

# BIG CITY Rhythm & Blues

# REVIEWS

## SOUTHERN AVENUE Family

Alligator Records

Southern Avenue has made quite a name for itself since its inception less than a decade ago. The family distaff trio of Tierinii, Ava, and Tikyra Jackson was raised on gospel music in Memphis, and didn't segue into secular music until their teens. Around the same time as



that metamorphosis, Israeli guitarist and songwriter Ori Naftaly came to the U.S. with his band to participate in the Blues Foundation's International Blues Challenge. Ori and already renowned singer Tierinii were introduced, and the rest is (brief but notable) history: Tierinii and Ori have become a marital as well as musical couple and formed the band with drummer Tikyra and violinist/percussionist Ava.

Southern Avenue won the 2018 Blues Music Award for their eponymously named 2017 debut album and since have received three more BMA nominations and a Grammy nomination. They now tour extensively and have opened for luminaries such as Willie Nelson and Bob Dylan, both of whom have become aficionados.

For their fourth album, and their first for the

Alligator label, Southern Avenue delivers a percolating, effervescent, bubbling stew of soul, gospel, and rock...oh, yeah, and blues.

This outing celebrates their familial roots and current affinities. It's composed of fourteen original songs, all penned by the group. Buttressing the core players are keyboard artist Jeremy Powell and bassists Blake Rhea and Luther Dickinson.

The title track, clocking in at less than a minute, is introduced by a plangent Naftaly guitar chord and some slide riffs interjected into a mainly a cappella number. Almost as brief is "Believe," melding gospel and blues with understated but sublime guitar. Mid-set is "Rum Boogie," more upbeat and with vibe of rock stirred into the mix. Many of the tracks sound similar, but the high quality maintains interest.

The constant mood of uplift is evident in some of the song titles: "So Much Love," "Gotta Keep the Love," "Believe," and "Back to What Feels Right." In fact, there is not a downer to be found in this set. The prevailing tone is accentuated by the consistently energetic and syncopated rhythms. For me, though, the outstanding feature of "Family" is the singing. Tierinii's lead soprano vocals are moving, steamy, and soulful, and when the three siblings harmonize, the result is superb. Think of harmonizing bands that you have loved: the Pointer Sisters; Crosby, Stills, and Nash; plus innumerable gospel groups. Southern Avenue is on the same level as the

best of them.—**Steve Daniels**

## FRANK BEY Peace

Nola Blues Records

"Peace" is a compilation album that celebrates the life and legacy of that "Southern Gentleman of the Blues," Frank Bey. The late blues vocalist was born and raised in Millen, Georgia and came up singing gospel, working



with Otis Redding, touring the South, with a family band "The Rising Sons" and was a member of a radical '70s funk group called The Moorish Vanguard. You get a sense of all of this on this wonderful collection.

The Grammy and seven-time Blues Music Award nominee was a musical chameleon, able to assess and assume any singer and any song. A case in point is the opening track, "That's What Love Will Make You Do." The Little Milton Campbell composition is lovingly delivered and backed by the Anthony Paule Soul Orchestra. The ensemble adds a bit of bounce and swing to this funky track. Bey has a rich and syrupy-smooth voice that immediately grabs you. In the positive spirit of artists like Bill Withers or Rance Allen, Bey spreads some joy in the messaging here. He sings about how every-

one has a purpose and that there's that one thing that everyone can do to make the world a better place. Backed by stellar harmonies and a strong groove, it's a sentiment we can all get behind.

"Midnight and Day" is a medium cooker that simmers via guitar mainstay Jeff Monjack and organist Doug Travis. Bey sings about an oft-told tale of infidelity, with a twist. Keb Mo's beautiful "City Boy" gets an earnest reading accompanied by Monjack's superb acoustic Dobro work. The addition of Sark Damirjian's scintillating harmonica helps sell the tale of the city boy that wants to reach out beyond the confines of circumstance. "Blues Comes Knockin'" is a nice and easy swing tune, with the team of Monjack and Damirjian, again, lighting up the path for Bey's vocal home run. "Walk With Me" continues in that jazz-blues vein, with stunning keyboards from Andrew Samuels and subtle horn accents arranged by Kevin Frieson. "Bed for My Soul" is written by Monjack and features his wonderful acoustic guitar work alongside Bey's gut-level and unvarnished personal account. "If You Want Me" features Bey at his most intimate and transparent. Perhaps that's because this is a co-write between the singer, Monjack and Frieson. This is a really cool jazz-fusion kind of number, with tasty horns and moody chord changes. The rhythms creep along, with a smoky late-night lounge feel. But just when you think you're being lulled into something

soft and easy, Bey and band erupt with a clincher that takes you by surprise. "Blues in the Pocket" talks about hard times. Bey sings, "Blues in my pocket...nothin' but dust and lint." It's super funky, with in-the-pocket precision and Doug Travis' killer electric piano comps. Two classics close out this fine collection of tracks, with Sam Cooke's "Change is Gonna Come" and John Lennon's "Imagine." Both of these tracks really show you the depth of Bey's ability to interpret an ever-green and make it his own.

