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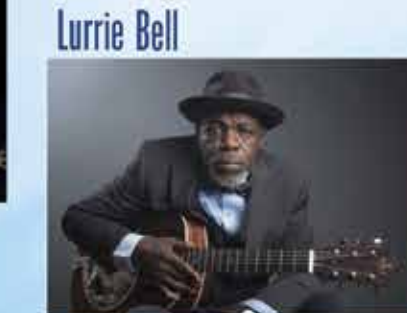
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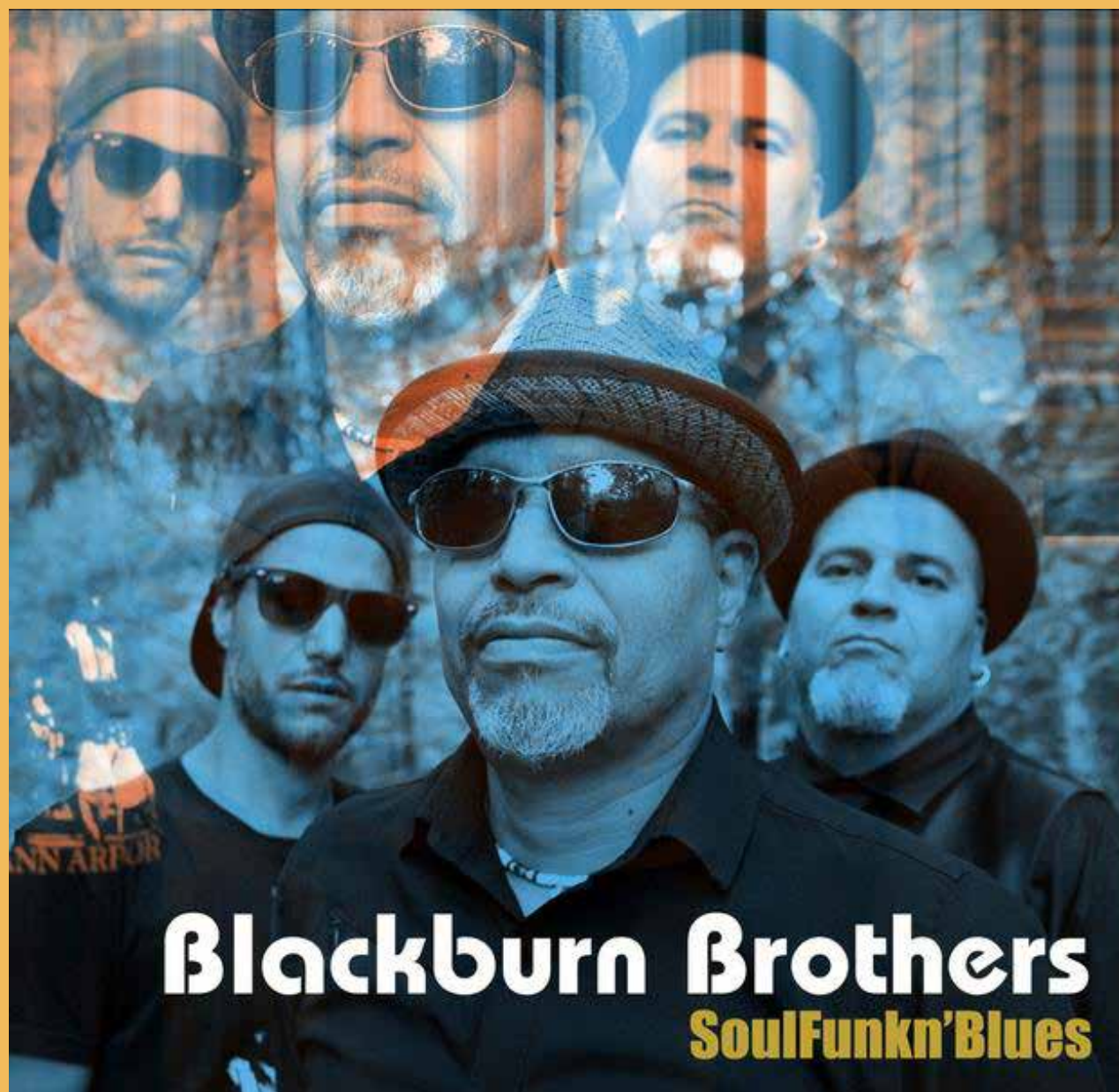


# BLUES MUSIC ONLINE

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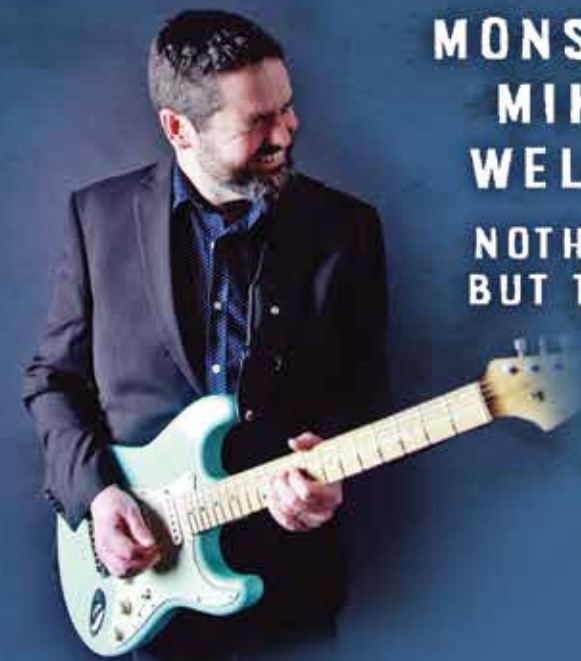
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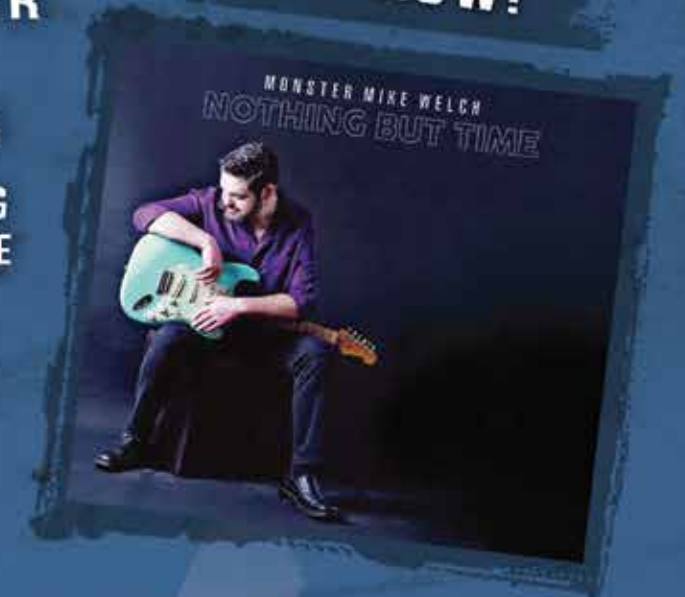
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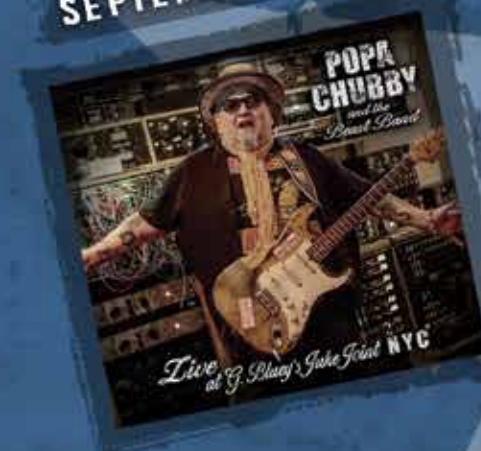


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# The Blackburn Brothers

## *Canadian Music Legacy*

PHOTOGRAPHY © Laura Carbone

By Art Tipaldi

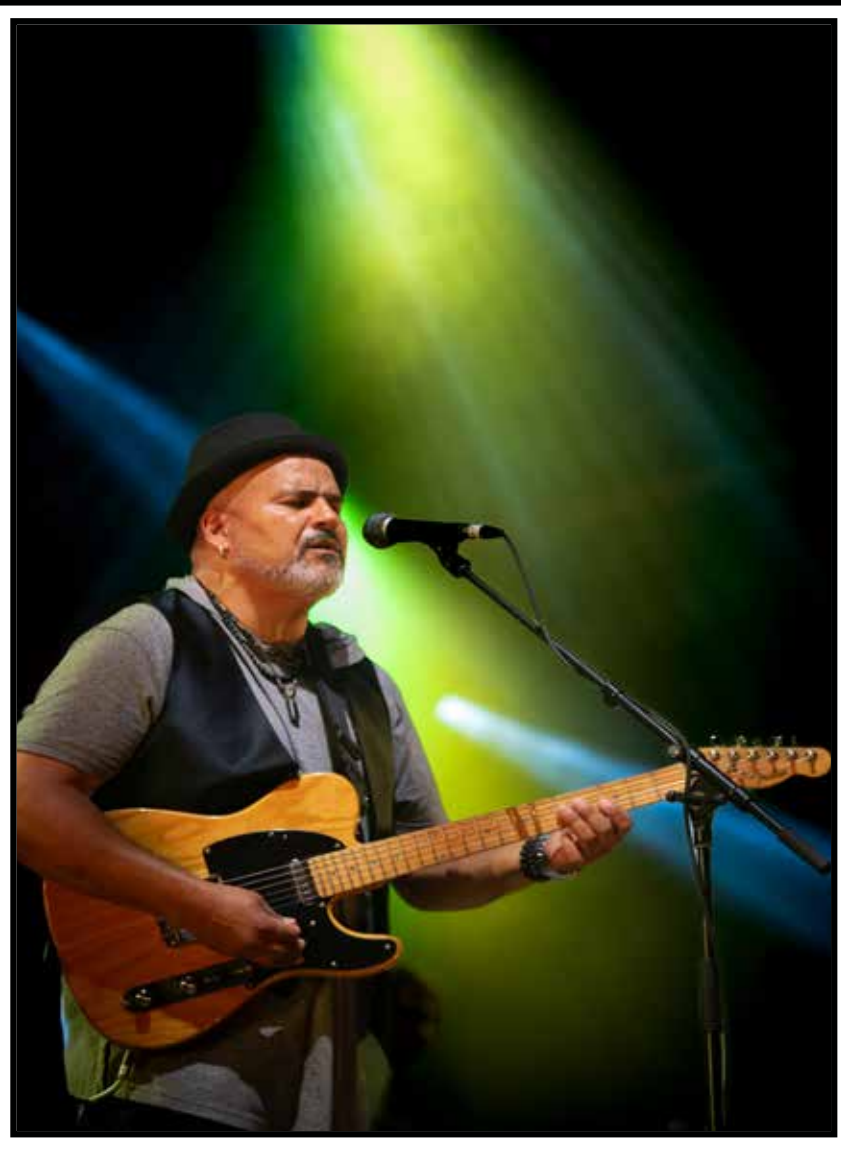


Since the early 1970s, the Blackburn name has been at the forefront of Canadian, and more specifically Toronto, music scene. Bobby Dean Blackburn was a seasoned R&B performer throughout the city of Toronto. Since the early 1990s, his sons, Cory, Duane, Robert, and Brooke, have carried the Blackburn name's musical importance. Along with

cousin Nathan, these talented and experienced Brothers have continued the Blackburn legacy.

