

to a slow blues groove—a perfect sign-off from a true master of American music.

— Robert H. Cataliotti

JANIVA MAGNESS

Blue Again

Blue Élan / Fathead Records – BER 1045

Janiva Magness knows how to get inside a song, inhabit it and make it her own.

Blue Again showcases Magness' powerful eloquence, as she delivers her interpretations of blues classics from artists as diverse as Etta James, Bo Diddley, Freddie King, Nina Simone, Al Kooper and Joe Hinton. While these versions of the songs are clearly Magness' way of honoring her roots, her treatment of the songs makes them her very own; she honors tradition at the same time she takes the music to a new level, illuminating it and opening it up for us to hear again, as if for the first time.

The album opens with *I Can Tell*, a song most closely associated with Bo Diddley. David "Kid" Ramos propels the song with his simmering, down-and-dirty guitar licks, and Magness' commanding vocals capture the raw power of the song. Magness showcases her gritty vocals and her vocal range on the song, but it's her gift for phrasing that shines through on this track; she knows how to get the most out of a bar of this music. Magness delivers a version of Al Kooper's *I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know* that captures the pathos, passion and hope of the original. Guitarists Zach Zunis and Garrett Deloian weave their slow burning riffs under and around Magness' sultry vocals. Magness' version outshines the original. Her vocals mirror the sex-drenched lyrics on Nina Simone's *Buck* (credited to Simone's husband/manager Andy Stroud); the song captures the tempestuous relationship between two lovers and the hold that they have over each other. Magness displays her vocal prowess on the album's final track, *Pack It Up*, a song most associated with Freddie King, and she delivers a straight-ahead blues shout at the end of the song.

Blue Again demonstrates why Magness is one of our best contemporary blues singers. Her vocal power and range allow her to take on any song; her phrasing and pacing enable her to make the most of the songs she's singing. Her ear for the just-right tune to interpret is impeccable, and her deep acquaintance with the blues allows her to play with a song's structure to find its best sonic skeleton and add flesh to it.

—Henry L. Carrigan Jr.

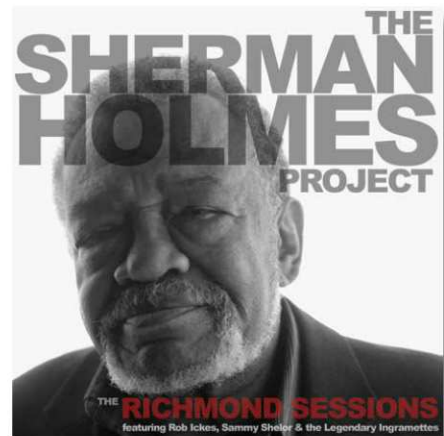
THE SHERMAN HOLMES PROJECT

The Richmond Sessions

M.C. Records – MC-0082

The Holmes Brothers, National Heritage Fellows, have always been genre benders, steeped deep in the wellspring of American roots music, the place where country music meets gospel, meets blues, the very place where rock 'n' roll was born. Now that Sherman Holmes is alone, he carries on that soulful amalgam in his first "solo" record since the Holmes Brothers ended their triumphant and adventurous musical journey following the deaths of his brother Wendell and their longtime partner Popsy Dixon in 2015. **The Richmond Sessions** is dedicated to their memory, and Sherman Holmes is totally in his element. The album is produced by Jon Lohman, Virginia State Folklorist and Director of the Virginia Folklife Program at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, brought in an arsenal of fierce Virginia-based instrumentalists—Grammy-winning Dobro player Rob Ickes and the brilliant banjoist Sammy Shelor, to name a couple. Lohman intrinsically understands Sherman and managed to find the perfect cast for his comeback. Sherman Holmes sings lead vocals and plays bass and keyboard. New York-based singer Joan Osborne, a longtime friend of the Holmes Brothers, joins them on a fiery rendition of Dan Penn's *The Dark End of the Street*. The Ingramettes, a gospel group featuring the Rev. Almeta Ingram-Miller, are a powerful building block of this ensemble, an amazing choir that firmly injects this album with soulful, passionate and heartfelt singing. When Sherman sings *I Want Jesus to Walk With Me* as if it was his last song for eternity, while Rob Ickes' Dobro lets out wailing, sorrowful glissandos, and the Ingramettes sing the Amen choir, it's a magnificently moving moment, a soul-stirring song that will bring tears to a Hells Angel.

Musical delineations into tightly divided genres is a marketing construct. Sherman Holmes does not abide by externally imposed limitations. Nor does Rob Ickes. On this album, his lap steel slide playing is masterfully on target, sensitive, colorful and vibrant, showing that modern acoustic American string music long ago left those restrictions behind. Simply superlative sliding. They get to the heart of Sherman's love for country music on *Lonesome Pines* and then tackle Marvin Gaye's *Don't Do It*. The old Creedence Clearwater Revival hit *Green River* will make John Fogerty proud, and the notes advise that this was the last song



the Holmes Brothers had worked on together. Sammy Shelor and Ickes help on Ben Harper's anguished *Homeless Child* as the fabulous Ingramettes bring us back to church, with Ickes again playing boldly and with clarity.

