

BLUES REVIEWS



ERIC BIBB & NORTH COUNTRY FAR WITH DANNY THOMPSON

The Happiest Man in the World
STONY PLAIN

Eric Bibb is now, officially, *The Happiest Man in the World*. Proof beams forth from one of the most glowingly warm sets the 65-year-old calming force has ever beamed. At the risk of spoiling us over some 36 albums now, Bibb's latest is yet another unabashedly gorgeous project of thoughtfully-crafted acoustic grace and soft, melodic demeanor. Fitted with six- and 12-string guitars, banjo, Dobro, fiddle, mandolin, and the lauded standup bass of Danny Thompson (Alexis Korner, Richard Thompson), Bibb and North Country Far possess all the makings for a hoedown. However, nestled in the idyllic English countryside around Norfolk, their unplugged lushness instead dapples sunshine onto winsome love songs. And therein lies the wellspring of all these good vibrations: Bibb's songwriting pen is in love—with love, and eloquently so. “Born to Be Your Man,” the gentlemanly “I’ll Farm for You,” “Wish I Could Hold You Now,” and the blissed-out title track are as openhearted as their titles relay. Even the Kinks’ “You Really Got Me” lyrically swoons amid its (relative) rocking. “Tossin’ An’ Turnin’” and the more existentially agitated “Prison of Time” are the only bumps along an otherwise smooth joyride. Compared to last year’s (nearly) all-covers *Lead Belly’s Gold* tribute, this (nearly) all-original collection is quite the pivot. So cozy is the session, Bibb practically whispers his tales and plucks his instrumentals directly into your enraptured ear.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



OMAR COLEMAN
Live!
DELMARK

Once upon a funky time, Junior Wells was the kingpin of Chicago harp ‘n’ jive. Now, nearly two decades since his passing, it sounds like a new breed of hoo-doo man is in town. Because right around this time last year, Rosa’s Lounge got the funk soundly kicked out of it. The three-night shakedown at 3420 W. Armitage Ave came at the hands of late-blooming Omar Coleman, who’s been making up for lost time with buzz-worthy performances like this *Live!* one, taped hot on the heels of 2015’s *Born & Raised*. For one hour, the 40some-year-old with the tough, tussled voice and the pioneer spirit, issues his statement of identity, confidently doubling down on a personalized interpretation of what his West Side turf should sound like. Sure, Muddy’s “I’m Ready” gets ripped into with gusto. But off in the turbid backwash of funk and soul is where the real payout lies. That’s where the band’s heat from yearning to grow grooves welds Johnnie Taylor’s “Wall to Wall” directly onto Junior’s “Snatch It Back and Hold It.” And where the hip-shake of his own “Sit Down Baby” soulfully morphs into “Jody’s Got Your Girl and Gone.” Fire-fingered guitarist Pete Galanis helps torch “Born and Raised,” another Coleman original, with quite the blowout solo, before quick-picking Junior’s 1957 “Two Headed Woman” with country panache. Even Coleman’s approach to the harmonica deviates from Little Walter dogma so prevalent throughout the city, instead pro-

prietarily blending Wells with Sugar Blue and a tad of Bobby Rush. *Live!* is surely the sound of the funk hitting the Chicago blues fan.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

KENNY “BLUES BOSS” WAYNE

Jumpin’ & Boppin’
STONY PLAIN

Zoot-suited Kenny “Blues Boss” Wayne makes his living the same age-honored way that forerunners like Amos Milburn and Louis Jordan once did: namely, by joyfully jolting the joint. It’s only fitting then that *Jumpin’ & Boppin’*, staying true to its word, would be a funhouse sprint on piano. “I’m Comin’ Home,” “Rock, Rock Little Girl” and the wordless “Boogie to Gloryland” barrel past with the greatest of ease, leaving behind a wake of adrenaline and a cloud of dust. B.B. King’s longtime bassist Russell Jackson extra adds propellant, as does Duke Robillard’s guest guitar. Plus, what a difference horns make, whether booting the roly-poly “Blues Boss Shuffle” or blasting Jordanesque thrust behind “Look Out! There’s a Train Coming.” Calamity doesn’t stand a chance around such effervescence, whose barely retrained energy prevents neither empty-pocketed “Bankrupt Blues” nor extorted “Blackmail Blues” from derailing the prevailing locomotive chug. Yet Wayne’s 72-year-old foot doesn’t always ride the accelerator, laying off to gently give “Blues Stew” the ol’ soft-shoe and to majestically ache Ray Charles’ misty anthem for secret admirers, “You Don’t



Know Me.” Just goes to show that the sign of a real Motorvator is when their blues are as iridescent as their Technicolor wardrobe.

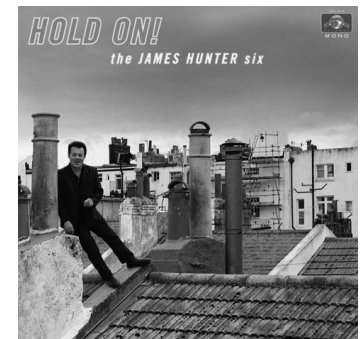
DENNIS ROZANSKI

THE JAMES HUNTER SIX
Hold On!
DAPTONE

As long as *Hold On!* is spinning, it’s still late-1950/early-1960something. That’s because all the valid comparisons to Sam Cooke silk, Jackie Wilson snap and Ray Charles bluster that follow James Hunter explode into the year’s grandest flashback—ideal for twistin’ the night away or instead cocktailin’ it away with a highball in one hand and a Chesterfield in the other.

The album, which mind-melds with Daptone Records’ mantra that old-school soul is just way too cool, studiously pledges allegiance to that transitional period when R&B was just discovering its soul, before succumbing to the funk. Powering the time machine are the vibrant James Hunter Six, who impeccably detail everything from the cha-cha footwork of “This Is Where We Came In” to a hyperventilated “Stranded” with foamy organ washes, wrap-around backdrop harmonies, Hunter’s own overwound reverber guitar, and, of course, horns that continuously pump in oxygen to sustain all this finger-poppin’ action.

