released July 2023

**CHRIS DUARTE**  
*Half As Good As Two*  
Provogue Records

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If you're in the mood for some grindin,' Stevie Ray-style geetar antics. Chris Duarte is your man. The Austin, TX-based guitarist labels his sound "ferocious rockin' blues," and is often left bloody-fingered from his hard-charging shredding. For his latest, *Half As Good As Two*, on Provogue Records, even though Duarte introduces some new influences into his work, he's still a hard-core string buster. The guitarist has said that John Coltrane is his main musical god, but there's more hard-rockin' blues than jazz evident in these latest offerings.

The title cut, "Half As Good As Two," is a blistering honky-tonk shuffle touting the virtues of a made-up lover put together from two women to help him get over the cardiac pain one heartbreaker superwoman has already put him through. "Try to find a lover that will make me sweat/Searching and I'm searching haven't found her yet." "Nothing compares to the way that two do," Duarte laments. "Two girls is what it takes for me."

"Lies, Lies Lies" sounds like Johnny Winter chewing on the strings, hard rockin' blues with a corral full of twang and thump. Even though it's an original, "Gimme Your Love" is vintage Stevie Ray, a clanking and grinding string squeezer with lyrics advocating a softer approach to your loved ones' well being and longevity than the title implies: "Be strong for your women/Be strong for your man/Never turn your back and make a stand/Be strong for each other/While you can."

"Can Opener" is also in the Stevie Ray canon, a shrieking, searing instrumental with Duarte showing off his octopus technique, all eight arms busy shredding his prey to bits. Duarte gets all Hendrix on the feedback-saturated "Big Fight," mashing up Robert Plant Led Zep- era vocals with pedal effects antics of mass distortion. Recorded live in the studio with vintage gear, Duarte's latest has that fresh, in-person and unfooled with sound you'd associate with a live gig. Shuffles are the predominate means of delivery here, but the guitarist keeps things so stirred up with his muscular solos that the form seems new with every appearance.

– Grant Britt

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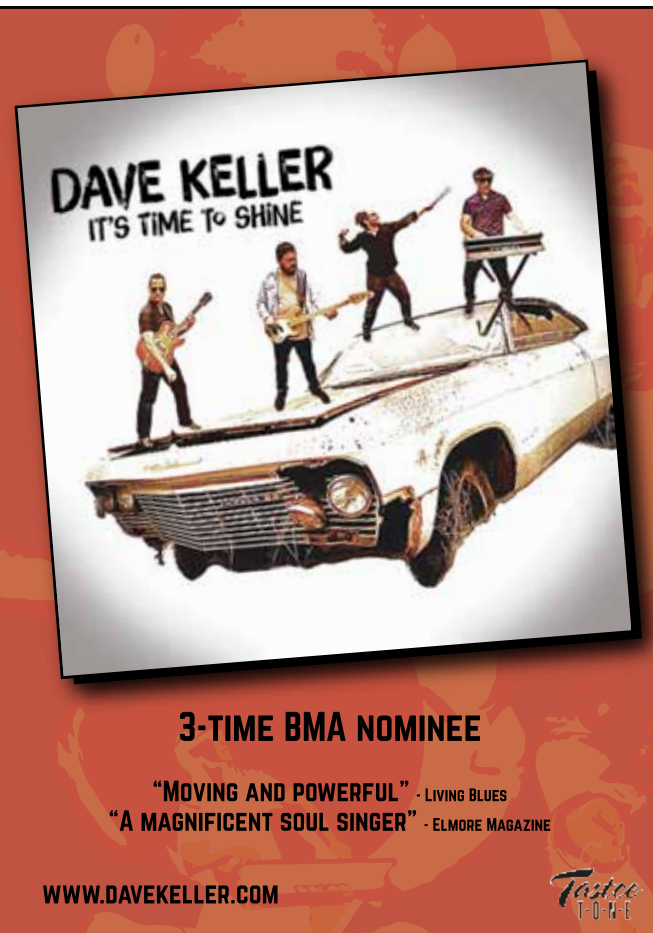
For the first time in her 25 years in the blues, this album has a very special guest on background vocals - her mama, Miriam!

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**BIG HARP GEORGE**  
*Cut My Spirit Loose*  
 Blues Mountain Records



Well, why mess with a good thing...especially when it just keeps getting better? Chromatic harmonica maven George Bisharat, a retired defense attorney and law professor living in the San Francisco area, released his first album in 2014 and has recorded with the same adept ensemble in each album through his fifth and newest, *Cut My Spirit Loose*.

A harp player couldn't wish for a better band. Producer Chris Burns mans the keyboards, D'Mar and June Core share percussion, Joe Kyle Jr. plucks the bass, Kid Andersen deals out six-string expertise, and Mike Rinta and Michael Peloquin handle the trumpet and sax respectively. The Sons of the Soul

Revivers send out sweet backing vocals, and a few others make brief appearances, including canine Lulu Bisharat with barking on the aptly titled "My Dog Is Better Than You."

That song's title suggests the wit of many of the 13 tracks, all but one of which were composed by Bisharat. It's a jaunty jump blues, effectively employing the horns. Equally swinging is the opening tune, "It's Tuesday," in this instance propelled by Andersen's stinging lead guitar. "Pile Driving Sam" is an ostensible lament of envy about the titular gentleman who has a perplexing attractiveness to women. "Give Me The Dark" continues to swing, albeit at a slightly slower tempo, followed by the horn-driven instrumental "Bustin' Out," even a tuba participating. Next is the only cover song, the Lennon-McCartney Beatles' song "She's A Woman," replete with Burns on organ and with the horns razzing in the background.

An upbeat and optimistic vibe persists for the first nine tracks; it's hard to listen without popping one's fingers and smiling broadly, both at the musicianship and the well-crafted lyrics. Bisharat's harmonica playing, if it needs saying, is alternately saucy and sibilant; he definitely knows how to play that big (chromatic) harp!

At track ten the set pivots to a traditional twelve bar slow blues, "Behind The Eight Ball"; it's one of the best of Bisharat's smooth and evocative tenor vocals. The ensuing "Take A Knee" is a brief but pithy condemnation of social inequality, with some fine acoustic guitar by Andersen. The loose and loping instrumental "Sunrise Stroll" affords delightful interplay between harmonica, guitar, and horns. The set finishes on a literal high note – actually multiple high notes courtesy of flute by Ben Torres – with "Captain Jack," all the principals collaborating in a fine culmination.

– Dan Stevens

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