

VARIOUS

Blues Kings of Baton Rouge
BEAR FAMILY (2 CDS)

When nothing less than gutbucket will do, the foremost *Blues Kings of Baton Rouge* deliver a mudslide of lowdown melancholy majesty. Their reign over Louisiana—the land behind the sun (Muddy’s words)—peaked from the mid-1950s through the budding-1970s. It’s from here this limited-edition two-CD set (and 52-page booklet) does its dredging.

Unlike nearby New Orleans, Baton Rouge wasn’t throwing funky, syncopated parties with their blues. This was muck-and-mire habitat—rhythmically as much as emotionally—through which the preferred mode of transport is slogging at a pace of either slow or sludge.

So, the bad news is that life has gone to pot. Having someone named Lonesome Sundown deliver “My Home Is a Prison” certainly doesn’t bode well for having a nice day.

The good news is that this kingly gathering could make calamity sound like a million bucks. Lightning Slim’s voice alone is the sound of the swamp hitting the fan. Then pile on the sparse but heavily mentholated backing of guitar, bass, drums and harmonica, and the bumper anthems “Winter Time Blues” and “Bad Luck” were born. Slim Harpo, the other kingpin, likewise hypnotizes by grinding in first gear. With rats and roaches as roommates, Silas Hogan’s “Trouble at Home Blues” oozed right along, too. Still, nobody does misery better

than Robert Pete Williams. The alumnus of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola was a poor soul with an acoustic guitar and miles upon miles of loneliness. He’s brilliantly crippling on the bottlenecked elegy “Goodbye Slim Harpo.”

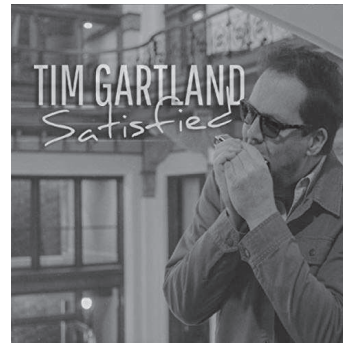
Certainly the region’s principal stylistic architect was J.D. Miller, whose Excello label became the gold standard of “swamp blues,” cornering the market on stark, dank, echoey churnings. But pursuant with a policy of leave-no-stone-unturned, Bear Family also raided the coffers of such labels as Folk Lyric, Ahura Mazda, Zynn, Flyright, Montel, and Peacock for the full Baton Rouge experience.

Jackpot! By searching outside of the swamp, patriarchs Tabby Thomas (father of Chris Thomas King) and Raful Neal (Kenny’s dad) are heard. Off in the backcountry, rural guitar grinders (Clarence Edwards) and pumpers (Smoky Babe) get rustled up, along with fiddler Butch Cage and guitarist Willie B. Thomas shaking the shed for a slice of “Jelly Roll.”

Don’t worry, though, the *Kings’* crowned jewels are housed here: “I’m a King Bee,” “Rooster Blues,” “Dark Clouds Rollin’,” “Rainin’ In My Heart,” Lazy Lester’s rockabillyish “I’m a Lover Not a Fighter.” But the surprises are just as valuable. Like Moses Smith slurping out “Baton Rouge Breakdown,” a two-and-a-half-minute harp solo, or the throbbing “Blues Hang-Over” had by Slim Harpo. Although none of the 53 tracks approach anywhere close to a level resembling lushness, Herman Johnson, Isaiah Chattman and then Arthur Kelley each scale back operations all the more to the utmost basics: electrified-guitar soliloquies. The Nitehawks’ “Boogie Chillun” is an even rarer, raucous find.

Blues Kings of Baton Rouge sinks so deep into the gutbucket that a snorkel comes in handy for the 2.5-hour dive to the bottom.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



TIM GARTLAND

Satisfied
TASTE GOOD

Can he play harp? Let’s put it this way, Tim Gartland wrote the book, literally: *The Talking Harmonica: Harmonica As a Second Language*, which is already on its fourth edition. As for references, Jerry Portnoy served as mentor, with additional big name brands (Bo Diddley, Carey Bell, Pinetop Perkins) providing on-the-job training.

Surprisingly though, the arsenal of harps that Gartland blows—chromatic, 10- and 12-hole diatonic, bass—is not what first turns heads; it’s that bottom-of-the-basement voice of his. Nor is *Satisfied* a blowfest intended to showcase harp chops stressed to the max. But rather his fourth solo album is an evenly balanced, complete portrait of Gartland’s capacities in the art of the song. Songwriting, singing, and instrumental skills all figure into the big picture.

With a likable, cool command, his baritone seeps through “Blues For Free,” before lightheartedly shrugging off bungees and parachutes in favor of a more laidback “Satisfied” lifestyle. Even when “Drinking for Two” hustles the pace as well as the hurt, Gartland is never in a hurry himself, slinging his chocolate croon around curves like a Nashvillian Elvis. His ties to Music City indeed rub off on these 10 originals, with assist from Kevin McKendree’s rich, smooth production. So much so that Gartland’s majestically heartbroken crawl through “Artifacts,” set off by glassy slide-guitar sweeps and pillowy organ swells, would no doubt guzzle quarters by the handful if living inside a honky-tonk jukebox.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



THE JEWELL GOSPEL TRIO

Many Little Angels in the Band
GOSPEL FRIEND

Ernie’s Record Mart was where it went down that winter of 1956. To be precise: in a small studio perched above the Nashville storefront on 179 Third Avenue North. As the February winds did their best outside, so did the hometown Jewell Gospel Trio, inside. “Somebody’s Knocking at Your Door” heated up the room with a beehive of voices and a modest yet cooking rhythm section. But when “I Looked Down the Line and I Wondered” received the “go” signal, those little singing angels held nothing back, hitting with all their fervent might. The first minute and a half boiled before giving way to holy hollering, stoked by Sederia Boles’ shattering lead. Their raw power overwhelmed the microphones.

The Jewells returned to that second story in 1957. And then again in 1958, as well. During those sessions, Canzietta Staton (future soul/disco diva, Candi Staton) grabbed the reins over “Sin Is to Blame,” an arresting piece of dramatic smoldering. On the other hand, Boles, electrified by the Holy Ghost and Deacon Jones’ similarly hyper guitar licks, incited spiritual liftoff with “Ease My Troublin’ Mind.”

Those three years upstairs at Ernie’s weren’t the only recording dates, however. In 1953, a gospel caravan lit out for Los Angeles, where Aladdin Records—home to spiritualists (Soul Stirrers) as well as secularists (Wynonie Harris)—commissioned “At the Cross” with sacred-steel ace Lorenzo Harrison lending a woozy hand. In ’55 came “Many Little Angels in the Band,” their