

BIG CITY Rhythm & Blues

REVIEWS

MIKEY JUNIOR Blues In The Barn Volume 1

8th Train Music

Take two individually successful blues-rocking guitarists and put them together with their respective bandmates; what could go wrong? Potentially, a lot: disparate styles, clashing egos, differing tastes. In this case, though, no worries. Mike Zito and Albert Castiglia (“ca-steel-ya”) seem to be an ideal musical pairing.

Zito and Castiglia have each reached the pinnacle of the blues-rock world. Each has won multiple Blues Music Awards from the Blues Foundation and each has released praised albums. Zito, a St. Louis native who has played guitar since age five, is also a valued producer and is co-founder of the Gulf Coast label. Miami native Castiglia apprenticed in the band of legendary singer and harmonica player Junior Wells in the late 1990s before going solo. Since spring 2022 they have toured together as the Blood Brothers. This eponymous album affirms their soulful partnership.

Under the production guidance of fellow guitarists Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith, Zito and Castiglia tear into a well chosen set list of eleven songs, four penned by the former and one by the latter. Their ensemble includes percussionists Ephraim Lowell and Matt Johnson, bassist Douglas Byrkit, and keyboard expert Lewis Stephens. In addition to Bonamassa

and Smith, several other musicians appear; special kudos to the horn section and to the talented backing vocalists Dannielle DeAndrea and Jade Macrae.

For those bored by, or disdainful of guitar-slingers who fling myriad notes with egotistical abandon, do not despair. Zito and Castiglia have buried their egos in the blues! They have chosen fine songs,



replete with variety, vivacity, and virtuosity. There are two rambunctious rockers: “Hey Sweet Mama,” the opening track, and a cover of John Hiatt’s “My Business.” Hiatt’s tune features the two principals singing in harmony, as they do on one or two other tracks. On most of the tunes, though, one of them sings lead. Both are in excellent vocal form. Zito puts his all into his own composition, “In My Soul,” which opens with acoustic guitar and was inspired by his wife’s 2022 bout with cancer; it is one of several cuts reminiscent of the sound of the Allman Brothers Band. Equally impassioned is the singing on “You’re Gonna Burn,” a slow blues from the viewpoint of an embittered, rejected lover; it transcends some clichéd lyrics to become one of the best tracks of the set.

Although every track is worthy, there are three

that really grabbed me. “Tooth and Nail,” written for the Blood Brothers by Georgia bluesman Tinsley Ellis, has slide guitar, and a terrific vocal by Castiglia. On most of the songs one principal plays lead guitar while the other provides impeccable rhythm backing; here the two trade lead guitar licks in call-and-response fashion. “Hill Country Jam,” a seven-minute instrumental of Zito’s, has key and tempo changes, a fine Stephens organ solo, and guitar solos that progress from lyrical to frenetic to synchronously sweet. Then there is the final track, “One Step Ahead of the Blues,” with more acoustic guitar, pulsing handclaps, dual vocals, and beautifully intertwined guitar work. By itself it’s worth the price of admission. Bring on the accolades.—**Steve Daniels**

LIGHTNIN’ MALCOLM Eye Of The Storm

Whiskey Bayou Records

Lightnin’ Malcolm is a cutting edge Mississippi guitar-slinger who has been on the scene for over a decade, with a handful of critically-acclaimed releases on the indie label ShakeDown Records. Specializing in the stripped-down style of blues known as Hill Country, he is adept at playing unaccompanied electric guitar with foot drums or with a drummer, notably Cedric Burnside, grandson of one the main originators of Hill Country, R.L. Burnside. He’s toured the US and Europe, played many big festival

stages, but is possibly more comfortable playing juke joints across the South where his music really feels at home. On Eye Of The Storm he is

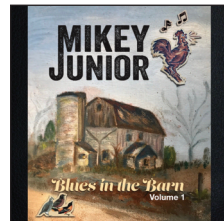


joined by Brady Blade as well as Tab Benoit on the drums. The esteemed blues artist Benoit is the producer of this album as well as the owner of Whiskey Bayou Records. Malcolm has inspired none other than Led Zeppelin vocalist Robert Plant and has toured as a member of the North Mississippi Allstars. On Eye Of The Storm, Lightnin’ Malcolm mostly sticks with the Hill Country sound that he has mastered and is known for, but when joined by bassist Tony Hall (Neville Bros., Bob Dylan, Dumpstaphunk) he branches out vocally and song structure-wise, like on the title track and “Lift Us Up.” The eleven original songs are recorded with no frills or known overdubs. Malcolm’s guitar playing is sharp and on point with just enough grease to make him dangerous. His singing is soulful and is reminiscent of a young Levon Helm, especially on the funky jam “Too Many Nights.” Eye Of The Storm is an honest and rocking album, please keep it up! — **Bob Monteleone**