And they are not just riding on their father's coattails. They have won Canadian honours for Best New Band (2010), Album of the Year (2016), and many, many Maple Blues Award nominations. However with an arbitrary line called a "border," most American





blues fans have not heard the music of this 30-year-old veteran touring and recording band.

Until now. Their current 2023 recording *SoulFunkn' BLUES* on Electro-Fi Records, is reviewed in both *Blues Music Magazine* print and here in *Blues Music Online* digital.

To introduce the Brothers to our readers, we've sent out questions for the Blackburn Brothers as a way to introduce themselves, the family's history, and the Canadian music scene. All the Blackburns answered the first few questions, then Brooke and Duane spoke for all on the final ones.

**PHOTOGRAPHY © Laura Carbone**

**Blues Music Magazine:** We'll start this roundtable by having each brother introduce himself, tell about the instrument he plays how and when each begin to play that instrument, what American musicians were your influences, and when did you all start playing together for friends and family.

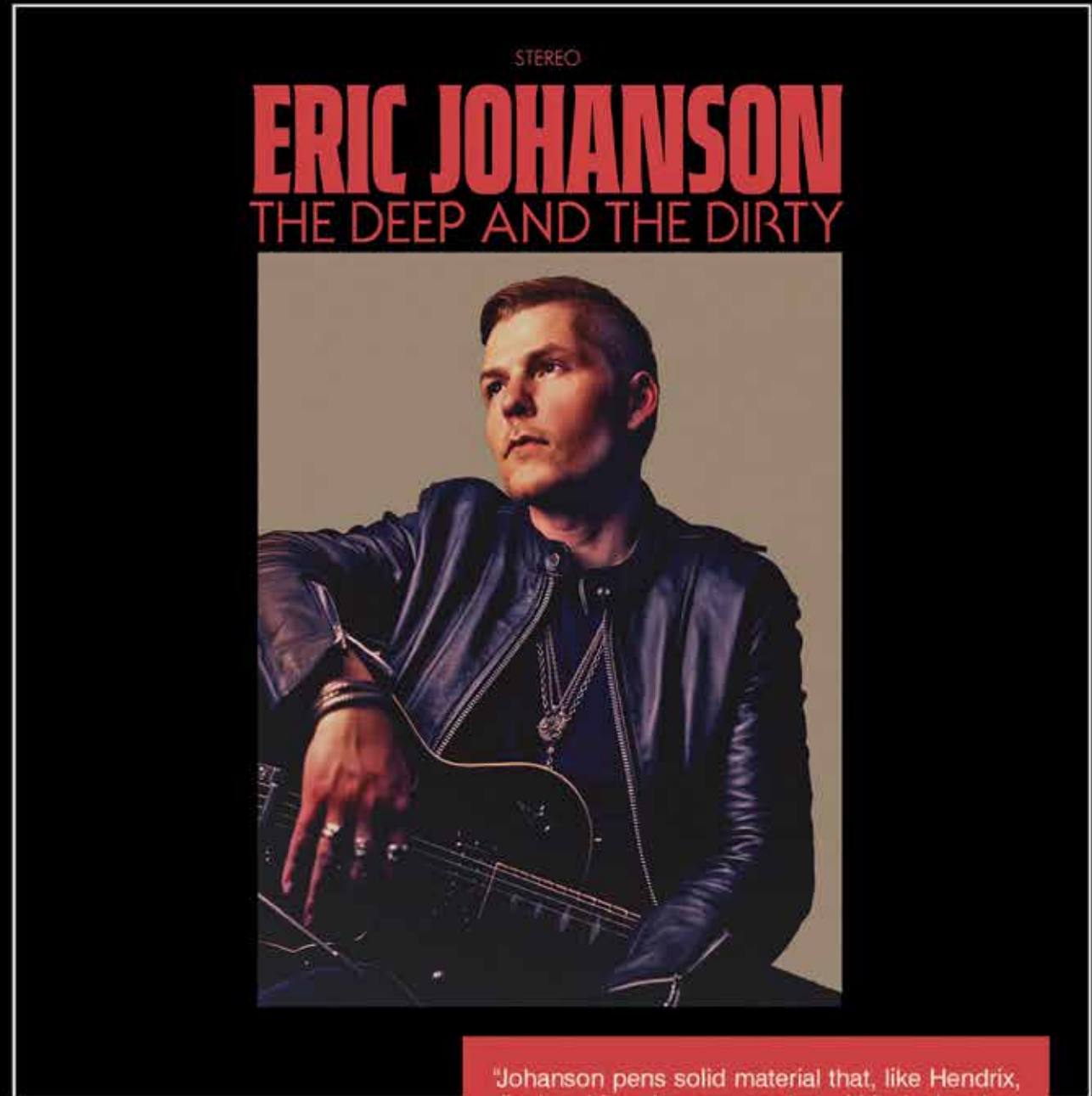
**Cory:** I play the drums. I began messing around with the drums and pursuing it further at the age of ten. I began playing for friends and family at the age of 11. For me, hands down it was James Brown and his drummers, Clyde Stubblefield and John "Jabo" Starks. They laid down the funk that shook me to the core.

**Robert:** My first instrument was the drums. I was probably eight years old when I first started playing. My dad also started teaching piano about this same time. In my teens, I started to play tenor sax in high school and the sax became my main instrument. Later, I took an interest in guitar and now it seems to be my main instrument for writing music.

I can't really say when the first time I played in front of friends and family was, but I do remember getting together with my cousin Nathan and performing at the family Christmas Eve parties. This led to Nathan and myself starting our first band called the Basement Blues Band. Later we formed a new band called 20<sup>th</sup> Century Funk.

My earliest influences were groups like Earth Wind & Fire, the Ohio

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*American Songwriter*

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*Blues Rock Review*



Players, Sly & The Family Stone, Parliament, and of course, James Brown.

**Duane:** I started playing piano at about 13 years old. I also played drums, bass, and saxophone in high school. I started playing with my brothers Brooke and Robert when I was about 18. We played with Eugene Smith. Of course, I played with my dad as a kid, whatever instrument was available.

When I finished high school, I toured with Eugene Smith in Canada, backed up many different musicians for years. Then my cousin Nathan called and said

let's start jamming. From that point on Blackburn was created.

My musical influences for piano: Oscar Peterson, Jimmie Smith, Lonnie Smith, Fats Domino, and Herbie Hancock, As far as vocal influence: Bill Withers, Bobby "Blue" Bland, James Brown, B.B. King, Jack Dupree, Sam

**PHOTOGRAPHY © Laura Carbone**

Cooke, Nat King Cole, and Stevie Wonder. As far as bands: Bob Marley, of course, Earth Wind and Fire, Roger Troutman, ZAP, Funkadelic, The Gap Band, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Ray Charles, Charlie Parker, and Robbie Robertson.



**Brooke:** I play guitar in the Blackburn Brothers Band and also sing. I started playing guitar around 1976 and played my 1st paid gig with my father when I was 15. The Blackburn Brothers Band was formed in the early- to mid-'90s when our youngest brother Cory was old enough to start playing bars.

When I was a kid starting to play guitar, I would say the most influential

American musician to me was George Benson. His music captured my interest and led me in the direction as a solo instrument player. I could hear the voice of the instrument through his playing.

**Blues Music Magazine:** In all the press about the band, there are major

references to the family's roots in American slavery and the escape to Canada 200 years ago through the Underground Railroad. Can you tell readers about that part of your family's history, how it affected you as children growing up in the freedom of Canada, and how that family background informs and affects what you do as individuals and as a band in the present?

**Duane:** The fact that my family came through the Underground Railroad in the early 1800s places a big influence on my children, and I let them know about the history of our family in Canada as Black Canadians. It's very important for them to be proud of the legacy of those who came before us. I tell my kids you have the freedom to have and the freedom to choose. Anything is possible because of your forefathers, so respect the history and legacy

**Brooke:** Our family and our heritage has formed us and cloaked us with a historical place in our society that is to be honoured every August 1st in our Emancipation celebration of the Abolitionist Movement that formed our charter in 1834 to abolish slavery as a British colony.

Our music tries to embrace our day to day lives and loves and our Black History connection as free peoples that still are searching for equality and social justice throughout our earthly existence. We are a celebrated peoples who contribute greatly to our communities. We live together and honour our neighbours in the indigenous communities, and thank

them for sharing their lands with us. We live in one of the most diverse communities on the earth, and we celebrate through our music and learn from all of our neighbours from all their backgrounds. We look forward to touring through the United States and Europe and throughout the world as we live and spread love and play music.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What was the music being played in your Canadian home?

**Cory:** Ray Charles, Oscar Peterson, Fats Domino, Little Richard, John Coltrane, Parliament Funkadelic, Aretha Franklin, Mavis Staples, Bob Marley & The Wailers to name a few.

**Brooke:** In our house, you had a plethora of Black music being played that was rooted in soul blues. From the popular soul chanted music of the '60s and '70s like The Jackson 5, James Brown, etc. to the instrumental sounds of the Jimmy Smith trio and Grover Washington, to the blues of B.B. King and Champion Jack Dupree.

**Duane:** The music that I grew up on was definitely the blues, R&B, soul, funk, reggae, and gospel. My father would go down to Buffalo and get music all the time. My brothers would do the same, we all would. The radio stations in Toronto, Canada, were very limited in the '70s and '80s [playing] mostly American artists, but I was influenced by a lot of Toronto musicians: Dougie Richardson, Connie Menard, Robbie Robertson, and Eugene Smith.



Living in Canada, you've got a wide spectrum of different music because all the new cultures that were coming in during the '70s and '80s, so I learned different styles of music. Like I said, I grew up with a lot of Caribbean influences as well as Southern American influences.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What was the influence of your father in the early musical journey of you four? Can each one tell what you learned from your father about the music you play?

**Cory:** My father started taking me with him on duo gigs when I was the age of 14. He taught me to shake my nerves and focus on being a band member. What I learned from my father as a drummer was to play steady in the pocket, to gain stamina, and not to speed up or slow down the groove.

**Robert:** Our dad was a major influence. He never pushed us to play, but was encouraging and very supportive. Most all the instruments and amps we used in our first bands were borrowed from my dad. I learned a lot about how music should be played, and a lot about the music business from him.

**Duane:** My father was a major influence musically. Obviously what I learned from him was the basics, how to become an entertainer and how to work the audience. Of course, he definitely influenced my piano playing because he's also a piano player, so I picked a lot of chops up off of him. Because he's a great Hammond B-3 player, I definitely

learned a lot of keyboard licks off him.

**Brooke:** I started to concentrate and learn the guitar at 13, so by 15 I was able to sit in with my father and his band rehearsals. When he needed a sub guitarist, he would ask me to cover and we would play a wide range of dive clubs in the Toronto area until I was more familiar with my instrument, and then we started playing more upscale clubs like piano and organ lounges.