Equally wise to the era’s vocal mannerisms, Hunter colors a song’s every nuance with inflected twists, falsetto leaps, and notes that avert gravity’s pull by lin-



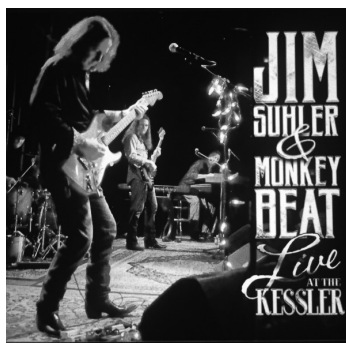
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gering on the tongue. The ultimate adrenaline-squeezer is that shattering soul-scream of his. Although born in 1962 England, Hunter comes off every bit as if he'd instead been swinging the Copa with "If That Don't Tell You" at that time.

True to form, the entire set was masterfully composed from scratch. With Hunter, there are no covers. Never. Ever. Luckily, his heart gets him into enough sorts of jams—be that pleading "(Baby) Hold On" en-route to prison or soaring the equally contagious "A Truer Heart"—to now fill four records. And somehow, Hunter manages to yet again keep topping the retro high attained by each of those three prior highs. To hear *Hold On!* is to be smitten by the epitome of hi-fi coolness. Yeah, the flashback, cut live to 8-track tape, is truly that vivid.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



JIM SUHLER & MONKEY BEAT

Live at the Kessler
UNDERWORLD

And the crowd goes wild! Guitarist Jim Suhler & Monkey Beat are in the house—*Live at the Kessler*—and rocking the blues before an appreciative hometown Dallas crowd. Between the rush of a live performance and the quartet's comfortable familiarity with the intimate room, the evening soars. The unveiling of aptly-named "Reverie" and its hyperenergetic opposite in "Doin' the Best I Can" specially marks the event. But rather than roadtest new material, the band of 25 years instead launches into a tried-and-true "best of," pulling from four of their last five studio albums, circling as far back

as 2001's *Bad Juju* and including *Panther Burn*'s belly-slithering title track from just two years ago. "Po' Lightnin'" and the rootsy ramble to "Texassippi" characteristically spring into life under the whip of Suhler's slide, whereas "Devil in Me" and "Scattergun" prefer exploding into bottlenecked action.

"Across the Brazos" dresses up nicely with a little squeeze of accordion. "Tijuana Bible" embeds its riff even quicker than its dodgy tale. But for onstage transformation, the trophy goes to the formally-acoustic "My Morning Prayer." Newfound electricity and cymbal haze elevate the atmospheric instrumental into cinematic abstraction. Besides all this catchy fun, original songcraft likewise powers the entire show, starting with the spring-loaded shuffle kickoff ("I Declare") and running straight through to the meltdown boogie sendoff ("Restless Soul"). How much of a meltdown boogie sendoff? Just know this: When not anchoring Monkey Beat, Suhler has been the lead hellraiser with George Thorogood & the Destroyers since 1999.

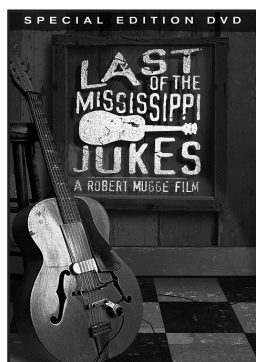
DENNIS ROZANSKI

VARIOUS

Last of the Mississippi Jukes
MVD (DVD)

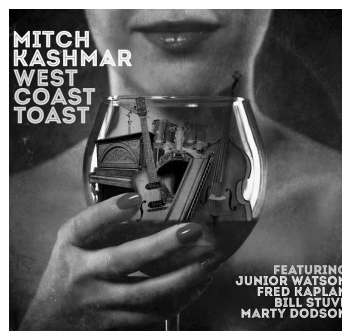
Hunkered down inside a pair of Delta hotspots during that April of 2002, filmmaker Robert Mugge was on another mission to chronicle Mississippi's ragged glory, just as his *Deep Blues* famously did two years earlier. This time, though, the documentary's focus was the *Last of the Mississippi Jukes*, viewed through the eyes of two venues at opposite ends of their lifespan: The Ground Zero Blues Club was a brand-new addition to Clarksdale's blues scene, whereas the Subway Lounge long stood as a landmark blues cavern beneath the equally historic black-owned Summers Hotel in downtown Jackson. Amid plates of deep-fried catfish,

quart bottles of beer, and live performances galore, tales get told by the proprietors (including actor/co-owner Morgan Freeman), the community, historian Dick Waterman, and, of course, the stream of musicians commanding the stage or either letting loose in the backroom. Mugge's cameras



catch Alvin Youngblood Hart putting the stranglehold on "Joe Friday" with a rowdy trio (and a rowdier bottleneck) as well as the Subway's two house bands—King Edward's Blues Band and the more sexy House Rockers—sustaining a long parade of homegrown talent from Pattrice Moncell and nationally-heard Vasti Jackson to the overly prolific songsmith George Jackson ("Down Home Blues" to "Old Time Rock & Roll"). But, like Bobby Rush harping solo on "Garbage Man," guitarist Chris Thomas King similarly rumbles "John Law Burned Down the Liquor Sto'" on his lonesome. However, little did anyone suspect these 86 minutes were safeguarding blues memories by capturing the Subway's unforeseen final days. After its renovation project horrifically failed, only a pile of rubble remained in 2004, infusing *Last of the Mississippi Jukes* with bona fide credence.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



