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Blues CD Reviews: "Saturday Night in Shankletown" and "Mean Streets"

Saturday Night in Shankletown

and

Mean Streets (Catbone Records)

By Brian Arsenault

About the time the sax solo began on James Cotton's slow song of pain from lost love, "Jelly Jelly," I decided I really like this CD. I was already pretty much there from the bouncing Billy Boy Arnold "El Dorado," a roadhouse dance tune that defies you to sit still. Not to mention Muddy's "40 Days and 40 Nights" where that voice signs on as distinctively as always.

Saturday Night in Shankletown is like that all the way through with only a couple curious bumps. (George Cummings? Really?) It's nearly an hour of unreleased or rare blues and rhythm and blues recordings. *Mean Streets* is three minutes longer for a full hour of this good stuff.



I'm tempted to say that Cotton steals the show in *Saturday Night in Shankletown* because "Jelly Jelly" is followed a couple tunes later by "Diggin My Potatoes," demonstrating how much music a voice, an acoustic guitar and a harmonica can provide. Early bluesmen often had little

else and Cotton, a much later artist, demonstrates that superbly.

Such a judgment would of course ignore Muddy Waters' rendition of "Rock Me" which provided the basis some of the best Led Zeppelin work ever. There are a lot of links to the future of rock on this CD and its companion "Mean Streets" and three other CDs (hallelujah!) that Catbone Records has just released.

It seemed to me that Peter Frampton was an odd choice for inclusion in *Saturday Night in Shankletown* until I heard his tune with Nanette Workman, "Loving Cup." The song beautifully shows the passageway between American (mostly black) blues and r&b artists and the British kids who listened to them and reenergized rock 'n roll.

Similarly, I found the inclusion of The Commodores initially a surprise. As it turns out, "I Know I'm Losing You" is a musical and thematic link to Sam & Dave and the Four Tops. I'm tempted to say it demonstrates the "progression" or "evolution" of rhythm and blues but both words imply improvement. I don't mean better I mean responsive to its era; to electronic music, faster cars, faster times.

If the CD doesn't literally save the best for last, we are all the way to cut 13 before we catch that slow hand style, that deeper than deep voice of Howlin' Wolf doing "Goin' Down Slow." As he sings "I had my fun if I never get well no more" you can't but hope to be able to say the same whenever the goin' down comes. And the guitar. It's like it's played in a concrete building — a small club or a working garage, know what I mean? A sound you don't often hear any more.



If you have to wait a while for The Wolf on "Saturday Night in Shankletown," he's up first in *Mean Street* with "Before I Commit a Crime." The crime would be not just loving the next tune, "Dust My Broom," by the great, great Elmore James, who was listened to very carefully by The Allman Brothers Band I believe. Next time you listen to Duane Allman's accomplished guitar work, you'll hear the influence.

Little Richard chips in with a couple tunes and reminds us that, for all his flamboyance, his musical roots too are r&b. His "Hound Dog" version here may become your favorite rendition of the song ever. Really.

John Lee Hooker (who else?) closes the hour of *Mean Street* (star billing?) with the seven minute "Rock With Me" to remind us all that this music is as much about soaring pleasure as deep pain.

Want more? Mike Bloomfield, Etta James and Jimmy Reed all contribute.

I wish there was more information about all the sidemen here. Some of it may be lost to history, bu **Follow**

musicians here who played every night for years, sometimes decades, and at their height made virtuosity seem as natural as walking.

Catbone Records is one of the artists here. The care given to quality is significant. Due to the technical limitations when most of this music was recorded and the very real danger of deterioration of master tapes, Ken Hatley and Rob Booth deserve enormous credit for the modestly stated "audio restoration."

I began listening to all this thinking they had enough cuts by some artists to make separate CDs or at least group artists of similar styles. Nah, that's wrong. These CDs kind of bounce you around in no readily apparent order, rather like a 50s-60s radio station that should have been but never was.

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