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## Music DVD Review: *America's Music Legacy: Blues*

- Jack Goodstein

The *America's Music Legacy: Blues* DVD is another entry in a series that aims to document the broad variety of styles and genres that have defined the country's contribution to the music of the world. Like others dealing with soul music and rock and roll, this DVD's main focus is the music. Others I've reviewed have been presented in a concert format; *Blues* is shot on a small stage in a nightclub setting. The audience, more than likely actors, is seated at tables and dressed in what look like costumes. The staged format lacks the kind of lively spontaneity that concert audiences usually provide. Even when performers get the audience up on its feet, the reaction seems choreographed.

This is unfortunate, because while the artificial situation does affect some of the performers, there are some really exciting performances on view, and a little legitimate audience reaction would have amped the energy.

The show, hosted by Brock Peters, is divided into two parts, although both follow a similar format. They start with a film clip or a black-and-white still of a classic blues artist with some commentary, and follow that with a performance by a modern musician. They open, for example, with a short clip of the legendary Bessie Smith singing "St. Louis Blues" in a bar, which morphs into a contemporary performance by Linda Hopkins. There are short clips of Billie Holiday, Count Basie, and Jimmy Rushing, but they provide little more than a taste of what these artists were like. Together with one or two snippets of interviews with the show's performers, this gives the show something of a faux-documentary feel that is really unnecessary. The music when done honestly stands well on its own. While one or two of the performances come across as artificially mannered, the ones that aim at simplicity and sincerity are those that are most effective.

The first half of the show belongs to B. B. King and Linda Hopkins. Hopkins has a voice that exudes the richness of brandy, and King is an old-school showman. Their duet on "Every Day I Have the Blues" is a remarkable bit of blues improvisation. Other artists in this part of the show include a somewhat stagey Leata Galloway doing a sultry version on "Fine and Mellow," Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson with a comical blues take on his shiny bald pate and some nice alto sax work, and Pee Wee Crayton playing some sweet blues guitar. This first part culminates in a stage filled with all the performers in "Jammin' the Blues."

The second part is headlined by Joe Williams of Count Basie fame. While he doesn't sing his best known "Every Day I Have the Blues," he's still got the mellow charm that made it a hit. He is joined by a lively Esther Phillips who does a down-and-dirty "Cherry Red," Brownie McGee with a laid-back "Life Is a Gamble," and some truly exciting piano jazz by Dorothy Donigan. Paula Kelly slithers and slinks her way through "Ain't Nobody's Business." Williams and Phillips end the show with an improvisatory duet on "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

All the performers are accompanied by a remarkably talented five-piece combo. Gerald Wiggins leads the group and plays the piano. Andy Simpkins is on bass and Teddy Edwards on drums. Paul Humphrey does some nice solo work on the saxophone and Harry "Sweets" Edison is brilliant on the trumpet.

One strange thing: there is a performance on the DVD by a blues singer-guitarist named Addie. However, she is not mentioned on the track listings on the back of DVD case or in the biographies and track listing on the DVD.

As with others in the series, the quality of the picture leaves something to be desired, but since the show dates from the eighties, it is probably as good as one could expect. Recorded in Dolby Stereo, the sound quality, which is after all the important thing, is fine. The DVD runs close to two hours. It has prose biographies of all the performers and an individual track listing.

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