MIKEY JUNIOR Blues In The Barn Volume 1

8th Train Music

Mikey Junior is a master harmonica player and singer who has been steadily putting out releases for the last two decades. He plays at all types of venues and festivals in and outside the Philadelphia area. The aptly named *Blues In The Barn Volume 1* was actually recorded inside an old farm silo sitting on 80 acres owned by his friend Gene Stickel. The silo was repurposed as a recording studio by renowned producer/engineer Andy Kravitz. The album smokes from start to finish with pure, no nonsense Chicago-style blues. “Something Inside Me” opens the session with an Elmore James “dustin” slide guitar and from there straight to a “killin’” Howlin’ Wolf/Hubert Sumlin-inspired “Shake For Me.” A few slow burn songs, “You’re Killing Me,”



“Elevate Me Mama,” and “321 Chelsea” are highlights, especially the latter, where Junior creates a huge harp sound, perhaps from the large Hohner 64 Chromonica he is notably pictured with on his website. An instrumental version of the old standard “Summertime” breaks things up amid the shuffles and slow blues numbers.

Overall, a real solid outing and the title implies there’s more to come from the barn. Bring it on, please!—**Bob Monteleone**

JOHN PRIMER “Teardrops for Magic Slim: Live at Rosas’s Lounge”

Blues House Productions

Morris Holt (aka “Magic Slim”) was the son of sharecroppers, originally from Torrance, Mississippi.



The singer and guitarist moved to Chicago in 1955, with his friend and mentor Magic Sam. He had a rough go assimilating at first and actually moved back to Mississippi. But by 1965 he was back in Chicago hitting every juke joint and nightclub he could find. In 1970 Slim formed his band The Teardrops and made blues history recording for labels like Alligator, Wolf Records, MCM and Blind Pig.

One of Chicago’s fellow favorite blues sons John Primer joined Slim’s band in the early ‘80s and lent his considerable guitar and vocal skills in service of The Teardrops for thirteen years. This latest recording finds Primer giving back to his former boss and recognizing one of the originators and innovators of modern Chicago blues. Recorded live at Rosa’s Lounge in Chicago, Illinois in November 2022, Primer and his band honor Magic

Slim by covering a number of the songs that made him famous. As an added bonus Slim's son Shawn Holt sits in on vocals and guitar for a couple tracks.

Over the span of a dozen tracks Primer and company deliver some of the best and most authentic blues you are ever gonna hear. J.B. Lenoir's "Mama Talk to Your Daughter" kicks things off in a spirited manner, with the band's "say what" refrain echoing in the fray. The festivities continue with Jimmy Dawkins' "Luv Somebody." It's an up tempo and funky shuffle, with deeply syncopated and layered guitars. Jimmy McCracklin's "Every Night, Every Day" features down and dirty guitars and a number of straight ahead shuffles follow in "Ain't Doing Too Bad," "Buddy Buddy Friend" and Magic Slim's own "Trouble of My Own." Willie Dixon's "Let Me Love You Baby" has been popularized by tons of blues and rock artists alike. Primer seems to capitalize on that fact and vocally tries to encourage applause and carrying on from the audience. Shawn Holt jumps in on guitar and vocals for this and the follow up "It Hurts Me Too." The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree, as they say. He follows in his father's footsteps delivering some mighty vocals that really connect with the crowd. Another highlight that stands out is Eddie Jones' "The Things I Used to Do." This was a big hit for Stevie Ray Vaughn, among others, and Primer and company do the song proud. A big song for Little Milton, "The Blues is Alright" always seems to get a rise out of people. And it is a great choice here that wraps the night on a swinging and exuberant note.