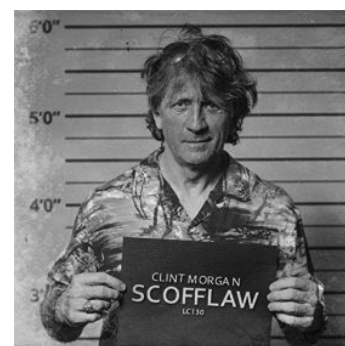
MITCH KASHMAR

West Coast Toast
DELTA GROOVE

Just as are William Clarke, Rod Piazza and Kim Wilson, Mitch Kashmar is also a reed-rattling descendent of George "Harmonica" Smith, father of

California blues harp. That means *West Coast Toast* slugs you with a biding sense of swing and a rampant flair for cool—yet slugs you nonetheless, especially given that Kashmar's chops are so strong as to have played alongside cats named Eddie "Cleanhead" Vinson, Pee Wee Crayton and Jimmy Witherspoon. Now, after waiting a full decade since *Wake Up & Worry*, comes this fresh studio slugging, cut precisely the way blues were intended: live to tape. So the energized highs from fellow harpist Billy Boy Arnold's "Don't Stay Out All Night" and Kashmar's own "East of 82nd Street" instrumental are just as undoctored as the sludgy lows through which "My Lil' Stumptown Shack" alternately slogs. The set keeps slyly blending borrowed old stuff (Sonny Boy Williamson to Lowell Fulson) with original new stuff that sounds like borrowed old stuff. Kashmar's airy lines breezing atop the whoosh of Hammond organ chills the jazzy Toots Thielmans-meets-Jimmy Smith jam of "Canoodlin'" like a meat locker. Yet the hornless quintet isn't above Chicago gutter crawls, dragging "Mood Indica" up and down the Marine Band's full register amid pelting showers of ice-picked piano notes a la Otis Spann. Such a grind actually turns out to be far oilier than "Petroleum Blues," whose highly swinging release prevents any grease from ever much sticking. In other words, precisely as West Coast blues were designed.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



CLINT MORGAN

Scoff Law
LOST CAUSE

Here's to the outlaw, the gangster, the desperado. Clint Morgan—an obviously creative

fellow known for teaching piano at Pinetop Perkins Foundation Workshops—pulled out all the stops to hatch quite the ingenious plan for his second album, *Scoff Law*. With a rogue's gallery racing through his songwriting mind, he imaginatively designed and executed (no pun intended) this fun, yet harrowing, look through the eyes of those who infamously savaged the Old West and the Depression. "I Got a Gun," "I Love Robbing Banks" and "Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair" vouch for the red-eyed, cold-blooded crowd on hand. So, amid a hail of guitars and harmonicas, saxophone and fiddle, stickups get held, safes get blown and folks get plugged. Bowie knives, Colt .44s and getaway Fords enrich the vocabulary of tales inhabited by a literal murderers' row, including Billy the Kid, John Dillinger, Butch Cassidy, and Clyde Barrow (whose mug shots stare back from the thick booklet of liner notes). Covers of Johnny Cash's "Wanted Man" and "Wild One," 1958 rockabilly which Iggy Pop rode up the charts nearly 30 years later, get perfectly heisted. The jailhouse also fills up with originals as equally ominous as "Waco" or as flip as "A Sackful of Cash" ("and a body in the trunk"). To help Morgan's Cash-like baritone pull off a couple jobs, Maria Muldaur and Diunna Greenleaf ride shotgun: Muldaur, for sepia-tinted piano hymns seeking a sliver of redemption, and Greenleaf, for whenever the situation calls for a hardened blues belter.

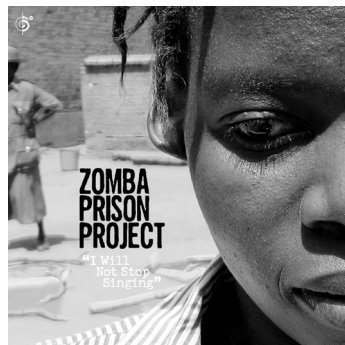
DENNIS ROZANSKI

ZOMBA PRISON PROJECT

I Will Not Stop Singing

SIX DEGREES

Even without the rats, barbed wire, or rifled guards, Zomba Prison is anything but a—voluntary—destination point. Being stuck in the poorest of the world's poorest nations (Malawi) certainly doesn't help matters. Yet, without being sentenced to do so, Ian Brennan passed through its maximum-security gates. The tape deck and microphone tucked under his arm would again go to exceptional use recording melodious inmates



and the occasional tuneful officer. The natural, ragged glory of *I Will Not Stop Singing* is just as every bit as disarming as the first Zomba Prison Project, last year's Grammy-nominated *I Have No Everything Here*.

Amid an assortment of performance formats—male and female; electric, acoustic, and a cappella; solo, simple bands, and small choral mobs—the lone constant remains the untainted sound of the human spirit. Because if only for a fleeting minute or three, prisoner after prisoner tries to spiritually break free with tailored escape routes. "All Is Loss" busts out behind brute vocal force, a polyphonic blizzard of chants and wild ululations. "I Will Not Return to Prison" charms its way out using warmly fingerpicked guitar and even warmer harmonizing. "Ambush of the Slaves" likewise enchants, except with a drummed backbeat and an amplified guitar that's all smiles. "Protect Me" attempts floating up, up and away, serenely disguised as a heavenly breeze. And "Leave My Daughter Alone" plugs-in and rocks out. Just don't let Malawi's retort to the Everly Brothers sneak past unnoticed, harbored inside the hidden final track.

Never would you think of turning to a prison yard—especially one that's been banished to the backwash of Africa—for a shot of sunshine. But, against all odds, *I Will Not Stop Singing* paradoxically outshines with blinding openheartedness.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

ROBERT FINLEY

Age Don't Mean a Thing

BIG LEGAL MESS

Slim ain't slick. Unlike Marvin, Slim, or Teddy, Robert Finley is

no smooth operator. Yet no less a soul man with pretty much only one thing on his mind. So much so that his 63-year-old tattered throat gets sacrificed all the more on the title track of *Age Don't Mean a Thing*—his new, best, first, and only album—just to prove he can (wink, wink) "take care of business." Coming off like a meatier, coarser O.V. Wright on a particularly hoarse night, such downhome charisma no doubt lights hometown Louisiana lounges afire.

