

Various Artists - Mean Street (2011)

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Compilation albums are a hallowed part of the blues tradition, not only in the form of single artist anthologies (after all, those beloved early Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf albums, to name but a couple, were just compilations of early singles), but also as multi-artist collections. Because so many bluesmen-and-women recorded whenever possible for anybody that would put up a handful of cash (contractual obligations aside), there are a lot of performances by some well-known artists that have floated around a shady blues underground marketplace, appearing on a number of rapidly out-of-print album releases before disappearing again into the night.



Catbone Music's Mean Street
Photo courtesy Catbone Music

Mean Street is one of a series of five blues music comps released by Catbone Music and distributed by MVD Audio. Catbone's Ken Hatley told me that all the songs on the five albums are licensed and legit, and I believe him, and the label has taken great care to re-master the original recordings used on these albums to achieve the best sound quality possible. While I don't believe that there's anything truly previously unreleased here – European blues labels have been mining gold from these scraps for decades with fly-by-night compilations – each of the five Catbone titles has something of merit for the diehard fan and newcomer alike.

Jukin Wit De Blues: Mean Street

You can never go wrong with the mighty [Howlin' Wolf](#), and *Mean Street* opens with the Wolf's "Before I Commit A Crime" (a/k/a "I'm Leaving You," also as "Commit A Crime"), which is an early 1950s wail of anguish. As the Wolf blasts out his tale of woe, guitarist Willie Johnson (I'm guessing – it could be [Hubert Sumlin](#)) invents heavy metal with tough-as-nails lead guitar distorted and amplified in a manner unbecoming of the era, but it's a heck of a lot of fun! One of dozens of versions of [Elmore James'](#) classic "Dust My Broom" is another welcome obscurity, this one featuring James' familiar cut-and-slash slide-guitar styling alongside some manic honky-tonk piano-bashing, every instrument (and the vocals) sunk in an echoed quicksand that oddly enhances the performance.

An early 1950s [Little Richard](#) track, "Money Honey" displays the singer's wild-man persona and raucous piano-play years before he would become a caricature of himself. Here he cuts loose with a ragged-but-right performance with rollicking vocals, fiery piano-pounding, and somebody's trebly, tasty fretwork in the background. Chicago bluesman Jimmy Reed is one of those integral building-blocks of the modern, urbane blues sound and while he's often overlooked by fans, he's revered by musicians who have covered his considerable songbook seven ways to Sunday. Reed's "Take Out Some Insurance" is an easy-flowing mid-tempo blues tune with boogie-woogie undertones, and some fine, fine guitarwork. "I Goin' Upside Your Head" is more up-tempo, with a slight shuffle rhythm, and features Reed's soulful vocals and lively, electrifying guitar playing.

Michael Bloomfield, Etta James, James Cotton & John Lee Hooker

Mean Street includes a number of obscure tracks from some of the masters of the blues. [James Cotton's](#) "V8 Ford Blues" is an excellent example, a smoldering blues bonfire that features Cotton's troubled vocals and crying harpwork, an unnamed guitarist playing rightfully alongside the singer's voice, effectively doubling the emotional impact. Cotton's "Dealin' With The Devil" is even stronger, a vintage performance with squalls of thunder (Cotton's harp) and lightning (the fluid fretwork) laid down beneath Cotton's heartbreak vocals. [Muddy Waters'](#) "Standin Around Crying" is another slab of vintage hot-wax, 1950s-era Chicago blues with chiming guitar, swaying rhythms, and Waters' hearty vocals accompanied by blasts of ([Little Walter's](#)?) icy harp.

Singer [Etta James](#) has always been able to wring every bit of emotion from a lyric, and this live take on "It Brings A Tear" displays the R&B great at the top of her game. With heartbroken anguish, James shouts and cries the lyrics above a sparse soundtrack that consists mostly of shards of wiry guitar and a few cymbal brushes. It's a great performance from one of the finest singers in blues and R&B. [Michael Bloomfield](#) wasn't a great singer, but he was a heck of a guitarist, and his take on the blues standard "Don't Lie To Me" puts those instrumental talents on full display, providing the song with an entirely different dimension.

Evicted From Mean Street

While *Mean Street* offers up a number of rare tracks, much like its companion volume *Saturday Night In Shankletown*, there are some performances that should have been evicted from the street before the CD was burned and boxed. Obscure roots-rocker Barry Darnell's "Deacon Stomp" is just embarrassing, with Darnell's gruff vocals a grotesque mimicry of the great Howlin' Wolf, the song's harp grating on the ears in its attempt to ape Little

Walter and James Cotton. Little Richard's take on "Hound Dog" has its moments, but they're few and far between – definitely not one of the rock 'n' roll legend's best takes – while the Peter Frampton and Nanette Workman collaboration that worked so well on *Shankletown* falls flat here. "Love Taker" is a hard-edged blues-rock dirge in the same vein as Free, but without the saving graces of Paul Rodgers' leathery vocals or Paul Kossoff's switchblade guitar.

Overall, however, the mix of material here works pretty well. Any of the four [James Cotton](#) tracks fly pretty high, but "Southside Boogie" may be the most fun. Above a jaunty boogie rhythm, Cotton's mad harmonica soars like no one since DeFord Bailey lit up the Grand Ole Opry stage in 1929, a few tossed-off vocal phrases disappearing amidst a flurry of razor-sharp harp riffs. [John Lee Hooker](#)'s powerful, hypnotic "Rock With Me" closes out *Mean Street*, the song's manic boogie soundtrack matched by the singer's sonorous vocals, which strangle the lyrics like an out-of-control kudzu vine.

The Reverend's Bottom Line

I'm grading *Mean Street* a half-star above its companion disc, *Saturday Night In Shankletown*, the former providing a slightly more houserockin' selection of songs from blues legends like Howlin' Wolf, Elmore James, Muddy Waters, and James Cotton, among others, with fewer fumbles such as those I've mentioned above. While I would have liked comprehensive liner notes with credits, as well as sourcing on the individual songs – all of which is sorely lacking – this information may not have been entirely available to Catbone.

Although it's unlikely that there's much in the vaults from any of the aforementioned blues legends that hasn't been previously released *somewhere* on CD, this Catbone Music comp does offer versions of classic blues tunes that you'd be hard-pressed to find elsewhere. While the hardcore collector probably already owns a lot of these songs, *Mean Street* offers a fine introduction for the blues newbie, or for the casual blues fan to check out some great music in easy-to-digest form. (Catbone Music/MVD Audio, released October 11, 2011)

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