



Tinsley Ellis
Devil May Care

ALLIGATOR
★★★★½

The Duke Robillard Band
They Called It Rhythm & Blues

STONY PLAIN
★★★★½

After decades in the trenches, Tinsley Ellis and Duke Robillard have secured enduring reputations. The usually overblown tag legend has a strong scent of legitimacy when applied to these two guitarists.

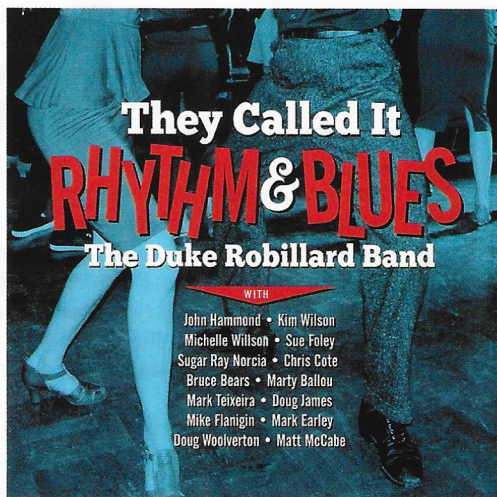
Ellis' *Devil May Care* is the best of the dozen albums he has made for Alligator since starting a solo blues-rock career in 1988. His singing voice is a casually potent vehicle of expression that age has given a new texture and a mature timbre. When he writes melodies, Ellis demonstrates an inquiring spirit and an ear for the catchy. His lyrics, even those on conventional romantic quandaries, are thoughtful rather than boilerplate. The 10 songs here, each a winner, were picked for the album from 200 he composed while at home in Atlanta for 18 months because of the pandemic. Being off the road so long allowed him to own his music as never before.

Years ago, Ellis blazed like a firestorm, but today he's a model of self-regulated heat who strikes the notes on his guitar with hard confidence and musical intelligence. He taps into a vein of inspi-

ration soloing on the Hendrix-like "Step Up" and the ballad "Don't Bury Our Love" (a cousin of Al Kooper's "I Love You More Than You'll Ever Know"). Ellis' guitar seemingly helps him summon the power to confront inner hurt and find a place of solace in the Muscle Shoals-soul of "Just Like Rain." Striking technical ability goes hand in hand with emotional tenacity throughout the album. Several songs carry the spirit of the Allman Brothers Band. Bonus: Pianist and organist Kevin McKendree, who produced the album with Ellis, enriches the music with his consummate workmanship.

Robillard's guitar work is excellent all through *They Called It Rhythm & Blues*, his salute to 1950s jump-blues and the other strains of R&B that drove his band Roomful of Blues in the late 1960s and 1970s. The Rhode Islander may be a nostalgist, but he cuts through the sentimental mists of time with a creative clarity that reinvigorates lost artifacts by Roy Milton, Joe Liggins, ZuZu Bollin, Mickey & Sylvia and others. His trait of elegant precision alternates with one of celebratory bravado. Robillard has found his passion in giving living history lessons, none better than his instrumental "Swingin' For Four Bills" in honor of guitar men Bill Jennings and Billy Butler and organ players Wild Bill Davis and Bill Doggett.

Vocals yield varied results. Though overwhelming in the past, Robillard steps up as a quirkily likable singer on three songs. Chris Cote, a member



WITH
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Michelle Willson • Sue Foley
Sugar Ray Norcia • Chris Cote
Bruce Bears • Marty Ballou
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of Robillard's ace band, acquits himself commendably on several others. Kudos also to Sugar Ray Norcia, whose expressive engine runs in highest gear when singing and playing harmonica on Tampa Red's "Rambler Blues" and Jimmy Nelson's "She's My Baby." Texan guests Kim Wilson and Sue Foley are in satisfactory vocal form. However, Bostonian Michelle Willson sounds hoarse trying to

put across two numbers. More appropriate for another Robillard album, veteran bluesman John Hammond gouges the air with his craggy voice doing Howlin' Wolf's "No Place To Go" and the country blues "Homeless Blues."

—Frank-John Hadley

Devil May Care: One Less Reason; Right Down The Drain; Just Like Rain; Beat The Devil; Don't Bury Our Love; Jujy; Step Up; One Last Ride; 28 Days; Slow Train To Hell. (48:23)

Personnel: Tinsley Ellis, guitar, vocals; Kevin McKendree, organ, piano; Steve Mackey, bass; Lynn Williams, drums, percussion; Jim Hoke, saxophone (3, 4, 7); Andrew Carney, trumpet (3, 4, 7).

Ordering info: alligator.com

They Called It Rhythm & Blues: Here I'm Is; No Good Lover; Fools Are Getting Scarcer; Tell Me Why; Rambler Blues; The Way You Do; Champagne Mind; Homeless Blues; Outta Here; In The Wee Wee Hours; Someday After Awhile; She's My Baby; Trouble In Mind; No Place To Go; The Things I Forgot To Do; I Can't Understand It; Eat Where You Slept Last Night. Swingin' For Four Bills. (68:02)

Personnel: Duke Robillard, guitar, vocals (2, 9, 17); Chris Cote, vocals (1, 3, 6, 10, 11, 16); Bruce Bears, piano, organ; Marty Ballou, acoustic and electric bass; Mark Teixeira, drums; Sugar Ray Norcia, vocals, harmonica (5, 12); John Hammond, vocal, guitar (8, 14); Kim Wilson, vocals, harmonica (4, 15); Michelle Willson, vocals (7, 13); Sue Foley, vocals, guitar (2, 18); Mike Flanigin, organ (2, 18); Matt McCabe, piano (4); Doug James, baritone and tenor saxophones; Mark Earley, tenor and alto saxophones; Doug Woolvorton, trumpet; Anita Suhanin, background vocals (9).

Ordering info: stonyplainrecords.com