Sherman Holmes may be 77 years old. He grieved the loss of his brother Wendell and best mate, Popsy. Here he is, energetic, passionate as ever, with the same relentless energy and vibrancy that was the hallmark of the Holmes Brothers. This well-produced album is remarkable on many levels. Sherman Holmes still kicks ass! As he said, "That's my life, man."

—Frank Matheis

ROBERT FINLEY

Age Don't Mean a Thing

Big Legal Mess Records – BLM 0534

Singer-guitarist Robert Finley hails from Bernice, a small town in north-central Louisiana. Upon entering the army in 1970, he found himself in Europe servicing helicopters and playing in a band rather than being shot at in Vietnam. When he returned home to Bernice, however, he was unable to sustain a musical career. He turned to carpentry to earn a living until failing vision prevented him from working and prompted him to pick up his guitar again. In 2015, he came under the umbrella of the Music Maker Relief Foundation, which helped him bring his music to a wider audience and ultimately led to the creation of this splendid new CD on BLM.

Although Finley had been playing as a solo blues act, BLM's Bruce Watson was determined to present him as a soul singer on his first record, and to that end brought him to Memphis and teamed him with a stellar group that included Jimbo Mathus along with Scott Bomar and the Bo-Keys. Watson's

Sherman Holmes

In July, M.C. Records, in collaboration with the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, released **The Richmond Sessions** by the Sherman Holmes Project, featuring the surviving member of the celebrated trio the Holmes Brothers (the cover story of **LB** #237). The members—Sherman and his brother Wendell, and their “spirit brother” Willie “Popsy” Dixon—were Virginia natives who began playing together in New York in 1967. Together they recorded 11 studio albums, toured the world and received multiple awards, including the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship.

Wendell and Popsy both died in 2015, but Sherman Holmes continued performing with his own group. **The Richmond Sessions** was created after Holmes met Jon Lohman, the Virginia State Folklorist, who subsequently put together a studio band including leading bluegrass instrumentalists Sammy Shelor and Rob Ickes, traditional gospel group the Ingramettes and, on *Dark End of the Street*, vocalist Joan Osborne—she had earlier produced the Holmes Brothers and hired them as her band when she toured with Bob Dylan.

We spoke to Holmes shortly before he performed on the West Virginia-based NPR radio show Mountain Stage. He noted that it was the 11th time he’s been on the program, but the first time as a solo artist.

How does it feel to perform and record without Popsy and Wendell?

It’s much different; we spent 40 years together

on the road. And when they died within five months of each other that kind of knocked me for a loop. Popsy died first and we didn’t know he was sick [with bladder cancer]. We had just come home from Europe, and he said he didn’t feel good and he went to the hospital and he never came out. We only had one good conversation before he died. He said, “Sherman, we’re always going to be brothers.”

And my brother, he died that June. He was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, but I didn’t know that he had such a short time to live. He told me that I “was the best brother that a man could ever have.” He died while I was driving to see him and that broke my heart, but that’s the way the world is.

When both of them were sick, I had a couple guys working with me, Eric [Kennedy] on drums and Brooks Long on guitar. I needed to do it, not only for financial reasons, but because we had done it for so long, it’s like a way of life for me. We were best friends; in 40 years I bet we didn’t have more than four of five arguments. We spent more time together than we did with our families. We had a great life. We played in 58 countries and all of the states many times.

The Holmes Brothers were often branded as a “blues” group, but you guys have always been pretty eclectic. I recall that you had Gib Wharton, a pedal steel player, on two of your early records.

We played what we felt like playing. When



PAT JARRETT/THE VIRGINIA FOLKLIFE PROGRAM

Sherman Holmes recording for WXPN’s World Cafe at In Your Ear Studios in Richmond, Virginia, on June 21, 2017.

we were kids, if we didn’t have enough songs, I’d sit at the piano and play classical songs. I majored in clarinet when I went to college, and I didn’t make more than \$6 in my life playing the clarinet. [laughs] We listened to pop music, Top 40, Frank Sinatra and Tony Bennett, we listened to a lot of classical music, and even as kids we’d play cowboys and Indians and we’d play “nightclub.” When we’d go on a gig we’d say, “We’re going to play nightclub tonight.” I miss those guys something awful.

How did you all pick the songs for the new album, which has a country flavor?

Jon [Lohman] came to my house and we talked songs, and I wanted to do *Liza Jane*, *Homeless Child* by Ben Harper, he’s a friend of mine, *Motherless Child* because it was a traditional Negro spiritual; it’s not gospel. *Green River*—I used to listen to those guys [Creedence Clearwater Revival] and a lot of rock ‘n’ roll, and on another CD we did *Bad Moon Rising*.

Jon brought *[Baby] Don’t Do It*—that song was originally on Motown by Marvin Gaye, but also the Band did it. Levon Helm and his daughter [Amy] sang *Rock of Ages* with us on another CD. *White Dove*—I worked with Ralph Stanley before he died. I met him at a festival, but I’d been listening to his music as a child. Growing up I listened to a lot of country. I love Hank Williams, Charlie Rich, Willie Nelson.

I love the CD, I’m amazed. I’ll be 78 in September, so I’m not exactly a youngster.

I want to tour as much as possible, that keeps me going.

— Scott Barretta *LB*

Sherman Holmes at Montrose Recording Studio in Richmond, Virginia, on September 27, 2016.



PAT JARRETT/THE VIRGINIA FOLKLIFE PROGRAM