This is a great overview and tribute to an artist that has contributed a lot to the lexicon of American and world-class blues music. He covers considerable musical ground on this album and kudos to the folks at Nola Blue for acknowledging the legacy of a true blues master.—**Eric Harabadian**

## JIMMY VIVINO "Gonna Be 2 of Those Days"

Gulf Coast Records

Can this really be only his third album?

Masterful guitarist Jimmy Vivino has been ubiquitous in the blues and more general musical realm for almost six decades, applying his craft to radio, television, and Broadway shows; serving as band member, producer, and/or session artist with such varied figures as Laura Nyro, Odetta, Hubert Sumlin, James Cotton, Joe Louis Walker, Son Seals...you get the picture. For almost three decades he has been gui-

tarist and music director for the Late Night with Conan O'Brien TV show. And after all that, he has recently become guitarist with Canned Heat, the acclaimed blues rock band founded exactly sixty years ago.

This release, Vivino's first since 2013's "13 Live," sports eleven original tunes encompassing an hour and displaying his aptitude at songwriting as well as guitar artistry. The set was co-produced by Vivino and drummer Rich Pagano; Mark Teixeira also handles percussion. Bass



is supplied by Jesse Williams, and keyboards by Vivino and Scott Healy, who also plays accordion on "Goin' Down Fast." That track illustrates the variety of the set; far from being a standard twelve-bar blues outing, it's a mid-tempo number that would have been appropriate on a 1970s album by Robbie Robertson and the Band.

Another notable cut is the opener, "Blues in the 21st." It is basically a re-imagining of Joe Walsh's 1978 classic rock song, "Life's Been Good," with almost identical guitar riffs, courtesy of either Vivino or guest guitarist Joe Bonamassa; it doesn't really matter which of the two guitarists is playing which part, they sound fine together. The only other guest on the album



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SHACK UP INN

is venerable harmonica ace John Sebastian - yes, he of the 1960s band Lovin' Spoonful, now eighty years old and still churning out compelling mouth harp magic, as he does on the set's closing number, "Back Up the Country." Surprisingly, Sebastian also plays rhythm guitar on "Beware the Wolf," an energetic shuffle with some classy piano by Healy.

Vivino's singing on that latter cut - in fact, on all the tracks - is strong and agile; although he occasionally croons smoothly, mostly he delivers a bluesman's rasp that reminds me of a melding of the voices of Howlin' Wolf, Dr. John, Omar Kent Dykes, and the late radio disc jockey Wolfman Jack. His guitar playing, unsurprisingly, is pithy, creative, and expressive throughout.

My favorite track is "Ain't Nuthin's Gonna Be Alright," which definitely should be a candidate for blues song of the year. Contrary to the song's title, on this album everything is alright.—**Steve Daniels**

### JOHN PRIMER *Grown In Mississippi*

Blues House Productions

*Grown In Mississippi* is a musical tribute to the 80-year-old bluesman's home, Camden, Mississippi. "I want to remind everyone that this is where I come from. Mississippi is very dear to me, and it inspires me every day!" Guitarist John Primer joined his idol Muddy Waters' band in 1979 and played until the legend's untimely death in 1983. He played with Magic Slim & the Teardrops the next 13 years and in 1995 formed his own band, The Real

Deal Blues Band. Primer has played on more than 100 albums, including 17 under his own name. He is in the Blues Hall of Fame and has earned 3 Grammy nominations. *Grown In Mississippi* was lovingly recorded in Clarksdale, MS at Gary Vincent's Soundstage. A stellar cast of prominent



blues masters appear on the album, including Bobby Rush, Charlie Musselwhite, Watermelon Slim, Deak Harp and others, while Primer's daughter, Aliya Primer, lends her vocals on the traditional "Lay My Burdens Down." The album opens with "John's Blues Holler," which is exactly that. It brings the listener right into the cotton fields that Primer worked until leaving the south for the promise of a better life north. "Born in Mississippi" follows an autobiographical solo performance on a slide riff based on Robert Johnson's "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom." Most of the songs are originals with a few notable covers like the classic "Baby Please Don't Go," Jimmy Reed's "Shame Shame Shame" and the Willie Dixon title "Down In the Bottom." The rhythm section of drummer of Rickey "Quicksand" Martin