Nothing more than his guitar and a place to plug-in is needed. (YouTube visually proves that.) Gratefully, though, sage producers Bruce Watson and Jimbo Mathus luxuriate Finley within a close-knit ad-hoc Memphis band that always does right. Having collectively worked alongside James Carr, Solomon Burke, and other greats, they come vetted with an innate sense of what works, starting with synergism between organ and tremolo guitars. "It's Too Late" convincingly bleeds its heart; "Come On" feeds on the funk. And with their horns majorly flaring as backup singers choreographically sway, Finley rides that extra power, storming "I Just Want to Tell You" before converting physical desire into the grooving "You Make Me Want to Dance" aphrodisiac.

Your gut tells you this everyman has likely lived these scenarios: cheating, lovemaking, vying for lovemaking. That this isn't the first time musky moves have been put on in attempt to "Make It With You." That those serrations up and down his voice are a natural by-product of a life lived hard. That ol' Finley teeters on the brink, just another glorious gut-punch ("Snake in the Grass") or two ("Is It Possible to Love 2 People?") away from abandoning soul to embrace the blues, for which his rough-cut presentation would like-



wise triumph. And that no manufactured emotion was employed in the making this record.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



MATTHEW SKOLLER

Blues Immigrant

TONGUE 'N GROOVE

Blues Immigrant weighs mighty heavy from Chicago-based harpist Matthew Skoller leaning on the blues' most fundamental feature—the curative powers of venting pent-up grievance. Not just generic woes or boilerplate gripes, either. Oh, perennial favorites like rotting relationships ("747") and workforce grumblings ("Only in the Blues" zings the biz) still naturally crop up. But at one point or another, everything from wealth (the venomous "Story of Greed") and mega-stores (Sonny Boy Williamson's "Welfare Store Blues" resharpened into "Big Box Store Blues") to sociopolitical matters ("Blues Immigrant") wind up in the crosshairs of lacerating criticism. Yet for all the fire in his tongue, Skoller's sly, cool voice melts easily into any groove. And having amassed a killer band—guitarists Eddie Taylor Jr. and Giles Corey to ace bassist Felton Crews (Miles Davis, Otis Rush)—all this infuriation rides on seething boogies ("My Get It Done Woman") and big-shouldered shuffles ("Get Down to the Nitty Gritty") built to bear the load. Although Skoller's trusty Hohner readily shakes out sheets of notes, a pair of instrumentals really airs out those reeds: the great Papa Lightfoot's after-hours "Blue Lights" more so than Skoller's own "Organ Mouth," which shares cooking space with Johnny Iguana's boil-over organ. You don't harp alongside greats like Jimmy Rodgers, Big Daddy Kinsey, Bernard Allison, and Lur-

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rie Bell without coming away with the kind of stuff that stirs the blood.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



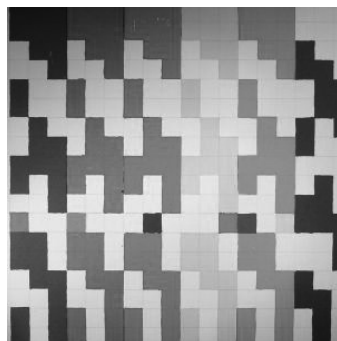
DUKE ROBILLARD & HIS ALL-STAR COMBO

Blues Full Circle
STONY PLAIN

The prolific Mr. Reliable—or the consistent Mr. Prolific, either works—bumps up his overstuffed portfolio with *Blues Full Circle*, a telltale Robillardian effort, right from its meticulous guitar down to that haltingly mannered singing of Duke's. Its title refers to the set's roundtrip from the past (three Roomful of Blues revivals) to the present (eight new unveilings). Hearing the level of sustain that Robillard's amp and guitar hit upon certainly verifies that serendipity was in the Rhode Island air that day. With teeth bared, the strings draw "Lay a Little Lovin' on Me" with linear lines versus the wang-bar wiggle inside "You Used to Be Sugar." "No More Tears" and "The Mood Room" (jolted by Kelley Hunt's sparkling voice) majestically swing with crisp, classic riffing. But not everything sprouts wings. "I've Got a Feelin' That You're Foolin'" ramrods its point of contention. "Blues for Eddie Jones" is just that: a biographical dirge in tribute to Guitar "The Things That I Used to Do" Slim. Even moodier is the blue ornithology of "Mourning Dove." Duke's All-Star Combo runs lean, triangulated by keys, bass, and Mark Teixeira's stalwart drums. Horns are not on the menu. Except for when Sax Gordon kicks on both thrusters (tenor and baritone) to propel "Last Night" from the bandstand as if 1954 had substituted Sugar Ray Norcia behind

the mic instead of Jimmy "Baby Face" Lewis. Jimmie Vaughan is another of the All-Stars, who arrives expressly to help pick apart the instrumental "Shufflin' and Scufflin'" with utmost Texas cool.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



75 DOLLAR BILL

Wood/Metal/Plastic/Pattern/Rhythm/Rock

THIN WRIST (LP; DOWNLOAD INCLUDED)

Even if you can't hear the edin, you can always spot it's fever from any distance: Wherever New York City's 75 Dollar Bill plays, a huge cloud of dust rises above. The dervish energy from their "tent music for tent people," an exploratory form of modal improvisation spun off from North African guitar mysticism, whips up quite the frenzy. The verve is vivid, electric and danceable. The format: instrumental, serpentine and hypnotic. Like Pentecostals, end-stage John Coltrane, the Velvets and other forms of trance-inducing, higher-state transport, the goal is for listeners—"listeners" is actually too passive a role for such highly interactive music; "participants" is more apropos—to get swept up and then lost in the sound. Liberation of body and soul awaits inside *Wood/Metal/Plastic/Pattern/Rhythm/Rock's* four individualized journeys. Hardly fussed over, this is pure-feel, gut-instinct, lightning-in-a-bottle stuff.