My father taught me many songs like "Chicken Shack" and "Stormy Monday Blues." He also taught me how to be a professional musician and how to respect and honour the craft and most of all to learn to listen. Listen to the other musicians you are paired with to be as cohesive a band as possible.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you talk specifically about the song, "Bobby's Blues" and what you want the readers to know about the song and the musical life of your father, Bobby Dean Blackburn?

**Duane:** Brother Brooke wrote that song "Bobby's Blues." It is basically about my father's journey in the musical world and how he was a very strong influence on Black musicians in Toronto, Canada. Because he did it his way, he had to deal with a lot of racist attitudes. He was the first Black man to play Yonge Street here in Toronto, which was a major milestone in the early '50s. He always said, "Don't let your colour hold you back, just get out there and do it."

**Brooke:** "Bobby's Blues" to me as the songwriter portrays the musical journey



of my father and the continuous change of the landscape of the '50s, '60s, and '70s to modern day. In the song, I talk about playing the blues since 1955 to a hurricane that hit Toronto when my father was an Air Cadet to many Canadian and international events that formed that era like wars and politically motivated decisions that directly affected the economy of Toronto.

Through all that, my father always played music he felt in his heart and did it his own way, never bending his style to please the masses. He would blend the piano playing of Little Richard and Fats Domino with the organ playing of Jimmy McGriff and Jimmy Smith while keeping a solid groove with his left hand. "Bobby's Blues" is a respectful homage to the effect of his music and conviction

to professionalism in the music business from his sons and the community.

**Blues Music Magazine:** How was the music in Canada different from the music you were hearing from America?

**Brooke:** I would say that the music of Canada was melded with the music of the U.S. because of us being so close to the border to Buffalo. The difference of the cultures when I grew up was the multinational influence of music in Canada. We grew up with the best of reggae, Afro-Cuban, funk, soul, and jazz like The Oscar Peterson trio to the guitar virtuoso of Nelson Simons and Terry Logan.

Musicians in Toronto were different than the musicians of the states

**PHOTOGRAPHY © Laura Carbone**



to me because I could listen to them on record and go see them around the block. It gives you a sense of pride as a Canadian musician. I talk to many of my friends from abroad, and they don't even realize that many of their musical heroes were from Canada from Oscar Peterson to Neil Young to David Clayton Thomas to Joni Mitchell and others.

**Duane:** The way that Canadian music influenced me was through the Canadian musicians that I grew up with through my father and my friends. Basically, a lot of the Black musicians in Toronto would hang out where my father played a House gig called Zanzabar on Yonge Street. These musicians would always come over to the house, and I listened to them play, listened to them talk, etc. and that was a big Canadian musical influence for me as well. As I said earlier, the influence of American music was very strong in our family because our background is American. We came through the Underground Railroad early 1800s, so the American influence was definitely a big part of my musical path.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What was it about American blues, soul, R&B, and funk that spoke to you?

**Brooke:** The sounds of the U.S. were the building blocks of our musical education, blues, funk, soul, and jazz all came from the backs of Black musicians that through unmeasurable strife and persecution came the breath of musical creativity passed down through generations that crossed

borders to Canada and to my ears.

The sound and production of the recorded music from the United States were always my focus to achieve with respect, the goal of creating music that would be as creative and soulful as the music I grew up listening to.

**Duane:** For me, it was a feeling of family and home, because like I said, a lot of the Black community in Toronto was a Caribbean-based community, and I do have Caribbean blood in me. My grandfather came from the island of Montserrat, but mainly American, Southern influences, food, music, etc. So when I played the blues, my friends did not know what the blues was for them. They thought it was more church music because the blues and the gospel are closely related.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Before you all became a named band, what were some of the band experiences outside the family that each of you had as you were woodshedding your identities?

**Brooke:** Being one of the older brothers in the band, I was playing with many bands before the Blackburn Brothers and backed many amazing singers. The music of the streets of Toronto is the sound of Blackburn. All the bands we played with as individual musicians were bands that we formed and performed in clubs around the city and were bred from the urban sound of the streets.

My brothers and I were forged more from the musicians that played in the clubs than the formal education

you would get from a music school. The school of the streets and clubs and the albums were our education.

The Blackburn Brothers became a band when my youngest brother Cory was old enough to perform in clubs. Mid-90s. We released our 1st CD in 1996 and have been recording since then. This our 3rd blues recording and 5th Blackburn production. From an early age, we were always encouraged to record by our parents and to learn production ourselves.

**Duane:** Before Blackburn was formed; I was a gigging musician, playing with many different acts, touring acts. Being a singer, I do a lot of commercials that come my way – Disney, Nickelodeon etc. Currently, I'm working on a solo CD that I hope to have up by Christmas. We all do our own thing and we come together for the Blackburn Brothers recordings every couple years or so and then we tour.

**Blues Music Magazine:** What were the early challenges the band faced?

**Duane:** I believe some of the challenges that we faced coming up was the fact that we lived in Canada. The exposure was not there. But with the development of technology, the Internet, etc. people that have never heard of you or heard your music, get a chance to listen, and that is definitely a positive development in the music industry.

**Brooke:** I don't know about challenges, more like growing pains. We started building our own studio from a three-car

garage at my mother's house, played on the weekends, and took half or more of our money to buy equipment and lumber.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Sibling rivalry aside, what compromise decisions did you each have to make artistically to make this band work?

**Duane:** Working with family can be hard but we have a mutual understanding of the industry and how it works. Everybody plays a part. Basically me being a lead singer, I handle all the band business. My brother Cory handles all the recording and social media. Sometimes we get into disagreements, so we put on the boxing gloves, and may the best man win!!! Lol

**Brooke:** I think that compromise comes with listening. When you realize the strengths your siblings have and the contribution they add to the music you then realize that collectively you are creating something organically creative. So compromise means to listen and go with the groove collectively being created.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you address the importance of the Blackburn Brothers writing originals?

**Duane:** Blackburn is all about writing original music for me. It's the only way I enjoyed my time backing up other people, cover bands, etc. but when you bring your own vibe and what you feel in the music and let the people hear it, that's what it's all about.



**Brooke:** The importance of writing originals is, our story is being told our way. Our sound and our experiences are being recorded and documented musically. Our sound and our story as told by the Blackburn Brothers.

**Blues Music Magazine:** How important is the balance between a sense of musical energy and celebrating your musical roots with the need to address contemporary problems in the world in your lyrics?

**Duane:** The Blackburn Brothers always try to create music with a positive message. I think there's so much negativity in the music industry – unfortunately this seems to sell. There's a place and a time for that but I think it's dominating the popular culture of music today. We have to get away from the negativity, start talking about positive things like Bill Withers, Bob Marley, etc.

**Brooke:** Our roots in Canada started through the strength and fortitude to be free. As enslaved peoples from the U.S., we persisted to be free in a new land called Canada and escaped through the route of the Underground Railroad to Canada. Our story is and always will be political, so it's fortunately difficult for me as a songwriter to not add stories about freedom seekers and equal rights.

Life is political and that causes change. To me you wouldn't have the world of today without the Civil Rights Movement and the uprising of social justice then and now. Our past dictates our future if we learn from it and continue on to equality and love and community.

**Blues Music Magazine:** Can you tell our readers about the Canadian musical culture you are part of and how it differs from the American musical culture? As such, what are the challenges you face now?

**Brooke:** Our Canadian music culture is not much different than the Northern states of the U.S. Toronto and Montreal have been close cousins to the sound of New York and Chicago since recorded music has crossed borders. The sounds of Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf are as common in our world as Anne Murray and Gordon Lightfoot.

**Duane:** I think the challenge now for us is getting the proper exposure. I'd really like to play more in the United States, more in Europe, etc. I love to get on a nice tour across America. That would be a cool experience.

**Brooke:** Challenges now are as they always have been, to be heard by others around the world. To get our music out to American and European audiences. To get across the States and Europe and Asia and Africa. To be international as all music should be. - **BMM**



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## BLACKBURN BROTHERS

### *SoulFunkn' BLUES*

Electro-Fi Records



This is the third album from “Toronto’s first family of funk and soul,” and its 12 tracks – including 10 originals – are all that the title proclaims, delivered by an impressive group. The band’s core is made up of the siblings of its name: Duane (vocals, keys), Brooke (guitar, backing vocals), Cory (drums, percussion, backing vocals), Robert (guitar, backing vocals), and Nathan (bass). They are supported in a big way on most of these tracks by longtime horn section Neil Brathwaite (tenor sax) and Ted Peters (trombone).

And the Blackburn Brothers are just that: a *band*. What they’re laying down doesn’t feature many solos because it doesn’t need them. Rather, everyone is tuned into each other and interdependent as their songs establish and sustain deep grooves that incorporate everyone, including Duane, as he huskily takes his time riding them home.

Everything is right, from the guitar and organ work, to the horns and chorus on almost every song. The band’s power and intensity is easy and relaxed, but it’s unstoppable. A great example of this is “Little Sister.” The groove is so strong and the message and chorus so infectious that it took a few listens to realize that there may have been a guitar solo in there somewhere; upon further review, it was more of a short bridge/break, but it didn’t initially jump out for the same reason a gear in the works of a Swiss watch might be overlooked: it was perfectly doing its part to make everything else move.

Listening to a band of funky brothers who are associated with a particular city, it was only a matter of time before the light bulb went off, and it did, while listening to the group’s cover of The Neville Brothers’ “Sister Rosa”; and there is a multi-layered resemblance, not much of which is in their heavily reworked version of that song. But “I Don’t Want To Be Alone” is sort of like Art filling in for Aaron, while “Soul Brother” could be vintage unreleased material from “New Orleans’ first family of funk.” Its sound and subject also recall the late ‘60s/early ‘70s Temptations who, of course, were backed by *The Funk Brothers* of Detroit. And listening to “Freedom Train,” one could be excused for thinking it was from Motown’s vaults: a high compliment, indeed.

*SoulFunkn' BLUES* was a long time coming, and its arrival is definitely a welcome one.