and bassist Harwell Thomas Jr. lay it down nice on half of the 14 tracks and keyboardist Billy Earheart plays on 4 songs. Some notable performances on the album include William Houmans' (AKA Watermelon Slim) dobro on "Down in the Bottom" and Deak Harp plays some masterful harmonica on "Blues Before Sunrise" and "Ain't Kickin' Up No Dust." Speaking of masterful harp playing, the legendary Charlie Musselwhite throws down on the tracks "Baby Please Don't Go" and "Shame Shame Shame." Tying the whole project together of course is Primer's heartfelt vocals and tight and deep guitar playing. *Grown In Mississippi* is a bona fide journey lovingly put together by one of the remaining blues masters still active on the scene, John Primer.—**Bob Montealeone**

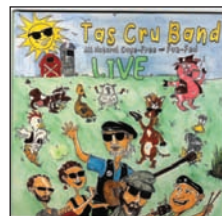
### TAS CRU BAND *All Natural Cage-Free and Fan-Fed*

Subcat Records

Tas Cru is a fine singer and excellent guitarist, although he may be most known for his original songs with their catchy melodies and clever lyrics. His ninth (or tenth?) album does not disappoint. Based in upstate New York, Cru typically employs an expert revolving cast of musicians, many not nationally renowned but all highly skilled. Among those with more recognizable names who have appeared on his past albums have been guitarist Mike Zito, keyboardists Bruce Katz, Anthony Geraci, and Victor

Wainwright, and fiddler Anne Harris. Talent attracts talent.

This outing is Cru's first live album, recorded in the Subcat Music Studios in front of an enthusiastic audience. Mia (Mary Ann) Casale, who has been with Tas for over a decade, lends her supple and stir-



ring vocal cords; Tom Terry on bass, Scott Ebner on keys, and Phil Diiorio on drums complete the ensemble. Those who have been hip to Cru's music won't find any new tunes here; the ten tracks are all renditions of previously recorded songs. No problem; they only sound even better live.

Speaking of sound, let's give kudos to the magicians at the controls: Cru and Shane Patterson, who produced, recorded, and mixed the set, and Ron Keck, responsible for mastering it. This is not only one of the best sounding live blues recordings that I have ever encountered; it is one of the best sounding blues recordings I have ever heard. The mix is superb, each voice and instrument can be heard clearly and distinctly, and it is a sheer joy to listen to.

It's really difficult for me to recommend particular tracks; they all shine. "Stand Up!" from Cru's previous release, 2022's "Riffin' the Blues," is a sizzling rocker, with drums and bass absolutely killing it. "Have a Drink" is an upbeat shuffle allowing Ebner to dazzle on the 88s. Over six minutes long, "Take Me Back to Tulsa" dials it back a little, from sizzle to simmer, with the principals meshing beautifully. Cru provides brief but delicious and inventive guitar solos on

this and indeed every track.

The set ends with "Heal My Soul," an uninhibited gospel rocker that melds all of this band's strengths ideally; the tune modulates midstream and then builds to an uplifting conclusion. As soon as it was over...I put the album on again! Definitely one of Tas Cru's best outings, and one of the best blues albums of 2024.—**Steve Daniels**

### IAN SIEGAL MEETS JOHNNY MASTRO *Easy Tiger*

I think of Ian Siegal as The Brit with Grit.

Probably unfamiliar to many U.S. blues fans because of his rare forays across the Atlantic, singer, guitarist, songwriter, and bandleader Siegal is well known throughout Europe. Since his days as a young busker in the late 1980s, he has compiled a respected body of work and won British Blues Awards for Best Band, Solo Artist, Song, Album, and Male



Vocalist. He is a member of the British Blues Awards Hall of Fame.

This collaboration with New Orleans harmonica adept Johnny Mastro was recorded in NoLa. It's a baker's dozen of new songs with minimal overdubs, resulting in a vibe of spontaneity and authenticity. The guitar and mouth harp stylings are compelling on all tracks, but undeniably the main focus is Siegal's vocals.

