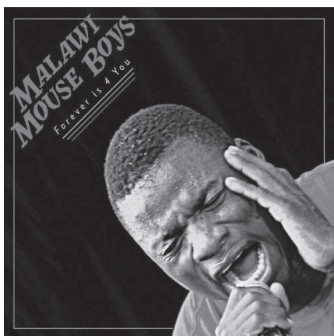


## BLUES REVIEWS CONTINUED

ergism lasted but three short months. While Mayall busily swaps between harp and organ (pressing “Bye Bye Bird” with both), Green’s fingers fly. More crucial, though, was the requisite soul infused into their bluster; to convincingly pull off the extended escalation of “Tears in My Eyes” requires real feel. The promise of greatness was there for the hearing.

Admittedly, fidelity isn’t this godsend of a collection’s bragging point. But its exquisite rarity and intense performances are. Though not a professional sound engineer, superfan Tom Huissen did diligently vacuum up every onstage note into his one-channel reel-to-reel recorder. That includes McVie’s bass solo on “Chicago Line”; the night at Klook’s Kleek, when Blues Incorporated’s Ronnie Jones sang “Stormy Monday”; and Green’s entire eight-minute “So Many Roads” revelation. Expectedly, the sound is compressed. But, predictably, inspired Bluesbreaker intensity beams through the grime like a supernova.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### MALAWI MOUSE BOYS

*Forever Is 4 You*

OMNIVORE

**H**ere we have a dirt-poor band, hailing from the planet’s poorest of nations, making some of the planet’s emotionally-richest music. Isn’t irony mischievous? For who knew that the needle in the haystack has been performing all this time in a thatch village lost in the middle of nowhere Malawi? Meet that one-in-a-million find: the Malawi Mouse

Boys. Music couldn’t possibly come any more honest than theirs. First, their indelible name derives from being discovered along the roadside, hawking the perfect grab-n-go snack to compliment swigs of banana beer: roasted mouse kabobs. (YouTube has barbecued proof.) Their improvised musical contraptions—bicycle gears for hi-hats, stones for kick-drum mallets, “guitars” jerry-rigged out of salvaged scraps—are no less organically real. And their crushingly humble sound—bright-eyed melodies lifted by flyaway Chichewa choruses—beams truth. Not truth for truth’s conscious sake; but just because the band would still pump “Ndiyenda Nkuunika” from strident strings or engage the impromptu animal theater of “Mabvu (The Wasp)” even without any tape running. It’s simply what the Boys do.

Luckily, despite growing stardom from now touring outside of Africa, Mouse magic remains incorruptible. *Forever Is 4 You*, their third album, refuses to upgrade (and, in turn, degrade) their unique timbres, twangs, and twinges for customary, factory-perfect instruments. And listening to—no, eavesdropping on—“Ndatopa Nawe” climb up Nelson Mulligo’s throat or to “Yesu Ndinkhulupirira” being freed by full-group harmonization, reveals actual human emotion. Primordial soul, if you will. “Umasiye Wanga (My Loneliness)” summits that peak. With his heart cracking by the second, Joseph Nkwankwa’s deep dredge of motherless thoughts consumes the moment in a spontaneous, tear-flooded breakdown, reminding us that a microphone can be far more sensitive than a stethoscope at picking up man’s innermost workings. Heightening the immediacy is producer/discoverer Ian Brennan’s anti-Phil Spector press-play-and-go recording approach. That way, it’s as if the Mouse Boys are glowing right before you.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### BONNIE LEE, NICK HOLT, EARL HOWELL & JOHN PRIMER

*Classic Chicago Blues: Live & Unreleased*  
WOLF

**S**hould anyone need reminding: The Teardrops were a major force to be reckoned with—even without Magic Slim. If ever there was proof that this wrecking-ball ensemble was *Classic Chicago Blues* to the bone, these *Live & Unreleased* performances from the 1990s are it. Bassist Nick Holt (Slim’s kid brother), drummer Earl Howell, and guitarist John Primer more than fended for themselves across Europe, warming up their walloping shuffles before Slim would eventually stroll out and seize the reins. Tons of rhythmic traction gets generated from merging groove and momentum with streetwise directness and low-end rumble. You could feel their brick-and-mortar mojo coming from miles away. Ordinary bands would require steroids to attain such muscle.

Like the music, their singing is identically forceful and unrefined. Without Slim, Holt and Howell take turns howling into the microphone. Holt is the one specializing in creeping weepers, his blunt-force croon tearing the heart out of Muddy’s “The Town I Live In,” after cautioning “You Better Watch Yourself.” Fearlessly stretching for notes, he’s emotionally committed. Howell’s voice is gruffer, hoarser, frayed around all its edges—downright scrappy. The bonus comes with every deeper dip into the gutbucket for the kind of gutter growls Howlin’ Wolf once scooped, making “Baby, Don’t Say That No More” a squalid windfall.

