

THE

# GROOVE

THE BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER  
OF CROSSROADS BLUES SOCIETY



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MAY - JUNE 2024 EDITION



**Magic Slim & John Primer — Slow Blues**

Wolf Records  
www.wolfrec.com  
16 songs/103 minutes



Welcome to rock bottom. Where the intensity of life's problems reaches such critical levels as to prohibit brisk or upbeat tempos that could alleviate the gravity of the situation. Down here, the mood sinks like a sack of hammers. Minor keys are mandated. And speeds shift between slow, slower yet, and sludge. Plus, heartaches and headaches just sound so much better when inching beneath the howl of commiserating guitars.

Yet, just as extreme pressure and heat compress carbon into diamonds, so can the streets of South Side Chicago turn daily stresses into treasure likewise worthy of being housed in a jewel case: two discs' worth of *Slow Blues*. Here, the extreme pressure and heat come at the combined hands of Magic Slim and John Primer, backed by assorted iterations of the rhythm-obsessed Teardrops and later, Primer's splinter group, the Real Deal Blues Band. They are bruisers either way, maintaining low centers of gravity akin to a Mack truck or a Sherman tank. Once set into motion, there is little chance of halting.

That becomes overpoweringly clear as "You Put It on Me" enters the room first, announcing itself with a massive rumble welling up and spiraling off Slim's guitar. Instantly, that baits everyone else in: Primer's second guitar and Nick Holt's bass step heavy while Earl Howell's cymbal crashes smack exclamation points for extra emphasis. At one point, Slim defiantly repeats a single, stabbing note over and over, ratcheting up the strain, refusing to relent as seconds upon seconds tick by before eventually releasing the tension. B.B. King performed this very song with a light, twinkling swing for a 1968 single; 24 years later, Slim drove those same verses as a thundering, back-alley bulldozer.

Fifteen more fantastically disgruntled sagas follow, working both ends of the spectrum—an overabundance of woe to a shortage of sex—as strung between "Please Don't Dog Me" and "I Wonder Who (Who's Gonna Be Your Sweet Man)." Over the course of this nearly-two-hour decathlon, Slim and Primer alternate guitar leads as well as who owns the microphone across a series of studio and live performances between 1986-2020. Within that span, the Magic Man's heart gave out at age 75, in 2013. Primer never let up—and now 79, still shows no signs of doing so.

Each headliner—whether teamed up or split apart—is readily distinguishable. Primer is the one often reiterating the emotive capacity of slide guitar, whether extendedly bellyaching "Take the Bitter with the Sweet" or throwing crazed fits alongside Billy Branch's harp during "Country Boy," a throwback to John's days with Muddy Waters in the early 1980s. The sarcasm in "1839

Blues"—an old Elmore James tune built off the tagline of "I ain't seen my baby since 1839"—affords him a moment to come up for air and sneer before diving back down into the undiluted "She's Too Much," which gets that bottleneck wagging away once again. For Slim, "When I Met My Baby" vies with "So Easy to Love You" as his best-kept secret. Despite being stricken with creeping paralysis, both shake violently with the vibrato he physically wrings out from the neck of his Jazzmaster guitar, shivering and trembling notes for dear life. It's a trademark move within his portfolio of ways to stress licks until they buckle.

The collection's many bandstand recordings especially free up the two guitarists to go long with their solos. "Just to Be With You," one of the never-heard tracks rescued from the vaults, stretches and stretches. Still, Otis Rush's "Double Trouble" weighs in as the epic: one long, long Primer solo, bookended by lyrics seeking a sliver of heart in a heartless world, that refuses to vacate a Viennese stage for nine minutes.

Tack on the razor-toting "Bad Avenue" plus "Hard Luck Blues," whose churn can bring a tear to a glass eye, and *Slow Blues* becomes one of those great albums to get plastered to whenever the weight of the world hits.

Reviewed by Dennis Rozanski



Jeff Schroedl at the Spring Fling 4/20/24  
Photo Rick Davis