– *Matthew MacDonald*

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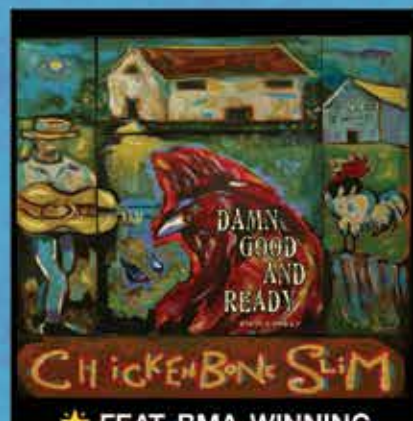
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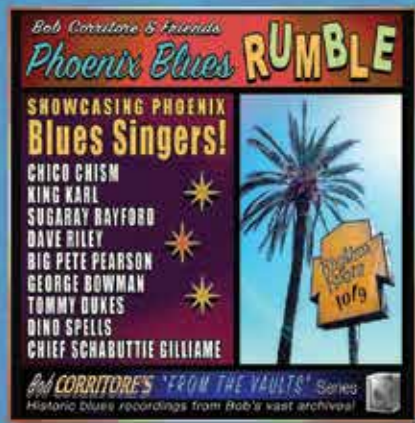
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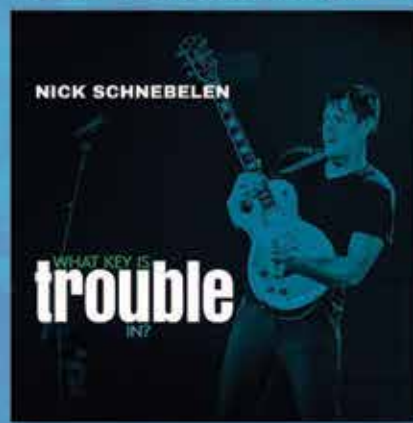
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# ALBUM REVIEW

## JOYANN PARKER

### Roots

Hopeless Romantics Records



Although singer Joyann Parker has recently moved back to Wisconsin, her state of origin, after an extended sojourn in Minneapolis, all along she has remained ensconced in her home musical territory, which is expansive: Americana. She is equally comfortable expressing herself through blues, rock, gospel, and country, as evidenced in her previously released – and praised – albums, 2018's *Hard To Love* and 2021's *Out Of The Dark*. Present on all three releases are stalwart bandmates Mark Lamoine, wielding guitar and adding vocals, and keyboardist Tim Wick. Percussionist Bill

Golden returns from the last album, and the newest band member is bass guitarist Chris Bates.

Not only a powerful singer, Parker also plays guitar and keyboards, composed all thirteen tracks, and co-produced the album with Kevin Bowe. The result is a simmering stew of tunes that touch all of the above-mentioned genres. The set commences propulsively with two rockers, the title tune and "Faintly Optimistic." The latter is buttressed by a zippy horn section, and the single note guitar forays of Lamoine, who is also in fine form sharing vocal duty with Parker and two backing singers. Lyrics on that outing and others are deft, as well. There are familiar laments of heartache for broken relationships, seen from both the vantage of the rejected and the rejecter, variously expressing sorrow, bitterness, and cautionary advice.

There is also a refreshingly honest description, in "Stay Home Mama," the longest cut, of the challenges of thriving while balancing motherhood and a performing career. On that track Scott Graves provides trombone support for Parker's talking-blues approach. Another track, "Sconnie Girl," is a tribute to Wisconsin. For even more variety, there are "Juxtaposition," with a decidedly reggae flavor, and "Going Under," a slow ballad enhanced by Parker on piano. Definitely not to be slighted is the brief and rollicking "Miss Evangeline," which expertly blends country and bluegrass and benefits from mandolin courtesy of Chris Silver.

Parker's singing chops remind me of those of Susan Tedeschi and Janiva Magness, but she is her own stylist, with an impressive range and the ability to emote both forcefully and plaintively. In my opinion, she is indubitably the equal of the best contemporary female blues vocalists.

– Dan Stevens

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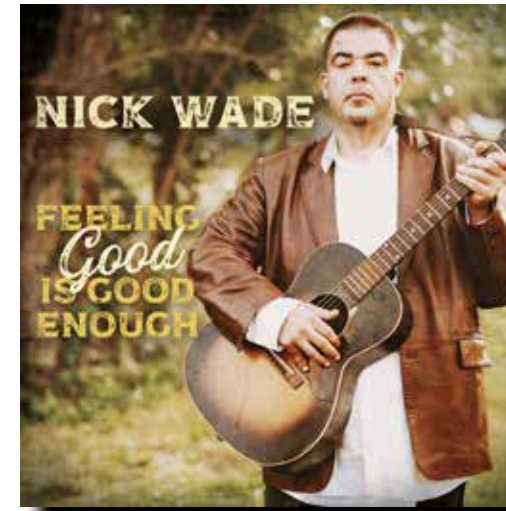


# ALBUM REVIEW

NICK WADE

*Feeling Good Is Good Enough*

Extra Sensory Productions



The musical recipe that Nick Wade, a talented musician who delivers old time original blues music, uses on *Feeling Good Is Good Enough* contains the following ingredients: 1) His guitars, which include a 1936 Gibson Kalamazoo, similar to the one Robert Johnson used on his recordings and a boutique hand made Goodman instrument that appears to replicate the old Stella guitars. 2) Convincing vocals that sound eerily like they were recorded with the tone and inflections of bluesmen of the '30s. 3) Twelve original songs that also include two instrumentals, "Ragamuffin" and "Raggin' My Blues Away" that bring out the lovely pure voices

of his fine instruments. 4) A soulful drive to infuse his music with an authenticity that would make Robert Johnson smile in his grave.

His father, a jazz musician, taught him music at age five and at 22 he began teaching himself how to play Chicago style electric blues. Like Eric Clapton, who was also influenced by the blues of Robert Johnson, Wade then redirected his playing in the style of Robert Johnson's country blues and added a dash of spiritual music as these forms of music are now the realm of his musicianship.

As you listen to *Feeling Good Is Good Enough*, you are transported back in time and feel that you have landed in the blues world of the '30s only with the improvement of 21<sup>st</sup> century recording techniques. Wade does add Li'l Ronnie Owens' harp accompaniment on "Lonesome Copperhead Snake" which opens with, "I'm a lonesome copperhead snake and I make my home down in the ground....now late in the evening, that's when I comes out and crawls around."

It's appealing to listen to his finger-picking skills on these 12 songs and his "Sky Line Drive" opens the CD and you will be instantly captivated by his vocals, guitar playing and lyrics. "Broke And Busted" is also a stand out cut. and "Engineer Blues" is played and sounds like it could be one of Robert Johnson's lost songs.

Robert Johnson only recorded 29 songs (not including outtakes and alternate versions) and let's hope that Nick Wade can exceed that output with his talent. He has a good start with his first 12 songs. Try this with your blues loving friends: play a few old blues recordings, slip in some songs by Nick Wade and see if they can tell the difference. Please consider adding the timeless *Feeling Good Is Good Enough* to your musical library.

– Pete Sardon

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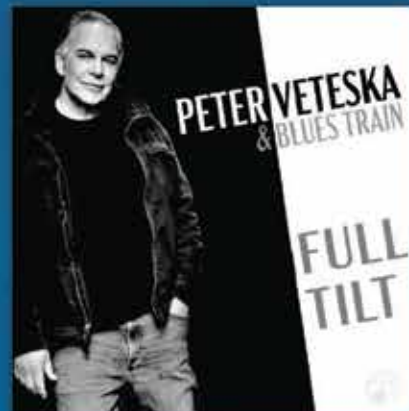






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# ALBUM REVIEW

LITTLE G WEEVIL  
*If I May...*  
Gee Wee



No, Little G Weevil is certainly not his birth name. He allegedly acquired that moniker from a fellow musician who saw him play at multiple venues on the same day and remarked that “you pop up everywhere, like a weevil.” The native Hungarian’s real name – spoiler alert – is Gabor Szucs. My knowledge of Hungarian is rudimentary, but I can assure you that it is false that Gabor sucks.

On the contrary, he is an accomplished singer, songwriter, bandleader, and guitarist who has been playing guitar since age seventeen, after falling in love with blues music while growing up in post-Soviet Hungary. He formed his first band 25 years ago, and has spent time absorbing the fundamentals and nuances of the blues in Memphis, St. Louis, and Atlanta. In 2013 he won the International Blues Challenge in the Solo/Duo category, and was named its best guitarist as well.

His ninth album finds Little G Weevil collaborating with pianist Mr. Jambalaya, drummer Tom Kiss, bassist Csaba Pengo, and harmonica player K.C. Brown on ten original tunes whose subjects range from the traditional to the topical. The CD version of the album includes a handy brochure sporting song lyrics, which are already accessible for appreciation via G’s clear enunciation on the record. He sings in an engaging baritone with a slight rasp, with barely a hint of Eastern European accent.

Of the topical numbers there is one addressing early 2023’s incursion over the U.S. of a Chinese observation balloon, “Spy Balloon Blues.” “Gold Mine” addresses the exploitation of workers in impoverished Third World countries: “I’m shoveling here with my own two hands/While I appreciate the nickels and I don’t mind to break my neck/Think about me when you wear your necklace/Worth over 50 grand.” “Tinglingaling (Everybody’s Qualified)” takes a more humorous approach in its investigation of education and the Internet: “The teacher said, Listen children, we’re living in modern times/I don’t even know what I’m doing here, try to free your own damn mind.”

Modes range from 12-bar standard to jazzy to swing. For this lover of slow blues, there is “We Don’t Learn Much,” with lyrics like: “We’ve been around so many years/Empires come and go and one day we’ll all disappear/We don’t learn much.” On that track, Mr. Jambalaya delivers some delicious pianos licks and G one of his many equally tasty guitar solos. There are requisite songs about love realized and thwarted, and a zesty and amusing rocker, “Doctor Hay.” This fine set ends convincingly with the upbeat “I Know Many Ways to Prove My Love,” in the process proving Little G Weevil’s talent.

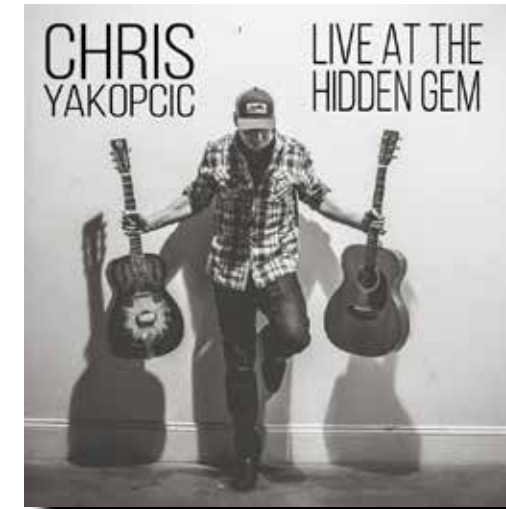
– Dan Stevens

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# ALBUM REVIEW

**CHRIS YAKOPCIC**  
*Live At The Hidden Gem*  
Yako Records



You may not know him yet, but you may soon. Chris Yakopic is a solo artist from Ohio who has represented several regional blues societies at the International Blues Challenge and consistently finished highly, including making the finals in 2015. He has performed extensively through the Midwest; his third album finds him vamping at a music club in Dayton, Ohio. The crowd sounds appreciative; so am I.

The 12-song set is composed of half originals and half covers. Yakopic's evocative vocals are effective, and he can reach into an occasional falsetto mode, which adds flavor.

His predominant appeal, though, is indisputably his guitar mastery. Various wielding acoustic and resonator guitars and dobro, he demonstrates a digital dexterity reflecting those legends that he cites as influences, particularly Robert Johnson and Arthur "Blind" Blake. However, his playing is far from imitative or formulaic. Instead, he continually surprises with lyrical and inventive fingerpicking and slide displays.

Among the set's pleasures are his re-imagining of three of Johnson's classic songs. Plying the dobro, he digs into a five-minute version of "Traveling Riverside Blues" at an initial slow, thrumming pace, segues into a furious two verse attack reminiscent of the approach of Rory Block and John Hammond to many of Johnson's tunes, then finishes again at a measured tempo. "Kind Hearted Woman," allegedly the first song Yakopic learned to play, features his impassioned singing and delicious fingerpicking. "Preachin' Blues," the closing number of the set, likewise has a passionate vocal and alternately finessed and fervid guitar work.