For their 1992 tour, Bonnie

Lee joined. The big-voiced graduate from Big Mama Thornton’s school was as tough as the West Side dives she regularly worked with Willie Kent’s bruising, no-frills outfit. So the transition to Slim’s bruising, no-frills outfit made a perfect fit. The band feeds on her energy blasts, hurling through “Wee Baby Blues” and “I’m Good,” a signature throwback to her bandstand shifts with Kent. “Rock Me Baby” finally puts the brakes on. Even then, idling and rhythmically sloshing awhile, Lee runs hot, generating her own crescendos by revving the buzzsaw tucked away in her throat. United, she and the Teardrops were a match made in barroom heaven.

Night after night, though, the unsung (more precisely, non-singing) hero was John Primer, whose guitar is expectedly brilliant, pulling overtime duty by always being everywhere with the right line, lick, fill, bend, or breakaway solo that deservedly draws cheers. Very soon, he’d totally splinter off on a solo career. But for these nights, Primer was still very much a Teardrop, doubling as both rhythm and lead, acting on one great idea after the next, injecting “As The Years Go Passing By” with tactical bouts of tension, singling out “Come On Baby, Help Me to Spend This Gold” for a bottlenecked drubbing. You could make a whole meal solely appreciating his constantly ingenious licksmanship.

Delivered raw, real and alive, *Classic Chicago Blues* makes good on its title: For 75 minutes, it’s as if rock, time beyond 1960, or a world outside of Halsted Street never existed.

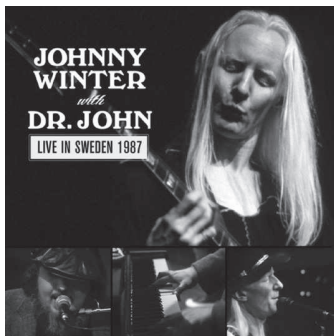
DENNIS ROZANSKI

### JOHNNY WINTER WITH DR. JOHN

*Live in Sweden 1987*

MVD (CD OR DVD)

**T**he race was really on to break speed records during the allotted hour of gig time. Either that or Johnny Winter was paid by-the-note for this Stockholm television blowout. Whatever the motivation, the velocity with which the Texas guitar fiend incinerates a seven-song set is both a rush to hear and a sight to behold. Fortu-



nately, *Live in Sweden 1987* allows for both, being available on CD as well as DVD (which benefits from a bonus in-studio video of “Prodigal Son,” from 1972). Either format leaves you with the very real sense that Winter could sustain his furious improvisation without every coming close to tapping out of embellished licks or the hell-bent energy putting them wildly into play. Right out of the gate, “Sound the Bell” and a “Gimme Shelter”-tinted “Don’t Take Advantage of Me” blister off the strings of his headless Lazer with the kind of fury that would have to be actively slowed down in order to be merely shredded “fast.” “Mojo Boogie” slides off a Gibson Firebird with typical kamikaze abandon. And without a 10-minute limit, Winter could solo and solo and keep soloing on “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” until someone physically pried the melted guitar from his smoking pale hands. Under such intensity, any sung refrain is only momentary punctuation between bouts of extended instrumental flight. To concentrate power, drums (Tom Compton) and bass (John Paris, who, incredibly, also doubles on rack-harmonica!) are the only backstop, until Dr. John joins, midway. He stays aboard for the duration, tag-teaming vocals while chiseling out shards of piano sparkle with his right hand. He also contributes the sleazy “You Lie Too Much,” which, along with Muddy’s lovestruck “Sugar Sweet,” is among the three pieces not drawn from Johnny’s trilogy of mid-1980s Alligator records. Flashing lightning bolts with thunderclap decibels, Winter pushes drama into overdrive, wowing you just as much as those Swedish onlookers with the art of escalation.