The set begins with "4 on the Floor," an unbridled boogie that announces this set's aim to take no prisoners. The ensuing track, "Ballin' the Jack," confirms Siegal's attraction to the

sub-genre of Mississippi hill country blues. In the past Siegal has collaborated with such hill country blues performers as Robert Kimbrough, Cody Dickinson, and Alvin Youngblood Hart; this number mines that sub-genre with its emphasis on rhythm and repetition as opposed to melody. It's followed by "Get Your Gun," in the blues rock vein familiar to both Siegal and Mastro; it does indeed rock. More versatility is evident in the slow blues of "No Mercy," with Mastro blowing agile harmonica, as he does again on "Dog Won't Hunt," which evokes memories of Howlin' Wolf at his best.

Rather than describe each of the remaining tracks, let me just summarize: they all deserve repeat listening and savoring. Two mid-set tracks, "Miss Your Cadillac" and "Quick to Gun," suffer from a muddy auditory mix but are still worthy. There is even a jaunty walking blues, "Emperor's New Clothes," which is noticeably similar to "Everyone Knows" by the late, iconic singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen.

If you can't get to New Orleans to see Johnny Mastro perform, and are unlucky and miss Ian Siegal on one of his infrequent U.S. tours, "Easy Tiger" is a fine way to enjoy their greasy, steamy take on the blues.—**Steve Daniels**

### KHALIF WAILIN' WALTER

*Phoenix Rising*

Timezone Records

Chicago blues artist Khalif Walter declares: "Music is my religion. I am only the messenger." Well, sit down in your pew and prepare to be transported.

Almost four decades ago, Walter passed through Chicago, was smitten by the blues, and promptly moved there. He has since become a fixture on the local scene and has

played gigs and festivals far and wide. Along the way he has benefited from some distinguished mentors. At a chance meeting, B.B. King gave him a guitar lesson. He learned a lot from his uncle, renowned Windy City guitarist Carl Weathersby. Further tutelage was garnered from the great Lonnie Brooks, in whose band he sojourned for four years.

For his first album in eight years, Walter provides the guitar, bass, and vocals, with help from drummer Barry Wintergarden and a cast of eleven other rotating musicians. Opening are two numbers which for me evoke memories of pop/rock tunes of the 1950s and 1960s: "Connie-Lee" and "Baby, Please Lie to Me." Like the remainder of the album's tunes, they were all written by Walter. On the former, Chris Rannenberg deals out some choice piano, followed by a nifty Khalif gui-



tar solo. Rannenberg shines again on "Baby..." with the horn section chiming in for a boost of zest. The horns take a breather next on "The Streets," a slow blues with more pithy guitar. Then we get to enjoy the title track, a rocker with thrumming drums and bass.

"I'm Through Cryin'" reverts to a slow groove again, with some of Walter's best six string contributions and swirling organ accompaniment by Paul Jobson. "Big Bootyed Woman" mines a familiar lyrical trope, in a standard Chicago blues style. "I'm Your Love Doctor," another slow blues, is my least favorite cut of the set; Walter's vocals, pitched between tenor and bari-

tone range, sound a little strained, as they do when he takes brief detours into falsetto. Rannenberg reappears on piano to juice up the shuffle "Stone Cold Busted," which is also motorized by the dual saxophones of Evert Hoedt and Martin van Toor.

The album ends with an instrumental, "Chi-Town Soundcheck," a shuffle with just bass, drums, and Khalid waxing adventurous on guitar. Good songs and musicianship; let's hope that we don't have to wait another eight years for Walter's next release—  
**Steve Daniels**

### REV. PEYTON'S BIG DAMN BAND Honeysuckle

Family Owned Records

Reverence, raunch, and rollicking rock, all melded with Mississippi hill country blues. That's what awaits you in this sixth album from the Big Damn Band, an Indiana outfit, essentially a duo, led by guitar virtuoso and powerful singer Rev. Peyton, ably accompanied on washboard and vocals by his wife Breezy. The third band colleague, percussionist Jacob "the Snakob" Powell, adds vocal harmonies as well as some rhythm, and several other renowned musicians make appearances.

The set, recorded in Breezy and the Rev.'s living room, clocks in at only a little over half an hour, but its brevity is overshadowed by its prevailing tone, which is somewhere between fervent and ferocious. There are a few tracks that provide a breather, but to characterize this album as energetic is a gross understatement.