Equally delightful are covers of "Chump Man Blues" by Blind Blake, "2:19" by Tom Waits, and...here's one you wouldn't have expected, "Tower Ff Song" by Leonard Cohen, in which Yakopic morphs from Cohen's pensive mood to lively and jaunty.

Yakopic's own half dozen songs are worthy compositions, giving room for his acoustic fretwork proficiency and also sporting clever lyrics and a welcome dose of humor, as in "When It All Goes Wrong": "When I woke up..my throat was pretty sore/ And my teeth were falling out/Couch was in the yard, right next to the car/The car was on fire...My mama always told me/Carry a scissors when you run/So you'll always be ready for/When It all goes wrong at once."

It's a rousing finale to an engaging and well-crafted live set.

– Dan Stevens



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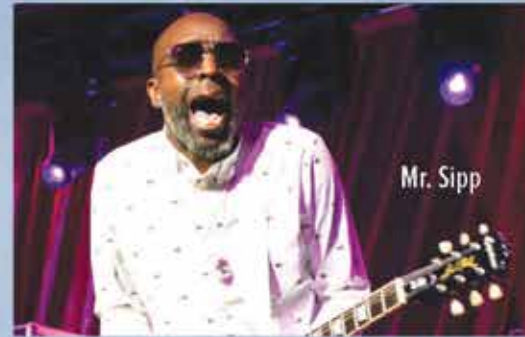
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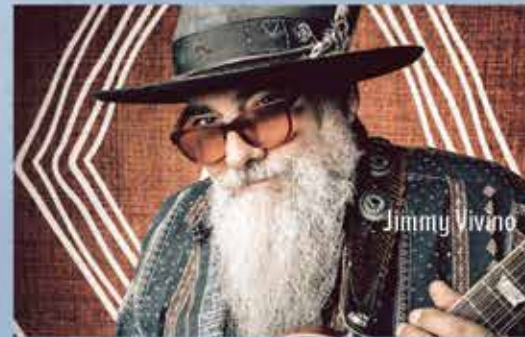
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**Album Review Originally**  
**Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine***  
**Fall 2023 Print Edition**  
**Released October 2023**

**COCO MONTOYA**  
***Writing On The Wall***  
 Alligator Records



Coco Montoya has made blues his life. His latest album, *Writing On The Wall*, showcases one of the most explosive and dynamic recordings he's ever recorded. Montoya's been a solo act for over 30 years, and it's been four years since his last release. His playing, singing, and songwriting are a testament to that axiom. And that's saying a lot, in regard to the ten all-stellar albums he's released previously.

Although starting out as a drummer, he was mentored for a decade and a half in the bands of Hall-of-Famers, Texas' Albert Collins and Brit John Mayall. Both of those venerable musicians encouraged him to branch out and start his own career.

In 1995, Montoya recorded his first solo album. His current one is his sixth album for Alligator, the venerable, top-of-the-world blues label. Montoya brought his backing band with him to the studio, along with a few good friends, and the familiarity of them to each other makes for a truly cohesive wonder of an album.

Recorded in Southern California and produced by Grammy and Blues Music Award-winning drummer and songwriter Tony Braunagel, and co-produced by Jeff Paris, the 13-tracks grab Montoya's affinity for securing perfect blues and pop/soul songs.

The opening number "I Was Wrong" presents Montoya's extraordinary lead guitar work and powerful, heartfelt singing in a four-minute blister-popping gem. Lonnie Mack wrote the heart-breaking "Stop" and the lefty-guitarist Montoya utilizes his more than accomplished slow-swagger to put the song over with an aching familiarity that all of us have known, feeling a love at its rock-bottom depth.

The album's upbeat title cut plenishes a New Orleans feel, and distills in one song all that's vital about Montoya's superb playing and vocal delivery. Montoya effectively delivers the upbeat "Late Last Night," a tune he wrote with his talented band-member, multi-keyboardist, and guitarist Paris. A particularly strong cut, and one of the strongest on the album, is "The Three Kings And Me," a slow blues that Montoya absolutely nails. The solo is as strong as any on the album. It's a Christmas lament, hall of fame holiday song for sure.

Throughout the CD, his electrifying solos move easily from rip 'em up burners to lovely and majestic slow blues. Equally, his powerful vocal prowess continues to expand and push the genres' no limits future.

Montoya has called this album one of the "best he's ever recorded" and that he was "over the moon" with the results. Fans of Montoya's long career won't argue. It's a thorough pleasure and listening to it will provide the happiest kick in the head you've ever had.

– Joseph Jordan

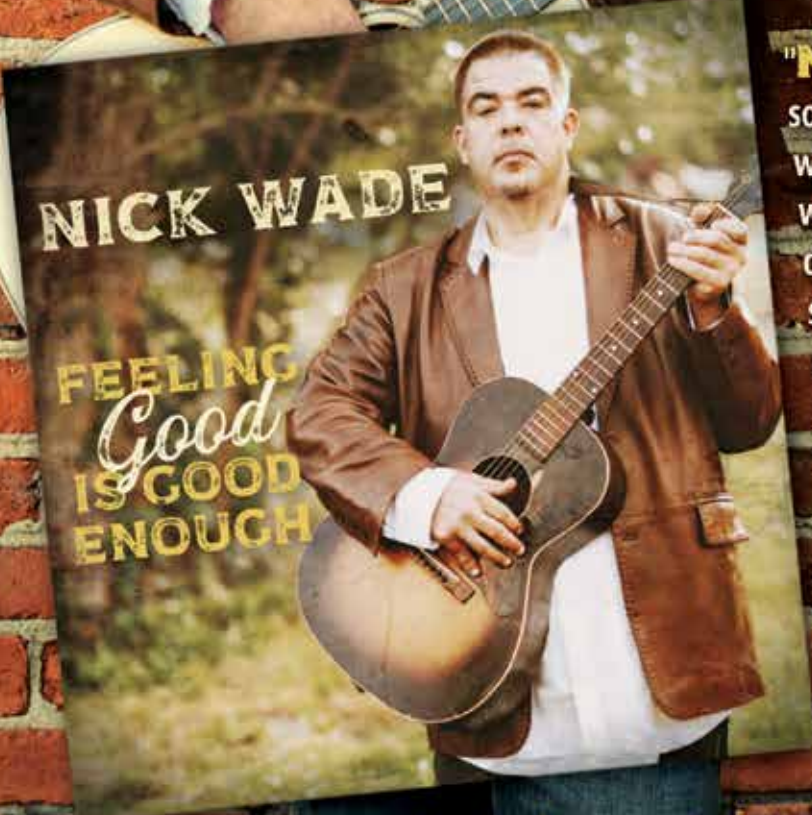
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# New from **NICK WADE**

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**"NICK WADE** is a young cat with an old sound. You hear it not just in his guitar playing, which is definitely expert, but in his voice which is real, true and deeply appealing. The old acoustic blues feels good in his hands and sounds great on his tongue. I really dig the way he tunes his gitfiddle down low, so he can find all of the lowdown grit and bendy notes. If I had to describe his musical delivery in one phrase, it would be "rich and organic". To misquote Woody Guthrie, Nick has "reborned" himself. His love of the old dust-covered black blues is genuine and authentic. Keep your eyes and ears on this cat." - *Guy Davis*

**"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*

## Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Fall 2023 Print Edition Released October 2023

**CHRISTONE "KINGFISH" INGRAM**  
*Live In London*  
Alligator Records



**G**ive the people what they want: a blisteringly live album. But heaven help that poor amplifier of his in the process.

So, on a late-spring London night in 2023, a Mississippi heatwave of scorching proportion stormed into the famed UK club, The Garage. For £30, patrons got pinned to the walls of the packed house as Christone "Kingfish" Ingram attempted to melt the bandstand with his telltale purple, humbucking Telecaster. It was an hour and 45-minute set to remember.

And, gratefully, tape was rolling the entire time.

*Live In London*, his third album, contributes significantly to the young Mississippian's discography: Strategically, it's the first long-play document of Ingram's onstage powers. Because if you thought 2019's Grammy-nominated eponymous debut and 2021's Grammy-winning 662 turn heads, then experience the whiplash from Kingfish having slipped the studio's leash. The opening bolt into "She Calls Me Kingfish" instantly begins the tortured string-bending, well before the first verse arrives, doubling the overall length in doing so.

And, literally, that's only the very start of the benefits reaped from being *Live*: 16 more extra-vibrant tracks follow. With bassist Paul Rogers, drummer Christopher Black, and keyboardist Deshawn Alexander feeding Ingram incentive for soloing, "Long Distance Woman" and "Fresh Out" are among those also gaining new power to stretch out more. The two-ton intro to "Outside Of This Town" ramps up to five tons, also gaining a far fiercer, nastier bite. "Hard Times" morphs from its unplugged prototype on *Kingfish* into an amped-out firebreather with funk swagger. Plus, two new originals get officially unveiled: "Midnight Heat," an even thicker essay in wah-wah-funk, and the instrumental "Mississippi Night," ten magnificent minutes of alternately smoldering and incinerating notes that will exhaust every air guitarist ripping right alongside.

But Ingram, being wise beyond his 24 years, knows how to titrate adrenaline. That goes for both within a song as well as across the whole evening. For all the inherent intensity, tension does get released ... momentarily. Even "662" has its moment of settling down, bookended by bouts of roaring. The setlist likewise fans out to include solo, acoustic time ("Something In The Dirt"), tuneful joy ("Listen"), and slow-jam premonitions ("You're Already Gone"). Consider those instances the eye-of-the-storm. Because ferocious fretsmanship can idle for only so long.

That said, no sooner does "Empty Promises," a revival of the late Michael Burks' lament, strike. Ingram's soulful, granite voice sings the pain; his guitar strings amplify that emotion, rocketing out a series of maximum-burn moonshots with every flick of the wrist.

No, not even 4,000 miles of land and sea away from Kingfish's Delta home in Clarksdale could temper the burn caught *Live In London*.

- *Dennis Rozanski*

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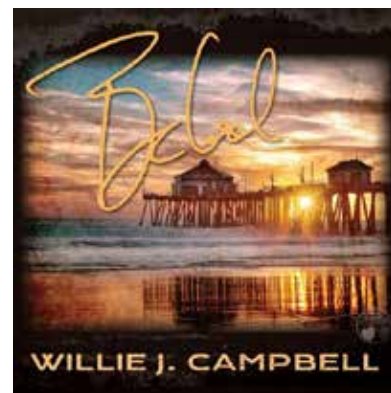
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**WILLIE J. CAMPBELL**

*Be Cool*  
Blue Heart



Willie J. Campbell was known for the company he kept. Since the 1980s, his bass had graced the work of bands such as the James Harman Band, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, The Mannish Boys The Proven Ones, and dozens of ad-hoc gigs and recording sessions.

His playing was steady and trustworthy and comforting. His groove was always designed to add dimension to the songs and, frankly, to make them better. He was an inspiration and everyone knew that. There was always a lot of love and respect when his name was mentioned. And, he would be the last one to mention that he was nominated for six times for

best bass player at the Blues Music Awards and 19 others times for works he contributed to.