Rick Brown locks down the bottom with anything percussive (plywood crate, maracas, shakers, bell, drum) while Che Chen's six- and 12-string guitars employ their generous amplification turning spirals that set the trance. Except for menacing guest drones from trumpet, sax

and viola, that's the entire band: a two-man wrecking crew. "Earth Saw" works a slow vortex. Their dizzying, mercurial "Cummins Falls" belongs on *Wallahi Le Zein!!*, arguably the wildest collection of Mauritanian guitar tangles. Not because Chen's teacher, Jeichould Chigaly (husband of famed vocalist Noura Mint Seymali), erupts there. But because Chen's famously hyperactive guitar can be just as provocatively medicinal with its relentless restlessness, maintaining levels of ecstatic intensity for anywhere up to the 15 opioid minutes of "I'm Not Trying to Wake Up." In the ambient tension of his unyielding riffing is where epiphany, catharsis and hypnosis all communally lurk.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



LURRIE BELL

Can't Shake This Feeling
DELMARK

Judging from the bound-to-be iconic cover shot, guitarist Lurrie Bell evidently *Can't Shake This Feeling*. Because string bends that massive don't just erupt casually, not without emotional provocation. But, between the late, great harpist Carey Bell being his father and he himself having been personally burdened with more than one man's fair share of grief, Lurrie comes innately blues powered. He never needs to pose. Plus, those shovelfuls of gravel which accumulate in his throat with every passing year only underscore that point all the more, adding credence to whatever testimony he airs. Trouble airs in all shapes and speeds, from Lowell Fulson's creeping "Sinner's Prayer" to the original title track's lumbering strut. "I Get So Weary" rouses fancy yet muscular moves on the strings in-line with T-Bone

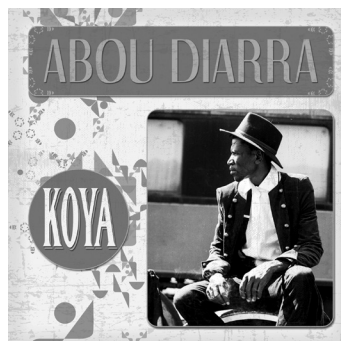
Walker being translated into what's spoken on the streets of Chicago. The Maxwell Street jest of "One Eyed Woman" speaks for itself. The most majestically miserable is "This Worrisome Feeling in My Heart," a Bell confession in minor key. Just as quickly, though, the lovestruck rush from "Hidden Charms" and Little Milton's "Hold Me Tight" send the band turning cartwheels with bounce to spare. That's Matthew Skoller's growly harp burrowing throughout versus Roosevelt Purifoy's strategy with twinkling Fender Rhodes or the organ likewise purring under his hands. And Dick Shurman's production sees to it that the quintet treats your living room like a club. Their set is tough, tight, and impervious to trends. These meat-and-potatoes Chicago blues don't rock in the slightest. "Drifting" even gets counted off as if this was just another night up on the Kingston Mines bandstand.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

ABOU DIARRA

Koya
MIX & METISSE

Koya comes on like a breeze. Softly materializing from out of the Malian blue, its mystique washes over you thirteen separate times, serenely gracing your presence with its understated magic before evaporating away. In that atmospheric hour, Africa's ancient past reconciles with its fusionistic present even more so than Abou Diarra achieved with 2013's similarly exceptional *Sabou*. (So hyped is *Koya* that YouTube sports two official teasers spying on its recording session.) The gentle giant of *kamala n'goni*—a noble yet beastly, stringed symbol of Old World Mali—enters



this deep dreamscape through the artistic direction of Nicolas Repac, who splices ethereal accents into layers upon sonic layers built from the constant comings and goings of instrumentalists. Elements of old and new compliment one other, just as do the indigenous and the imported. Earthy Fula and Mandinka flutes cool hot bursts of guitar scorch. Kora master Toumani Diabaté's glass waterfalls ring stately whereas Vincent Bucher's flickering harmonica wails in a blue mood. And Diarra's proto-guitar spider-walks atop hand-thwacked percussion that never stop bubbling. Despite lots of moving parts, the pair of radio singles in "Né Nana" and "Djarabi," the mirage of "Djalaba," "Koya Blues" and a deeply-grooved instrumental named "Mogo Djigui" radiate penetrating calm. Because, unlike the dancefloor exceptions of "Tunga" and "Ma Chérie" with their big beats, *Koya* seeps, floats, and drifts unmoored, subtly widening the expanse of traditional Mali all the while.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

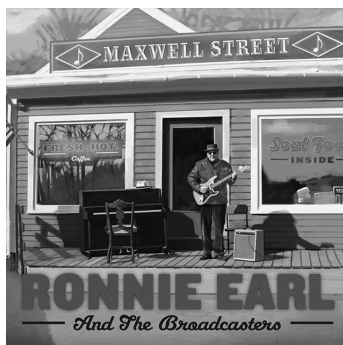


THE KENTUCKY HEADHUNTERS
On Safari
PLOWBOY

Yeah, they're the same Kentucky Headhunters who tore up the airwaves with *Pickin' on Nashville*, their 1989 debut which gobbled up a Grammy en route to selling over two million copies. Still Dixie-proud, raucously attitudinal, and long-haired (albeit grayer), the Heads roar even fiercer now, 11 studio albums removed from when first delivering the one-two punch of Bill Monroe's "Walk Softly on This Heart of Mine" and their

own "Dumas Walker." Richard Young and Greg Martin's overlapping guitars drawl tight and tense, their Southern rocking framed closer to Skynyrd scrunch than Allmans sprawl. Hell, even the fills flame hotter than some hotshots' entire solos. "Beaver Creek Mansion" lights the fuse that burns down into utter powder kegs like the blistering "I Am the Hunter" or the blistering "Way Down Yonder," nicked (then supercharged) from Charlie Daniels. Even when red-hot, "Deep South Blues Again," "Lowdown Memphis Town Blues" and "Jukebox Full of Blues" reveal the color of their songwriting mindset. Although the 21 YouTubeable minutes of the band personally guiding an in-studio tour of *On Safari* provide reason enough, the actual crank-it-up album is compulsory inspiration to give your air guitar a lashing.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



