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Tension & Release: Springing the Blues 2003

Contributed by Brent Simon

Wednesday, 16 February 2005

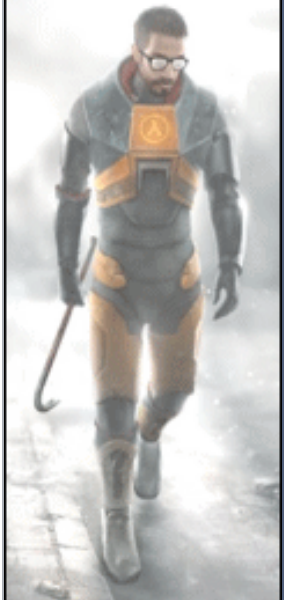


Held annually in Jacksonville Beach, Florida, the Springing the Blues Festival brings together some of the nation's top blues performers for a weeklong celebration of music, and draws upwards of 125,000 fans per year. A concert disc postcard for those unable or unwilling to book a musical road trip down to Florida for themselves, *Tension & Release: Springing the Blues 2003* captures the festival of two years past in all its varied glory, delivering a festive immersion in some fine, under-the-radar musicianship and song-craft.

Any discussion of *Tension & Release: Springing the Blues 2003* should include right off the bat a disclaimer of what it most decidedly isn't. It's not a collection of classic music performances, nor is it a retrospective musical history. It is, rather, a simple and friendly buffet-style sampling of some of the best performances of that year's fest. There are no supplemental extras on this disc to speak of, only "extended bonus performances" (the DVD equivalent of an obligatory encore?), and its appeal may therefore be best characterized as niche and negligible. But, in an intimate conversational style with the men who make the music, we learn how the simple musical label tied inexorably to "12 bars and three chords" drives and informs the lives of its performers, and also how they embrace and reject that simplification of their genre. (Otis Taylor notes that asking for a strict definition of the blues is akin to asking what life is.) Albert Gomes and others explain the classic structure of tension and release (hence the title), and how this well-worn song structure still provides the amazing flexibility they need to open a floodgate of emotions.

Ample primary evidence is then indulged in a track list that includes Jimmy Thackery's take on "The Star Spangled Banner," the Otis Taylor Band's stab at "Resurrection Blues," Deborah Coleman's aptly titled "The Dream," Albert Castiglia's "Hoodoo Man Blues," Michael Burk's "Don't Let it Be a Dream," Mofro's "Lochloosa," the John Hammond Band's "Buzz Fledder John" and two numbers each from Johnnie Marshall and J.J. Grey — "That's Where it's At" and "Statesboro Blues" (for Marshall) and "Higher" and "Seminole Wind" (for Grey). The highlights are probably Coleman's tune and the sublime work of the Otis Taylor Band.

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In total it's around 100 minutes of solid blues cuts, stitched together by director John Hazard. Its packaging is straightforward and non-flashy, and the 5.1 surround sound mix and picture quality are not nearly on par with your average Hollywood movie (this isn't necessarily the release to win over neophyte hearts and minds), but for hardcore, new school blues fans hospitable to an out-of-town guest, *Tension & Release: Springing the Blues 2003* adequately delivers on its title. B (Movie) C (Disc)

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