And, sadly, WAS is the fateful word. Campbell died in December 2022 after a fearless battle with ALS, the debilitating nerve disorder. Even after his diagnosis, he plodded ahead, but his demise was swift and unnerving.

*Be Cool* is his crowning legacy, Campbell, aided by some the high-profile musicians he supported through the years, wanted to control his own musical path for once, instead of interpreting someone else's work.

He handpicked the songs, and reached out to find the best possible supporting cast. The album features Kim Wilson, Janiva Magness, David Hidalgo, Kid Ramos, Jimi Bott, Joe Louis Walker, Anson Funderburgh, Sugaray Rayford, Jason Ricci and Mike Morgan among others.

The 15-song album ranges from smoldering slow blues to greasy blues to rollicking guitars to swinging grooves to some Rolling Stones-styled rave-ups. Produced by Campbell, Ramos, and singer Brian Templeton, each tune is purposeful and striking.

But there is also a heartbeat of humanity in these songs. Campbell understood the vicissitudes and challenges of the music business and how it conflicted at times with his family life. For a while he stepped back from music, returned to school and became a therapist, tying together heart and spirit as a way of helping people have more understanding of their lives.

Most of these songs were recorded just a couple of months before Campbell passed, and one was finished just a week before. But they are filled with love and humanity, the traits that Campbell always exuded in his music and personal life.

– Michael Kinsman

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MAN HAT TONE

# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Fall 2023 Print Edition Released October 2023

## MONSTER MIKE WELCH

### *Nothing But Time*

Gulf Coast Records



Take a talented blues guitarist who cut his teeth in Boston, a vastly underrated hotbed of great talent that gets overlooked by the genre's emphasis on New Orleans, Chicago, and Memphis. Put him together with producer Kid Andersen whose Greaseland studio's magic mojo turns everything he touches into memorable product. (He plays organ throughout.) Then, release the record on Mike Zito's Gulf Coast label, fast becoming THE hot label with new music by Jason Ricci, Popa Chubby, and The Blood Brothers, and you have a triple crown winner.

Monster Mike is a Covid long haul survivor that took him out of the game for 18 months, but he is the textbook example of an artist who will not give up even under terrible circumstances. I've interviewed scores of blues artists in the last three years, and to a person they have come away from the pandemic generally re-invigorated and universally pumped up to higher levels of appreciation for what they do.

Add to that the loss of vocalist Mike Ledbetter, who died from epilepsy in 2019, and you have a product that's an amazing testament of a former child prodigy and a welcome addition to a discography that includes six albums under his own name and recordings with Shemekia Copeland, Ronnie Earl, Danielle Nicole, Duke Robillard, Johnny Winter, Victor Wainwright, Nick Moss, the Mannish Boys, Sugar Ray and the Bluetones, and Sugaray Rayford.

On this release he is supported by two-time Grammy winner bassist Jerry Jemmott (Aretha Franklin, King Curtis, Gregg Allman, B.B. King), pianist Bob Welch (no relation), drummer Fabrice Bessouat, and numerous horn players. The titles of some of his originals alone are an indication of his grappling with bumps in the road: "Losing Every Battle," "I've Got Nothing But Time," "I Ain't Sayin'," "In Case You Care," and "Hard To Get Along With." "Afraid Of My Own Tears, Parts 1 & 2," running at 8:44, is the tour de force of the album, a virtual blues symphony.

He steps outside his contemporary comfort zone on an acoustic guitar run on "If I Had Possession Over Judgement Day" by Robert Johnson and goes electric on Johnson's "Kind Hearted Woman." He produces a decidedly modern blues version of the Beatles' "I Me Mine" by George Harrison and proves that The Fab Four were great writers, but we all know that. "Ten Years Ago" by Buddy Guy is a stretch as far as adding anything new, but I may be prejudiced on this one since I wrote Buddy's biography.

*Nothing But Time* runs 60 minutes with 14 cuts that are a primer for blues that's the right a blend of traditional styles and contemporary muscle flexing.

– Don Wilcock

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**D.K. HARRELL**  
*The Right Man*  
Little Village



Though the title of D.K. Harrell's debut CD is ostensibly about a love's choice of one over the other, it more likely suggests that Harrell is **The Right Man** for the blues of 2023. Harrell stands tall as another young African-American male who has eschewed the popular culture's fascination with Hip-Hop in lieu of the blues. And like those who proceed him – Christone “Kingfish” Ingram, Jontavious Willis, Dylan Triplett – Harrell rises from the Southern dirt that long ago fertilized the genre's birth. Like the aforementioned talents, his 25 years are filled with an intensive study of the elders essential in the genre's growth.

The mark of Harrell's importance is in the record label and musicians that are in this DEBUT recording. The album began with his meeting with Little Village founder Jim Pugh on the January 2023 Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise. From there, Pugh added the Little Village core recording studio, Greaseland, and its producing wizard, Kid Andersen. When Harrell was asked whom he preferred to man the rhythm section, Harrell answered, “Tony Coleman (drums) and Jerry Jemmott (bass).” For context, Coleman was B.B. King's drummer for 30 years and Jemmott was the bassist when King recorded “The Thrill Is Gone” in 1968.

That's the historical depth Harrell wanted, and that's exactly where the album begins. The opening track is 100% B.B. circa 1950s. “The Right Man” features the mature musical conversation between Harrell's stinging B.B. vibrato answered by Pugh's massive B-3 and the prodigious brass section. Because B.B. is such a huge influence on Harrell, there are other songs that honor his musical legacy. “Honey Ain't So Sweet,” “You'd Be Amazed,” “One For The Road,” where he introduces the all-star studio musicians, “Hello Trouble,” which is a nod to John Lewis' inspiring call to “good trouble,” and the orchestral string-heavy “Get These Blues Outta Me,” which recalls the strings from B.B.'s “The Thrill Is Gone” breakthrough and comes with a Bobby “Blue” Bland vocal delivery.

But Harrell's 11 originals show that he's no one trick, blues pony. “You're A Queen” shows off the soul stylings of Little Johnny Taylor, “Leave It At The Door” comes from the Albert King, Stax era, “While I'm Young” puts Harrell's delicate and expressive tenor center stage, “Not Here For A Long Time” comes in two parts. Part 1 is funk-a-licious while Part 2 continues the funk with a Greaseland soul stew attitude (Fittingly, Jemmott was the bassist on King Curtis' seminal “Memphis Soul Stew.”).

There are few albums released as blues that live up to that heavy promise. With his traditional musical approach wrapped around his contemporary lyrical images, D.K. Harrell has thrown himself onto the blues stage as one to closely watch. To me, this is the 2024 Debut Album of the Year.

– Art Tipaldi

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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Fall 2023 Print Edition Released October 2023

## BOB CORRITORE AND FRIENDS

### *Somebody Put Bad Luck On Me*

VizzTone



Bob Corritore has a lot of friends. Seems like he can round up enough of 'em to put out an album about every two weeks. For his latest, *Somebody Put Bad Luck On Me*, Corritore has enlisted a lineup of stellar musical friends with enough drawing power to fill a stadium. Guest instrumentalists and vocalists including Bobby Rush, Lurrie Bell, Carl Weathersby, Kid Ramos, Francine Reed, Diunna Greenleaf, Billy Flynn, Johnny Rawls, Bob Margolin, Wes Starr, and Sugaray Rayford demonstrate their prowess on a slam bang 16 track collection of hard core blues from sessions Corritore recorded from 2019-2023.

This thing starts out with a wallop and keeps ringing the bell all the way through. Corritore blasts away like James Cotton at full throttle on "This Little Voice," reuniting with frequent partner guitarist/vocalist John Primer (Willie Dixon, Magic Slim, Muddy Waters) slinging a bucket load of Magic Slim licks around while Muddying up the joint with his tonsils. Thornetta Davis displays her Shemekia Copeland sisterhood sound-a-like blast furnace vocal bombast on "I Need A Whole Lotta Lovin'" and "Remember Me."

Everywhere you turn in this virtual juke joint, somebody's trying to kick the door down or bust out a few windows. "Tough Enough" is not the tune The Fabulous Thunderbirds shuffled away on, but a fast paced rocker helmed by Jimi "Prime Time" Smith with echoes of Wilbert Harrison on his '62 hit "Let's Work Together," with Corritore's harp squealing like a man caught in a bear trap.

Bobby Rush brings things down to a slow boil on "I'm Good As Gone," Chester Thompson's organ burbling churchily behind Rush's crusty rendering of a lover brush-off. Francine Reed took some time off from her vocal duties with Lyle Lovett's Big Band to take the lead on the gospel-tinged "Draw Me Closer," gliding across the aisle and out the door to lay down some mellow, healing soul. Chicago-based guitarist/vocalist Carl Weathersby shows off some of the Albert King licks in his repertoire, knocking out a wicked low-down shuffle on "Stranded" with Corritore howling mournfully at his heels.

Even though his output is prodigious, Corritore keeps unearthing fresh treasures from his vaults that stand the test of time, keeping the blues tradition alive with respect and dedication.

– Grant Britt

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**E.G. KIGHT**  
*Sticks & Strings*  
Blue South Records



After E.G. Kight's lovely 2021 *The Trio Sessions*, she has fortunately brought the band back together by headlining *Sticks & Strings* with Gary Porter (Sticks) on drums, percussion and adept harp and Ken Wynn (Strings) on lead guitar and Dobro. Kight completes this ten song CD with her songwriting, beloved Taylor guitar, and "Georgia Songbird" vocals.

This seamless recording demonstrates both this trio's comfort and synergy in making their music. As an added bonus, Sean Williams offers up occasional bass and Kight's mother, Miram, adds harmony vocals to her song, "God, Goats and Guitars," which is Kight's signature saying. Kight has a very appealing voice that often ends her phrases with a slight but delicious understated warble. Mom Miram has that same vocal inflection, but she had it first.

Listening to *Sticks & Strings* over and over, love seems to be in the air or not. Opening with "Talk To Me" she is encouraging better communication in a relationship. "If You Have No Reservations" has the great anticipatory line, "If you have no reservations, how about making one with me?" Metered in a slow and sultry jazzy style, Wynn's guitar just snaps out these suggestive lines. Gregg Allman's "Come And Go Blues" is a precisely finger picked tune opening with "People say that you're no good but I wouldn't cut you loose, baby, if I could..."

Co-written with Nanette Alexander, the two ladies have penned "My baby's hiding something, I can see it in his eyes. My baby's hiding something. I can hear it in his lies," to open their "My Baby's Hidin' Something." The best way to describe this guy would be "what a putz!"

This is Kight's ninth recording and *Sticks & Strings* is just as pleasurable after multiple listenings as on the first. Her crack musicians also often offer properly punctuated background vocals to emphasize certain phrasings. The last two songs, "Changes Coming Down" and "I Won't Ever Give Up" are both introspective with Kight revealing her thoughts about the future.

Favorite cut was "I Won't Ever Give Up" with Kight's self revelatory lines, "The way I was raised, I learned to hold my head up high. I never ceased to be amazed how good things come when I try. Ohh oh, I'm not Superwoman, but I'm tough!" Carving out her niche in a competitive musical world is tough indeed yet there is an underlying tenderness and joy to her songs and singing that make Kight a most compelling listen. Adding *Sticks & Strings* to your musical library may induce you to leaving the rest of your CDs on the shelf for a while!