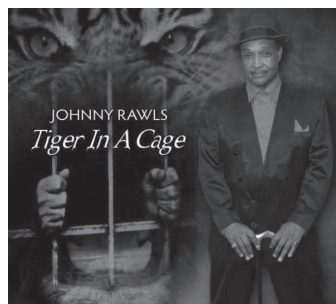
DENNIS ROZANSKI

## JOHNNY RAWLS

*Tiger in a Cage*  
CATFOOD

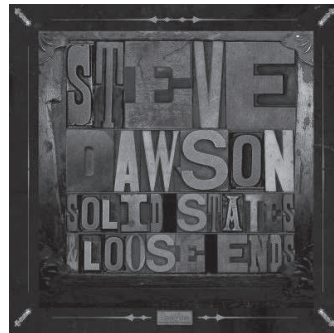
Old-school soul testifying has come back into fashion with retro acts like Leon Bridges, Sam Cooke’s avatar, or the Motown-worthy Nigel Hall out there stylishly conjuring up the nostalgia of their parents’ record collections. Johnny Rawls is no throwback, however. In the first place, the hard-working, sharp-dressed, tenor-throated Mississippi native started out back in the heyday. At 64, he’s the elder statesman who lived the life: helping lay down smiles, night after night, joint after joint, along the chitlin’ circuit with the prior generation of Southern soul singers as great as Joe Tex, O.V. Wright and Little Johnny Taylor. Yet, for all his impressionable apprenticeships through the 1960s and ’70s, Rawls has been his own man, with his own identifiable brand of party-down soul-blues that’ll visit Falls Church in May and Baltimore in December.

*Tiger in a Cage* reinforces Rawls’ standard of excellence established over what now makes eight albums with Catfood Records. (2014’s *Soul Brothers* collaboration with the late Otis Clay climbed up the charts, summing atop *Doubeat’s* “Best of the Year” list.) In grand soul-revue fashion, “Keep It Loose” struts the room excitedly whereas “Reckless Heart,” wounded by love, drops down upon bended knees. Rawls’ ready-made classic, “Red Cadillac,” cruises better than ever after a funky new tune-up. For old times’ sake, Cooke’s “Having a Party” receives a fresh fingerpopping. Even the Stones’ “Beast of Burden” benefits from a Memphis shake, courtesy of the ever tasteful, horn-leavened Rays, who always do right. Yet, for as much as the title track



momentarily draws Rawls out from his usual role as loverman for a rare topical piece protesting dope and prison terms, it’s “Lucy” who really works him up the most. Libido does wonders that way, transforming Johnny Be Good into a naughty, red-eyed Bobby Rush sonovagun.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



## STEVE DAWSON

*Solid States & Loose Ends*  
BLACK HEN

Like Ry Cooder and Sonny Landreth, Steve Dawson wrangles slide guitars for a living. He, too, has the gift for making every stab, sweep, swerve, and steely shakedown work in service of the collective song—to cast a mood, paint a scene, send a shiver—rather than vice versa. By getting a good bottlenecking, the assortment of electric and acoustic, National steels and pedal steels become expressive vehicles for these roots-rock rambles. Such has been Dawson’s signature on albums he’s produced for folks like Jim Byrnes as well as on the handful of his own. After 2014’s *Rattlesnake Cage* stripped down to the barest of solo acoustic instrumentals, *Solid States & Loose Ends* marks a return to form with vocals, electricity, and a band rich with the kind of rustic details for which Canada’s answer to T-Bone Burnett has grown to be revered. That’s not to say he’s averse to working alone and unplugged again, as Gid Tanner & the Skillet Lickers’ bygone hillbilly tale of “The Henhouse Door” confirms. But with accordions and mandolins, fiddles and a pump organ among the available textures, Dawson is back to fully coloring this blend of originals, traditionals, and even a revision of soul man Joe Tex’s “You Got

What It Takes” that works the strings’ muddy bottom as much as their bright high-end. “Final Words” philosophizes atop a meld of horns, Farfisa, a mello-tron’s simulated string symphony—and, of course, superelastic slide. The clarity of Dawson’s casual voice only heightens that tube-warmed haze of amplifiers getting stressed beyond their comfort zone by all this steel-on-steel snarling.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

## DAMILY

*Very Aomby*  
HÉLICO

Euphoria is the end result. The process of getting you there is the business of tsapiky (tsa-PEEK), southwest Madagascar’s mesmeric party music. Incredibly alive and totally immersive, its lose-yourself-in-the-rhythm rapture spreads by way of fever from an electric guitar gone wild with overexcitement.

And Damily is its best-of-the-best practitioner, a longstanding groove merchant, the flying-fingered guitar hero who moves people—physically and, in turn, psychologically—with transmissible joy beamed off blurred strings.

It all begins with a flicker. That constant friction of his guitar fibrillating against the 4/4 urgency of a pushy bass and some percussion generates combustion. While singers sing of cattle thieves, mosquitoes, and bad manners, riffs escalate, accelerate and excite in ever expanding circular logic. Stressed to the point of buckling, patterns keep spontaneously transforming, feeding the cycle. You’re drawn into the overheated, spiraling sound. Lulls are few and far between. So, once you’re in, you’re in for the duration. Compulsively danceable jams turn ceremonial gatherings—funerals and wed-