RONNIE EARL & THE BROADCASTERS
Maxwell Street
STONY PLAIN

Guitarist Ronnie Earl and his three hornless Broadcasters find themselves on *Maxwell Street* with heavy hearts for a fallen brother. Pianist David Maxwell, who passed last year at age 71, is the album's honoree—not the Chicago street notorious for flea-bitten blues. So rather than bare-fisted brawling on the strings, Earl sculpts another album of the coolest-of-cool smolder with trademarked spine-tingle. No one out there sounds like this. Earl's sparse, economic and emotionally invested signature is instantly recognizable, where engulfing black silence is as just vital as the warm glow around each note.

Slowing the tempo extracts even more soul, although Earl's spirituality beams through Gladys Knight's pop-peppy "(I've Got to Use My) Imagination" just as blindingly as the three-part requiem encompassing "In Memory of T-Bone," "Elegy for a Bluesman" and "Blues for David Maxwell." And by working the song's dynamics—escalating from suspended animation that openly defies gravity up to heavy, volatile bursts—the five instrumentals as well as five tracks Diane Blue sings become sublime. Otis Rush's "Double Trouble" hovers for nearly 12 minutes, bleeding its heart like never before, rising from the faintest of pulses, and maintaining Earl's recorded streak of honoring his mentor in the process. But no matter how lithely Dave Limina can make his Hammond B3 murmur, or how heroically creative Lorne Entress gets with cushioning his drumbeats, Earl's magic guitar still breathtakingly steals the show with utmost grace.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



COLIN JAMES
Blue Highways
TRUE NORTH

Even with having to traverse the gulf between the romp-and-roar of Freddie King's "Boogie Funk" and Robert Johnson's front-porch "Last Fair Deal," *Blue Highways* still only took two quick days to cut. That's because those songs are among 13 of Colin James' personal favorites, and the Canadian guitarist has been itching to record a desert-island collection like this for

years. Hot off the road, James and his touring band ducked into a Vancouver studio with inspirational heroes on their collective minds. Strung between Muddy and Wolf to Tommy Johnson and Junior Wells, the diverse, all-covers setlist affords motive to slide ("Goin' Away"), swing ("Lonesome"), slink ("Bad Bad Whiskey") and even sear Peter Green's "Watch Out" with a mighty cool hand. Pounding its descending riff, "Going Down"

gets treated like the rocking blaster that it is, whereas "Riding in the Moonlight/Mr. Luck" sucks through Steve Marriner's harp racing alongside James' acoustic fingerpicking. "Don't Miss Your Water" is what finally baits in horns, the ballad's soulful regret being far too tempting for a bit of brass. Yet the total transformation of "Ain't Long for Day" is how James best distinguishes himself, atmospherically extracting all of Blind Willie McTell's intended ache by way of an electrified bottleneck's gentle wag and a softly shepherding piano. Consider *Blue Highways* as the Canadian Music Hall of Famer's bid for his seventh Juno Award.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

JANIS JOPLIN
Janis: Little Girl Blue
MVD (DVD)

We know how the story tragically ends on October 4, 1970. But it's in the intervening 10,115 days before Janis Joplin fatally overdosed in Room 105 of L.A.'s Landmark Motor Hotel that *Little Girl Blue* captivates. Oscar-nominated director Amy J. Berg's documentary paints the most complete portrait yet of the meteoric rocker with the flame-thrower voice, viewing the musical and emotional entirety of Joplin's all-too-short life. (She—along with Robert Johnson, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and, newest inductee, Amy Winehouse—entered into the dreaded 27 Club, all of whose members never lived to

BLUES REVIEWS

CONTINUED

see their 28th birthday.) In fact, so notable is the film that it aired earlier this year as part of PBS' esteemed *American Masters* series.

Cheap Thrills, Otis Redding's gotta, gotta tagline, heroin, Pearl, locomoting aboard the Festival Express, and slaying the Monterey Pop Festival in golden slippers are among the many touchstones taking on special meaning here. A wealth of concert footage from Joplin's assorted renderings (Big Brother, Kozmic Blues Band, Full Tilt Boogie Band) melds with such behind-the-scenes moments as being inside Columbia Records' studio when "Summertime"

gets taped. Fellow band members along with rocking colleagues (the Grateful Dead's Bob Weir, "Bobby McGee"'s Kris Kristofferson, a Fish-less Country Joe McDonald) lend assorted and sordid tales.