— Pete Sardon

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**Album Review Originally  
Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine*  
Fall 2023 Print Edition  
Released October 2023**

**LISA BIALES**  
**At Christmas**  
Big Song Music



**WE NEEDED SOME RELIEF!!!** July was the hottest month on Earth EVER! Phoenix suffered through more than 30 days with temperatures over 110°. A national weather map was mostly fire red. The world needed some cooling. So just when the air conditioners were about to explode, Lisa Biales sent me the blast of frigid air I needed, a Christmas album in July!

Biales and her main workshop elves, Tony Braunagel (drums and producer), Johnny Lee Schell (guitars), Jeff Paris (keyboards), Joe Sublet (sax), and the horns of Jerry Vivino, Garrett Smith, and Mark Pinder, have assembled nine originals and one cover that celebrate the joys of every winter season. The lone cover is Biales' take on Louis Prima's 1951 wild "Shake Hands With Santa Claus." If your dad was like mine, you heard this yuletide tune over and over. Pass the scungilli, ring-a-ding-ding!

At the center of every song are Biales' vocalizations. There is a comforting glow to her articulations. With years of studying the nuances of her voice and focusing on the music that best suits it, Biales shows whatever emotion her song requires. She understands how to sing, not scream, lyrics with a delicacy that transforms and connects her emotions.

Biales' originals borrow many themes and images from the holiday season. If you wanna play Xmas bingo, search your song card for fireplaces, mangers, trees, snowflakes, fruit cake, mistletoe, eggnog, brandy, and Rudolph.

Once you finish holiday bingo, there are some unique takes on traditional holiday songs. Schell's "That's What I Like About Christmas" centers more on red beans and rice and an enchilada plate to share with his love; Biales celebrates her dog "Lulu Magoo" sneakin' to eat the plate of cookies left unguarded (anyone with a dog knows this!); she also sings of the anticipation of recording this record on the aptly titled "Christmas Record"; and she offers a sisterly nod to Mary and family on "Mary's Little Baby Boy."

Other tunes, "At Christmas," "When The Snowflakes Fly," "The Boy I Met For Christmas," "I Like You Mister Claus," and "Christmas Cheer" all wrap the lyrics around the comfort of sharing tender love in the warmth of the season.

So instead of the usual holiday music bombardment (which starts in early October) with the same tunes in the air everywhere we go, let Biales and her mischievous elves shake up that musical Xmas tedium in an exciting way.

— Art Tipaldi

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Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine*  
Fall 2023 Print Edition  
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**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.

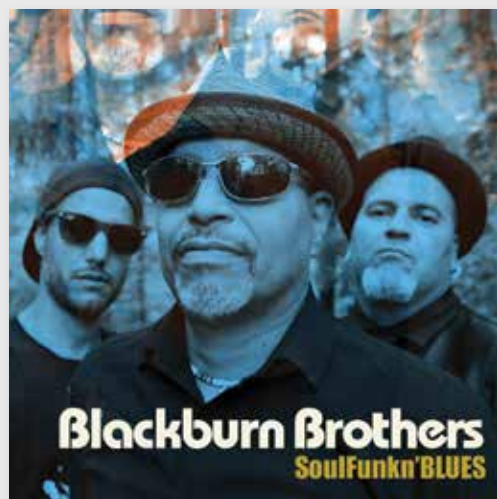
As he prepares to tour with his band, the Rocket 88s, in support of *Friends Along The Way*, this package should stimulate interest. Good timing, good release, good melodies, good tunes, good performances, good music. Highly recommended.

– M.E. Travaglini

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**MIKE GULDIN**  
*The Franklin Sessions*  
 Blue Heart Records



Although Mike Guldin's band, Rollin' & Tumblin', has been together for over two decades, they went almost 15 years between releases. During that time they toured extensively and honed their symbiotic relationship. Returning to the studio, they have released *The Franklin Sessions*, their third album in the last five years, and a quick successor to 2022's "Tumblin'."

Guldin and company are in fine form as they cruise through this energetic set of 11 tunes. Four of the songs were recorded with a top-notch ensemble of Tennessee session musicians, led by renowned keyboard maven Kevin McKendree, whose son Yates variously plies drums and guitars. The remainder of the set is with Guldin's long-time bandmates Billy Wear (drums), Tim Hooper (keyboards), and Bill Sharrow (bass guitar, and co-production), who comprise Rollin' & Tumblin'.

Three of the most interesting tracks are its cover versions. "Killin' Floor," by Chester Arthur Burnett, aka Howlin' Wolf, has been covered by myriad performers; two of my favorite versions are by the Electric Flag and Cafe R&B. Guldin's take on it is goosed by the dual keyboards of Hooper (organ) and McKendree (piano), with which Guldin's gruff vocal and stinging single note guitar lead fit well. McKendree adeptly switches to organ on Muddy Waters's "Blow Wind Blow." The third cover is the closing track, the hoary "Divin' Duck Blues" by Sleepy John Estes. This version is spicier than Taj Mahal's well-known take and showcases Hooper on organ and guest Mikey Junior producing animated harmonica fills.

The other eight tracks are Guldin originals. As is typical of most albums, this one begins with an upbeat number, "The Franklin Shuffle," and it is an infectious earworm that kept burbling through my brain for a week after I heard it. "The Right Thing," a gospel blues outing with clever lyrics, starts with Guldin singing a cappella with the McCrary Sisters trio, and Guldin puts out one of his nicest guitar solos. In "Prisoner Of Love" Guldin enters soul blues territory, enhanced by a skilled four person horn section.

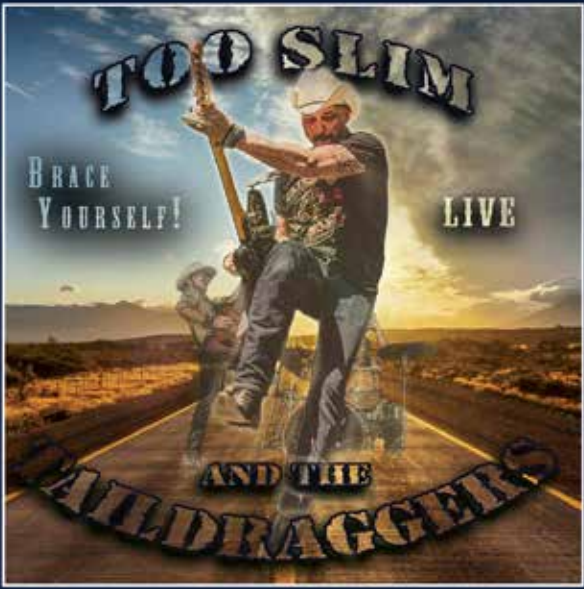
The remaining numbers mine the shuffle groove in which Guldin excels, whether with the session crew or his own band. Guldin and cohorts are on a hot streak; expect to hear more soon and to be pleased.

– Dan Stevens

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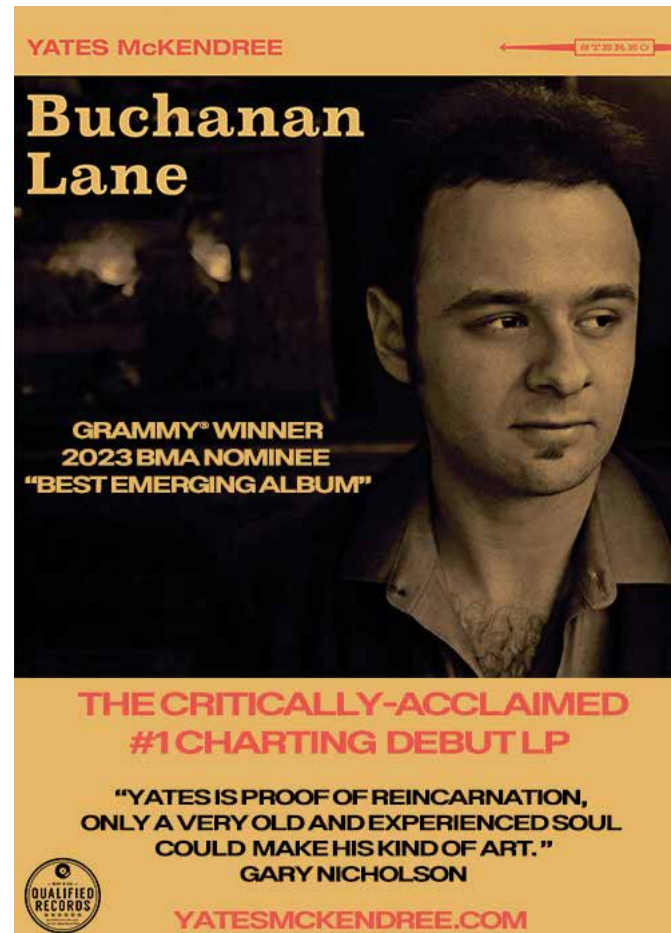
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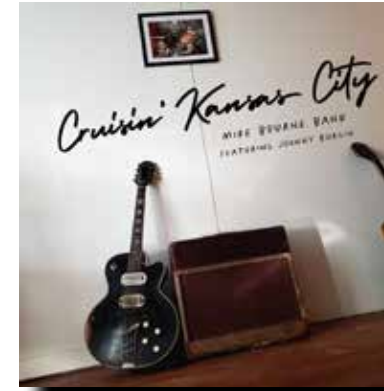
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**MIKE BOURNE BAND**  
*Cruisin' Kansas City*  
Blue Heart



Mike Bourne got a fairly late start for a musician, not picking up the guitar until age 22. But a few years later, he was already playing professionally. On *Cruisin' Kansas City*, the guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter pays tribute to his Missouri home and the players who inspired and nurtured him along the way in the city's 18th and Vine District.

Over 13 originals, Bourne and the band he assembled for this album power through a collection of songs rooted in tradition, but strikingly original. Sure, these grooves might sound familiar, but Bourne's unique lyrical bent elevates them beyond the tried and true.

The disc kicks off with the title track, an instrumental shuffle featuring guitarist Johnny Burgin, who gets a “featured” billing on the CD cover. It's a great way to kick off an hour's worth of music that comes off like a bar band's great first set. “Lose Your Rings Keep Your Fingers” is as much fun as the title suggests. Bourne bemoans losing all his money and possessions but is encouraged by his dad to appreciate what he has left – like all the fingers needed to make a living (playing guitar, we presume.) The track rides on Dave Creighton's organ work and is punctuated by saxophone in the intro by Sam Treinen.

On “Humpty Dumpty,” Bourne recasts the story of the ill-fated nursery rhyme character as a hipster celebrity who succumbs to the temptations of drugs and alcohol. “All the king's men couldn't party like Humpty did,” Bourne sings. Bourne takes a more serious, heartfelt tone on “Help Somebody,” a soulful track and testament to lending a hand when you can with no expectation of the favor ever being returned. Treinen's sax also features prominently in this one, which ends with a surprise gospel-style church that speeds up the tempo.

