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Blues Lounge: Ladies bring on the blues

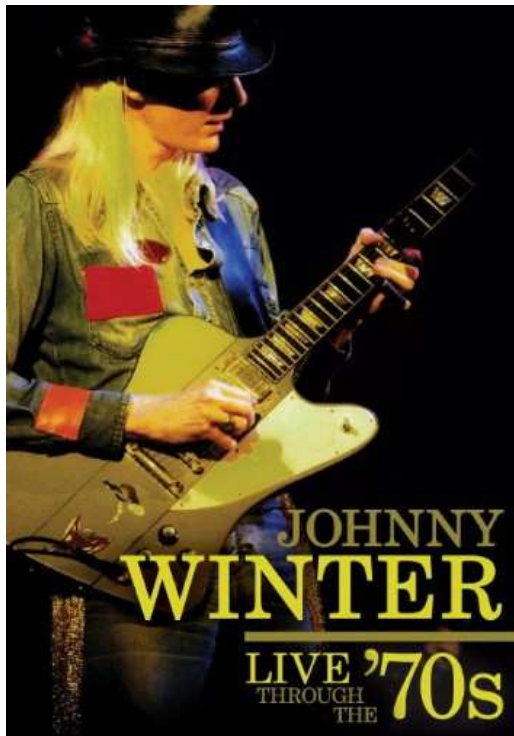
January 09, 2009
 by Bruce Sylvester

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Albert Cummings. Photo: Joseph Schuyler/Blind Pig Records.

For blues fans, MVD Visual offers Johnny Winter's "Live Through The '70s" (111 minutes), Johnny Guitar Watson's "Live In Concert" (155 minutes) and Long John Baldry's "It Ain't Easy" (50 minutes).

The best of the lot, Winter's provides blistering Texas blues rock: 15 songs in eight settings — some loaded with closeups — plus a hit-or-miss interview.

It's fun to note the '70s' shifts in rock star garb. Watson's DVD, filmed at 1993's North Sea Jazz Festival, presents him as a funkster more than as a guitarist. Not until the bonus features (one in German) does he unleash his formidable piano skills. He clearly was a champ at working an audience.

Baldry, a guiding light in Britain's '60s blues revival, appears in a Chicago-blues-tinged 1987 Iowa State University show with power-lunged Kathi McDonald contrasting to his seasoned, low-key delivery. Baldry's DVD offers the least-imaginative camera work.

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Among Acrobat Records' debut reissue CDs in the U.S. are B.B. King And His Orchestra Live, Howlin Wolf's Rockin' The Blues: Live In Germany 1964 and Ike & Tina Turner's Sing The Blues. On King's 1983 set, songs like Memphis Slim's "Everyday I Have The Blues" show the blues' refined side.

As for Wolf, Sun Records' Sam Phillips (his first producer) said his voice evoked "where the soul of man never dies." Here he enjoys an all-star Chicago backup (Willie Dixon, Sunnyland Slim, Hubert Sumlin), but the audio leaves much to be desired.

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Svengali Ike and primal Tina Turner's 18-song, 56-minute reissue excerpts two 1969 Blue Thumb LPs, *Outta Season* and the lesser *The Hunter*, as they charge into Robert Johnson, T-Bone Walker and Jimmy Reed songs. By the way, the Turners' 25-song *Nutbush City Limits/Feel Good* (Raven) combines two 1972-73 United Artists LPs onto a 78-minute CD with effective British Invasion covers and their wall-of-sound signature song, "River Deep, Mountain High."

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Beyoncé delivers a svelte interpretation of Etta James' "At Last," while Mos Def and Jeffrey Wright get by covering Chuck Berry and Muddy Waters, respectively, on the soundtrack to the Chess Records biopic "Cadillac Records" (Music World Music/Columbia).

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Better yet, the brightly remastered 16-song *The Best Of Chess Records* (Chess/Geffen/Universal) presents the originals as Polish immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess' studio captured rural southern blues moving to Chicago and birthing rock and roll.

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Hardly a cradle of the blues, Massachusetts nevertheless has produced Susan Tedeschi and Albert Cummings. Supple-voiced Tedeschi's *Back To The River* (Verve) brings in big guns — like husband Derek Trucks — but the writing is hers and *River* is a scorcher. "Talking About" evokes Janis Joplin's sound.

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Meanwhile, eclectic Cummings' tight trio's rousing live *Feel So Good* (Blind Pig) even drops guitar riffs from Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit In The Sky" into a Muddy Waters/Lowell George medley.

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Ry Cooder's metier seems to be taking a song from one indigenous genre and performing it in another — with varying degrees of success. Take the mariachi Christmas carol riffs on the thematic opener, a cover of Johnny Cash's "Get Rhythm," on his eccentric 34-song, two-CD 1970-2008 anthology *The UFO Has Landed* (Rhino).

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For class, there's similarly unclassifiable *To Be Free: The Nina Simone Story* (RCA/Legacy), a superbly annotated box of 51 1957-93 songs.

Artistically unpredictable, Simone could segue from Screamin' Jay Hawkins to Jacques Brel material. Controversial "Mississippi Goddam" embodies her fearless passion. Accompanying the box's three CDs, a 23-minute DVD intersperses interviews and music.

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Simone, Josh White, Billie Holiday, Bob Dylan, The Neville Brothers and Chuck D. are among 58 acts on genre-jumping three-CD *Let Freedom Sing: The Music Of The Civil Rights Movement* (Time Life). It's variously intense, quiet, in your face and even, on occasion, funny. Gospel-grounded Aretha Franklin encapsulates its message by shouting "Respect."

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A previously unissued 1974 session, aging singer/guitarist Sleepy John Estes' rustic *On Highway 80* (Delmark) with harp man Hammie Nixon is so informal that it sounds like rural Tennessee porch music.

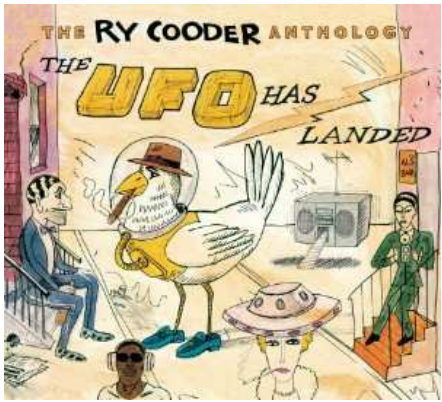
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Rory Block believes the blues transcends gender — thus her acoustic *Blues Walkin' Like A Man: A Tribute To Son House* (Stony Plain), Mississippi Delta-bred *House* (1902-88) having been a hero of the '60s blues revival. Block's sharp bottleneck guitar work blends well with her husky vocals. John Sebastian lends soulful harp notes.

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Finally, from the bookshelf, scholarly Ted Gioia's sleuth-like "Delta Blues" (W.W. Norton) reaches from so-called father of the blues W.C. Handy's opportunism to the dynamics of Skip James' recordings. Gioia also probes Robert Johnson's mythology.

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Susan Tedeschi. Photo: Pieter Van Hatten/Shore Fire Media.



Rory Block. Photo: Sergio Kurhajec.

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