But her family members, schoolmates, star-crossed lovers, and private letters (read by narrator Cat Power's Chan Marshall) also shed untold intimacy and vulnerability on Joplin's ironclad stage persona. Now supplied with missing pieces of the puzzle, the boat-rocking outcast is seen searching eternal for inaccessible slivers of lasting happiness and acceptance. We watch the psychologically-scarred "star" return to her high-school reunion. And we receive the takeaway message that if only she could have lived onstage all the time, perhaps the demons surfacing during her quiet downtime might have been kept at bay. So as Janis croons "Little Girl Blue" before the 108 minutes fade to black, that song—and her life—comes into crushing clarity. You'll leave reassured that Joplin was the force of nature we've always known. But also now with a newfound appreciation for the

flesh-and-blood behind that gale-force roar.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

ERIN HARPE

Women of the Country Blues Guitar

STEFAN GROSSMAN'S GUITAR WORKSHOP (DVD)

For two hours, Erin Harpe instructively reminds us—note for note on her trusty acoustic—that Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson and Blind Blake were not the only first-generation guitar heroes. Her *Women of the Country Blues Guitar* lesson builds its 10-song repertoire from one of the rarest blues commodities: prewar ladies who accompanied themselves by snapping and bending strings just as thrillingly as did their male counterparts. Justifiably, the prolific Memphis Minnie grabs the lion's share of material, chugging "What's the Matter with the Mill" and stomping "I'm a Bad Luck Woman" with brutish bass lines. "When the Levee Breaks" is the

epitome of classic. Here, Minnie is up against virtual phantoms like Texan Elvie Thomas (in lullaby form, "Motherless Child" renders misery beautiful) or the Delta's Mattie Delaney (chordlessly finger-picked, "Down the Big Road Blues" is anything but a Tommy Johnson carbon copy), whose meager but mighty handful of shellac is just about their only existing trace. Geeshie Wiley is arguably the more known of these unknowns, thanks to a memorable name and even more unforgettable songs. Her high-compression "Pick Poor Robin Clean" moves briskly

and brightly. But Harpe's inspirations don't all spin at 78 rpm. For when R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough were spinning their rhythmic spells up in north Mississippi, Jessie Mae Hemphill was casting her own hill-country trance by welding a G chord onto a roughhouse riff to contradictorily express "I'm So Glad." Her 1986 version, which resides here along with all the other bonus original recordings, is juke joint-worthy.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

IAN BRENNAN

How Music Dies (or Lives): Field Recording and the Battle for Democracy in the Arts

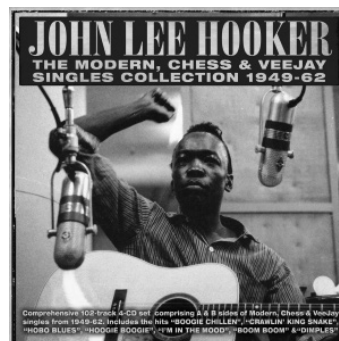
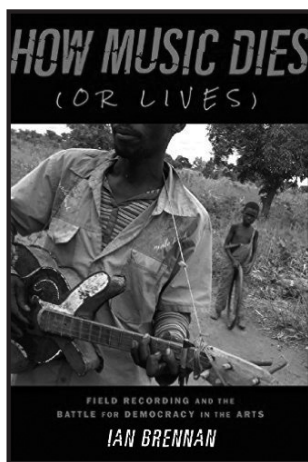
ALLWORTH PRESS (BOOK)

"Keep it feral": In this sterile, Auto-Tuned age, that's a mighty brazen mantra coming from a Grammy-awarded man of sound. But Ian Brennan, just like Hank Snow, has been everywhere, man, sonically living up to that very goal. Way-off-the-map spots, too, like Rwanda, Cambodia, Transylvania, and Malawi, where he and his overly inquisitive microphone sniff out, record, produce, and, thankfully, introduce some of the world's best kept secrets. Ever heard the Malawi Mouse Boys or the Zomba Prison Project? You can thank Brennan for having braved the heat, haggling, barbecued rodents and 2,000 inmates, so you didn't have to. (He has also worked more docile extremes, from Merle Haggard and Green Day to the Blind Boys of Alabama and the Vienna Boys Choir.)

Entrapped within a world of growingly homogenized and equally pasteurized music, Brennan advocates passionately that "Music should bleed and breathe, and not be vacuum-sealed." Very bite-sized, readily-digested chapters (some as short as one paragraph) peer into that sort of mindset which sent fellow

songcatchers like Alan Lomax and Hugh Tracey traipsing off into the hinterlands. Because experiencing a tiger at the zoo is nothing like experiencing one out in the tall grass. In kind, you get airdropped into circumstances as colorful as that touch-and-go time recording blind General Paolino, who plucked his guitar amid South Sudan chaos. Such essays as "Using the Microphone as a Telescope," "Surrendering to Sound" and "There Is No Rehearsal" further lay out a Big Picture philosophy for producing, recording, listening to, and, ultimately, appreciating music. *How Music Dies (or Lives): Field Recording and the Battle for Democracy in the Arts* puts into words what you always hear behind and within the performances captured by any of Brennan's recordings: The raw splendor of human expression left to sparkle with all its perfect imperfections.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



JOHN LEE HOOKER

The Modern, Chess & Vee-Jay Singles Collection (1949-62)

ACROBAT (4-CD SET)

No matter how hypnotic she was, poor "Sally May" never transfixed an entire planet—for generations upon ongoing generations. Instead, that was the immortal fate of her 1949 flipside, a three-minute-and-nine-second shot of primitive stomp indelibly named "Boogie Chillun." And the rest was history.

Herein lies the very bedrock upon which the John Lee Hooker dynasty solidly rests: 101 potent tracks stemming from the formative span of 1949 to 1962. Back when Hooker and his heavily-juiced guitar were at their peak of

being dangerous, twitching like a raw nerve as Modern and Chess microphones listened in. Back when VeeJay desperately tried domesticating his Mississippi minimalism with rhythm combos. Back before the boogie became endless. But rather than playing favorites, *The Modern, Chess & VeeJay Singles Collection* evenhandedly crams its four discs with A-sides and B-sides. Stacked in chronological order, an evolution in one-chorded genius resets back into place.

From "I'm in the Mood" (including the '51 echo-chamber model) to the how-how-how'ing "Boom Boom," the ordained essentials all convene. And on and on they keep coming: "Dimples," both '49 and '59 species of "Crawlin' King Snake," "Mad Man Blues" ... "Mambo Chillun."