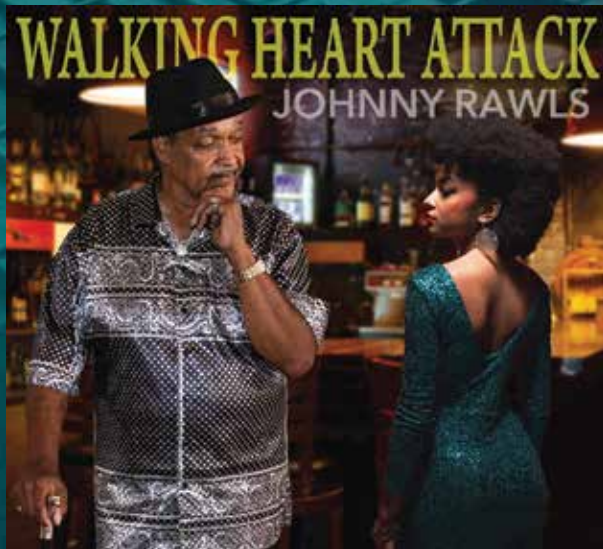
“Hollow Man,” featuring John Paul Drum on harmonica, pays tribute to Muddy Waters, echoing “Can't Be Satisfied.” Adam Hagerman's drumming features more prominently in the mix than the skins ever did in those old Chess tracks. Other highlights include the upbeat Chuck Berry-styled “Missouri Boy,” Bourne's tribute to his home state, and album closer, “Kansas City Grease,” which features Big D Ericson on harmonica and Robert W. “Bob” Lorenz on drums, two musicians now dearly departed. The slice of late night blues featuring pianist Johnny Iguana trading licks with Bourne, whose soloing is still fired up as the song quickly fades and ends abruptly, perhaps a nod to his late great friends.

– Michael Cote

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**JOEL ASTLEY**  
*Seattle To Greaseland*  
Blue Heart



Singer/songwriter/harmonica player Joel Astley has been active in the Pacific Northwest since 2014. He picked the best studio to record his auspicious debut. Co-producer Kid Andersen plays guitars and keyboards and is joined by guitarist Johnny Burgin, Charlie Musselwhite's esteemed rhythm section of drummer June Core and bassist Randy Bermudes, and backing vocalists Jill Dineen and Marina Crouse on this set of 11 eclectic originals.

This is not a straight blues harmonica album although the blues influence is prevalent. Astley is also influenced by rockabilly, swamp soul, jazz, Southern rock, and funk. His overall style often reminded me of the Blasters. The album opens with "Born Cryin'," a swampy existential jeremiad reminiscent of Tony Joe White and Eddie Hinton and concludes with the upbeat gospel-tinged country blues of "No Brighter Gold" with Sonny Terry-styled harp.

There are two cover worthy tunes for rockabilly artists: the wry "Just Right" with Astley proclaiming "I ain't happy unless I'm in misery. When the going gets rough it's just right for me" and the rollicking panegyric about a sexy woman "Hot As Hell," a latter day "Red Hot." The organ infused shuffle "Candy Shop" bemoans his woman's insatiable sweet tooth and features muscular harp in the manner of William Clarke. The stop time shuffle "Work With What You Got" playfully urges the listener to make the most of their brain and physical attractiveness limitations.

Chromatic harp is at the forefront of "Takin' It With Me," a swinging jazz shuffle with surging organ about leaving nothing behind when he dies. The funky "Secondhand Kid" bemoans his childhood and adult status of never being first. The strutting Southern rocker "Down To The Rims" about living life to the extremes is propelled by Andersen's scintillating electric piano. The thumping "Bobby's Place" evokes Little Walter's "Mellow Down Easy." And the moody mid-tempo blues "Karma Wheel" about the eventuality of paying for one's sins is a potential song of the year candidate.

Astley is a confident, no nonsense vocalist and a formidable harpist adept at various styles befitting the particular nature of the song; however, he doesn't blow harp on every tune. Astley's clever lyrics are comparable to Rick Estrin and James Harman and like them he is a genuine triple threat artist. Additionally, there is ample guitar solo space for both Andersen and Burgin. *Seattle To Greaseland* is one of the best debuts of 2023 and the best West Coast harmonica debut since Big Harp George's *Chromaticism* from 2014.

– Thomas J. Cullen III

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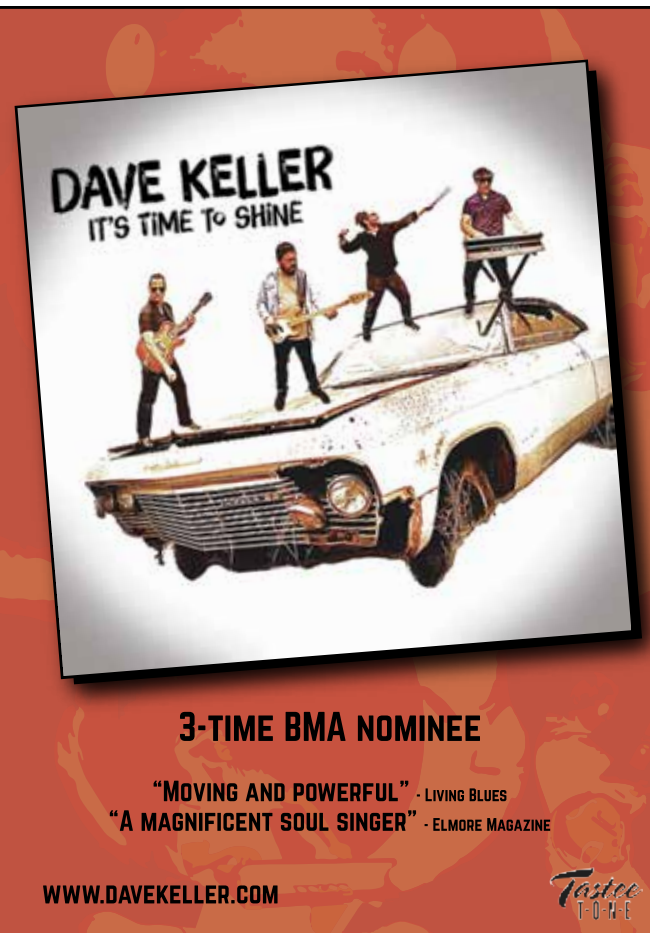
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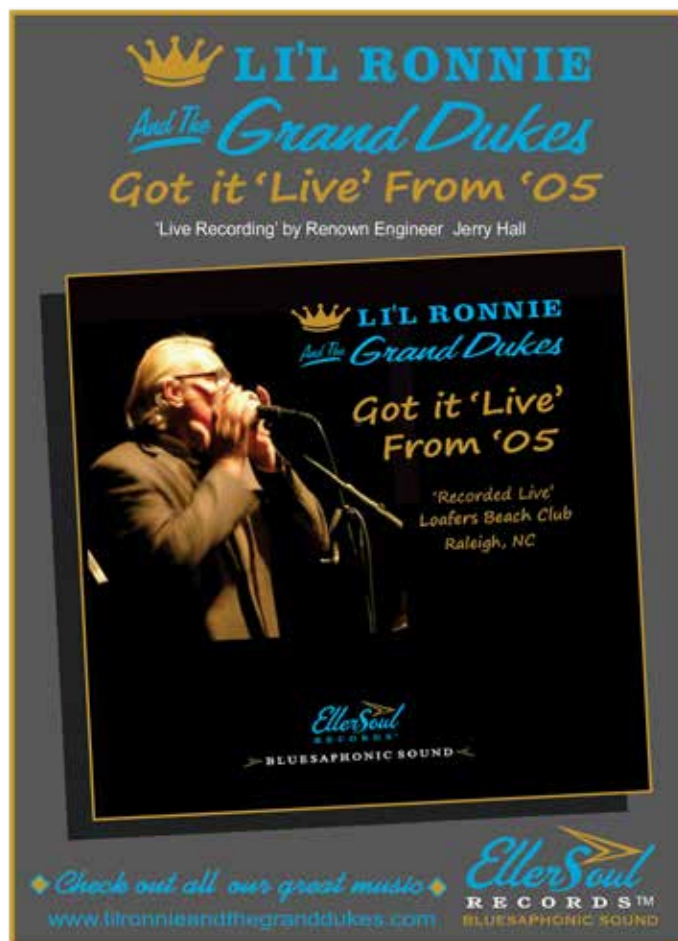
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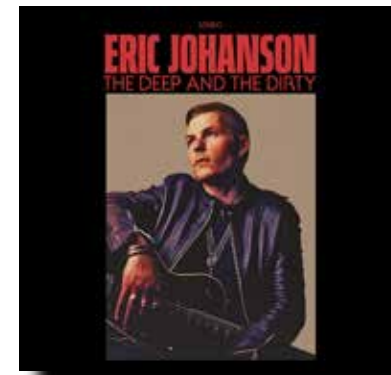
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# Album Review Originally Appeared In *Blues Music Magazine* Fall 2023 Print Edition Released October 2023

**ERIC JOHANSON**  
*The Deep And The Dirty*  
Ruf Records



According to its promo material, *The Deep And The Dirty* is a reference to the American South. Johanson was born and lives in Louisiana. Previously, I'd only encountered Johanson as a sideman or sitting in. Every time I did, he nearly set the stage on fire. He's one of the most talented lead guitar slingers I've ever heard, with impressive prowess using a slide too.

On this set, he may have tried too hard to push all the buttons, and he admits it's somewhat of a departure. A more intellectual analysis is required, but generally this album focuses more on the songwriting and less on the lead guitar.

That doesn't make it bad, not by a long shot. But you may need to dial down your hardcore blues mindset to fully appreciate what's going on here.

Using my microscope, so I could read the one-point liner credits, I learned that Johanson wrote all 12 of the tracks on this 48-minute presentation. Seven were co-written by Jesse Dayton, legendary Texas guitar songwriter/sideman (Willie, Waylon, Johnny Cash). He's now recording and touring with Samantha Fish. He produced this album too. Johanson's band is a traditional blues-rock trio with highly respected sidemen Eric Vogel on bass and Terence Higgins on drums. This compilation was recorded live in studio.

Johanson says none of his solos were written beforehand. Those solos are worth the price of admission, though there are too few of them, and they're shorter than I would have liked. One of the best examples of Johanson's gifted riffing is on the tune "Galaxy Girl." Its lyrics, unlike the excellent songwriting generally, are sort of throwaway and K-Popish, but the extended guitar solo is fantastic. Two of the best tunes are "Don't Hold Back" and the title track, both of which are hard rockers that envision romantic hookups. Johanson's impeccable slide work is out front on the Delta-style "Familiar Sound" while the band's raw power is represented on two other rockers, "Undertow" and "Stepping Stone." "Elysian Fields" is a nifty Louisiana-style swamp/funk boogie about heading out to find some action (romantic or otherwise) along the famous NOLA avenue (and maybe at Washington Square). There are three engaging love songs about seeking and/or finding romance, including "Beyond The Sky," "Gets Me High," and "She Is The Song." Johanson admits his ephemeral existence on "Borrowed Time."

It may take a couple listenings, but give it a chance and I think you'll end up liking this diverse collection.

– Dan D. Harrell



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