As in their prior albums, the Rev. is the main attraction. His skills at fingerpicking and bottleneck slide guitar are top-notch. They are evident from the opening, title tune, a solo Rev. original number (seven of the dozen songs are origi-

nals) which proceeds at a measured pace but with an impassioned vocal and adept slide. The abiding influence of "the king of the Delta blues," Robert Johnson, is evident in the cover of Johnson's "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day," but Peyton indelibly stamps his unique style on it. Full-on gospel appears in "Looking for a Manger," with Peyton's sturdy vocal pipes enhanced by the harmonies of the McCrary Sisters; they be testifyin! The harmony on the ensuing "Like a Treasure" is courtesy of Breezy. Breezy's washboard and voice accompany her hubby on "One Dime



Blues," a spirited cover of a Blind Lemon Jefferson song. The following track, also a Jefferson cover, benefits from the sinuous harmonica of Billy Branch...and can the Rev.'s singing get any more vehement than this?

Time for a let-up in intensity? "Freeborn Man" tries to fool us, beginning with slow, lyrical guitar...and then blasting into overdrive, with Peyton's vocal and guitar intertwining with the fierce and fluid violin of famous fiddler Michael Cleveland. "I Can't Sleep" slows the tempo as it conflates gospel and hill country styles. Powell lends hand percussion to the upbeat "Let Go," and banjo maven Colton Crawford meshes well with Peyton's fingerpicking on "The Good Die Young." The penultimate track, a thoroughly unique take of the traditional "Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning," deserves positive comparison with many of its previous cover versions, especially that of Hot Tuna from the 1970s.

The album concludes with the unfettered "Mama Do," all burners on high. I don't know if Mama do, but the Big Damn Band surely do!—**Steve Daniels**

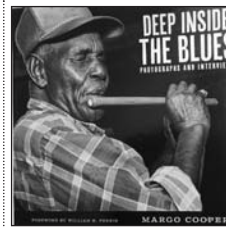
## BOOK

### DEEP INSIDE THE BLUES:

Photographs and  
Interviews by  
Margo Cooper.

University Press of Mississippi.

An enduring lesson I learned from participating in so many blues education projects is that blues is more than music; that blues is a window into a particular culture. Margo Cooper immerses us in that blues culture through her photographs and oral histories, allowing the musicians to speak for themselves about their lives. From the dust jacket cover portrait of Otha Turner to the back cover showing Sam Carr fishing at Moon Lake to the over 160 black-and-white photographs within, the book is beautifully appointed and big enough to warrant one of those museum-quality book stands or a good-sized coffee table. All the photographs are labeled with the subject, place, and date, and the book is organized by region: Chicago, the Delta, Beyond the Delta, and Hill Country. The collection is impressive, the result of years of work by Cooper transcribing recorded interviews over periods of time



and revisiting blues people who became friends.

Scholar William Ferris says in the foreword that Cooper's "interviews deftly unlock and reveal the soul of a people and their music. Their voices have hypnotic power as they speak. Cooper focused on their rich language in her interviews." Ferris praises the book as a "major contribution to how we understand blues and the State of Mississippi. . . . a powerful complement to classic works like Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, Robert Palmer's *Deep Blues*." Cooper herself says, "I wanted to get not only the exact content of what the musicians had to say, but the way they said it, their emotions, the rhythm of their speech, which was its own music."

A professional photographer originally from the Boston area, in the preface, Cooper charts her growth from hearing "Messin' with the Kid" when she was in high school to writing about musicians for the local *Blues Wire* to eventually conducting oral histories over time, multiple interviews with the same person, and visiting Chicago and Mississippi. Her extensive feature about Muddy Waters Band alum-

nus Luther "Guitar Junior" Johnson was first published by *Living Blues* magazine. Besides Luther, the first section of the book, "Chicago Called," has two long sections on two more Muddy alumni, Willie "Big Eyes" Smith and Calvin "Fuzz" Jones.

Part II—The Delta is the longest section, with some familiar names telling their own stories: Sam Carr, Robert "Bilbo" Walker, Super Chikan, "T-Model" Ford, Eddie Cusic, Mickey Rogers. Part III—Beyond the Delta has an interview with LC Ulmer followed by short sections on Willie King, Jimmy "Duck" Holmes, and Bud Spiers. In Part IV, the Mississippi Hill Country is explored, from Otha Turner's big family to the Burnsidés, ending with Cedric.

Musician and scholar Adam Gussow notes that "Cooper's interviews offer a nuanced celebration of the musicians she has come to know—indomitable individuals, storytellers and healers both," complemented by so many stellar photographs. My favorites include a portrait of Honeyboy Edwards opposite the Table of Contents, Junior Wells and Buddy Guy in an embrace, and "T-Model" Ford's granddaughter Stella playing a toy guitar.—**Karen McFarland**

*Karen McFarland is a retired English professor and former organizer for the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival*



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