"Mambo Chillun"? What?! Such is the strategic advantage of inventorying Hooker by his A's and B's: You discover unheralded, unloved gems like that blatantly commercial hip-shaker given extra shake from Jimmy Reed's harp. (In time, the guitars of Eddie Kirkland, Eddie Taylor and, yes, even Pop Staples also pop up.) Should-have-been contenders command newfound attention, starting with the sonically/psychologically savage "Need Somebody." Oddball curi-

osities, led by Bernie Besman cruising a roller-rink organ around "Rock Me Mama," turn heads. You'll win bar bets now knowing about scenarios in which no one would ever fathom finding Hooker: jumping R&B, Tequila rhythms, and barking out "Blow, blow, blow" to, of all things, an urbane saxophone. We even get to hear the Boogie Man turn Lover Man, aberrantly swooning "Take Me as I Am." This unobstructed panorama—complete with views into an alternative Hooker universe—nicely imparts a dimensionality to someone legendarily recognized for blues so primeval that competitors like B.B., T-Bone, Wynonie, and even Muddy came off sounding like cheery optimists.

Fear not, though: Over the course of nearly five hours, a ton of adrenalized boogies get pumped and a second ton of spidery crawls gets brooded. So, between the perpetual churn from "I Got Eyes for You" and the dire straits of "Cold Chills All Over Me," enough thump-and-shiver amasses here to relentlessly validate that, although boogie men will forever come and go, there will only be one irreplaceable John Lee Hooker.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

VARIOUS

Classic Blues Artwork from the 1920s- Vol. 14

BLUES IMAGES (CALENDAR & CD)

It's time again for the sights and sounds of blue yesteryear to ring in the new year: The now 14th annual *Classic Blues Artwork from the 1920s* twofer is out. That means blues collector extraordinaire John Tefeller has raided his world-class archives for another overstuffed package. Maintaining typically high standards, the ample (12 inch by 12 inch) calendar synchronizes

rarest of pre-war sides. Memphis Minnie blares hot into the mic. Blind Leroy Garnett's double-fists a raggy piano. The raggedy Mobile Strugglers boozily ramble, string-band-style. A lozenge salesman's dream materializes in the gravel-throated convention of Charley Patton, Blind Willie Johnson and equally growling Blind Gussie Nesbitt. Harpist Jed Davenport's "How Long How Long Blues" pulls off an astounding act of puff 'n' pucker, equal parts creativity and respiratory stamina. So good is Blind Joe Reynolds' "Outside Woman Blues" that Clapton's Cream rewired the 1929 cautionary tale of infidelity for 1967 rock-craved ears on their *Disraeli Gears*, right down to its original downhill guitar lick. And Big Bill Broonzy's "I Can't Be Satisfied"/"The Western Blues" finally gets heard for the first time since 1930. Sharing in the good fortune is "Illinois Blues"/"Yola My Blues Away." Without the ferocious blizzard of scratchy hiss that typically encases

the emotionally crippling flip sides, Skip James' minor-key picking patterns are far better appreciated. Even Kansas Joe McCoy (aka Joe Williams) can now be heard clearing his throat before launching "Mr. Devil Blues," making such immortal sessions incredibly more mortal.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



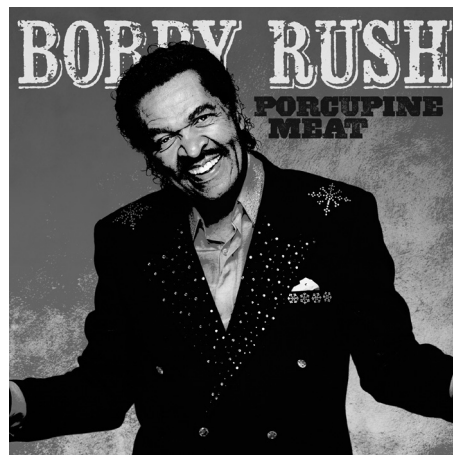
its vintage advertising artwork and photographs with the 23 audio tracks on its accompanying CD. The combination lets you plan for upcoming blues celebrations—from Howlin' Wolf's 107th birthday party (Thursday, January 12) to Blind Willie McTell's 116th (Friday, May 5)—while enjoying the finest, cleanest (surface noise) and

NOTABLE NEW RELEASE:

BOBBY RUSH

Porcupine Meat
ROUNDER RECORDS

Ageless wonder is a bit of a cliché, but Bobby Rush claimed to turn 83 on November 10, and I've seen him jump and do leg kicks within the last year most of us couldn't do when we were 20 somethings! Now hot on the heels of last year's retrospective *Chicken Heads: A 50 Year history of Bobby Rush*, his new disc, *Porcupine Meat* is a fantastic follow-up to 2014's acclaimed *Decisions*. Backed by a band of Louisiana heavyweights including Vasti Jackson, Shane Theriot, Jellybean Alexander, David Torkanowsky, Kirk Joseph, and guest appearances from Dave Alvin, Keb Mo, and Joe Bonamassa, Rush departs from the show revue and solo bluesman format to deliver



er a funk-blues masterpiece. All songs are original though several clearly are based on easily recognizable blues numbers, but

the band and Rush put their own seriously stanky Louisiana fonk on each one. Kirk Joseph on sousaphone is utilized in lieu of bass on about half the cuts. Keb Mo' appears on "Nighttime Gardner" which is the most straight ahead blues shuffle cut, Dave Alvin sits in for the subtle "It's Your Move." "Me, Myself and I" is multi-textured with Bonamassa throwing down a restrained solo. It's the funky cuts that highlight the disc, opening with "I Don't Want Nobody Hanging Around My House," a lyrical take off on the "garbage man" trope, "Snake in the Grass" built around a slinky guitar figure, and "Funk O' De Funk" which is of course, "just too funky." That's Bobby Rush, without a doubt the Funkiest Old Man since Rufus Thomas.

BOB SEKINGER