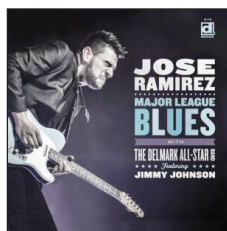
The liner notes extend the hope that this album will shine a light on the accomplishments of Magic Slim and let younger gen-

erations learn where this music came from. In my estimation Primer and his crew certainly accomplished that goal.—**Eric Harabadian**

JOSE RAMIREZ *Major League Blues*

Delmark

Major League Blues, Jose Ramirez's first release with the esteemed Delmark record label, is roughly divided into two halves. The first four songs were recorded in Chicago with the Delmark All-Star Band, including legendary guitarist Jimmy Johnson on the title track. The following six tracks were recorded with the Jose Ramirez Studio Band in North Carolina, at Purple Ridge Studio. The album is held together by Ramirez's emotive vocals



and tasty guitar licks. Appearing on the first half of the record are some "Major League" heavy-weights of Chicago blues: 90-year-old bassist Bob Stroger, drummer Willie "The Touch" Hayes, Roosevelt Purifoy on B3 organ and Billy Flynn on guitar. The title track opens the session, where Jose name checks some of his biggest influences, like Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy and Jimmy Johnson himself. The listener shares in the joy that Ramirez must feel trading licks in the studio with one of his idols. On the second track, the slow burn Ramirez original, "I Saw It Coming," Purifoy takes us to church on the Hammond B3 that was originally the organ at the famed Chess Records studio. (If only that organ

could speak, the stories it could tell!) On the 2nd half of the record, the spooky original "Here In the Delta" shines, with some effective vocal treatments highlighted by some serious B3 playing by Andre Reyes Jr. Ramirez steps out of the typical blues vocabulary and squeezes some very melodic notes out of his Fender guitar. The album is certainly a tribute to Chicago-style blues but is not limited strictly to that genre. The Latin-tinged "Are We Really Different" is a highlight. The obvious comparison is to Santana, however, Ramirez's guitar tone is drastically different from Carlos' fat, overdriven sound. The outro breaks down with some nice conga work by Evan Hoffman and lilting montuno piano by Andre Reyes Jr. while the Costa Rica native Ramirez sings Spanish lyrics over the top. The album is cohesive and it definitely achieves it's stated goal in the liner by the leader himself, "I wanted to cut a record that sounds like the records I used to listen to when I was growing up. No reworks, no frills...only raw passion." Well then, mission accomplished! -

Bob Monteleone

JOHNNY SANSONE *Into Your Blues*

Shortstack Records

Primo harmonicist, vocalist, accordionist and guitarist Johnny Sansone has recorded over a dozen albums. He has been nominated for seven music awards, and in 2012, won the prestigious Blues Music Award. He was heavily influenced by Jimmy Reed and has supported Robert Lockwood, Jr., David "Honeyboy" Edwards and Jimmy Rogers on tour. He brings that enormous wealth of musical savvy and blues acumen to his thirteenth and latest venture.

The title track gets



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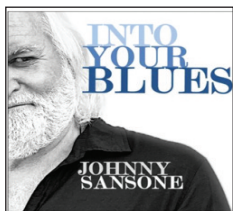
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things underway in gritty and jazzy mid-tempo style. Sansone delivers some hefty vocals and fiery harp work. Guitarists Johnny



Burgin and Mike Morgan offer fine interplay and support. With references to Jimmy Reed and fellow blues pioneers, streaming music services and the like, Sansone makes a clever and earnest plea to the general public that you've got to support blues music. "Pay for This Song" is a track that makes its case within the framework of a straight-ahead blues shuffle. Old school R&B, with compelling lyrics and a testifying sense of purpose finds Sansone singing, "Desperation is a sad thing....it's got a hold on me. Desperation make a man go wrong, but I keep holding on to you." This finds the leader here at his most honest and vulnerable. "Blowin' Fire" is a special track as it features guest Jason Ricci. It's a swinging tune, with great interplay on harmonica and vocals between Sansone and Ricci. Never has a mix of smooth style and raw emotion worked so well. Little Freddie King guests on "Willie's Juke Joint." King recounts coming up as a player via acoustic guitar and the uncanny ability to really spin a yarn. Another track that seems to captivate is "New Crossroads." Based loosely off the spirit of Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker, this has a trance-like boogie feel that is intoxicating. Sansone's chilling harmonica produces an otherworldly vibe. "Something Good Going On" follows and is catchy, funky and birthed in the feel of New Orleans. Tiffany Pollock's backing

vocals add a nice counterpoint to Sansone's rough and tumble voice. "Single Room" sort of continues that New Orleans flavor, with a voodoo-like tale underscored by swampy percussion. "Southern Dream" is, essentially, a Sansone solo vehicle where he shows his prowess on Resonator guitar. It's a fairly simple song structure, but it provides the opportunity to display the leader's musical roots and artistic direction.

Sansone has assembled a great crew and complementary bevy of special guests to elevate this release to the cream of modern blues status. He writes memorable songs that are destined to keep blues, R&B and related music humming along for the foreseeable future.—**Eric Harabadian**

SUGAR BLUE *Colors*

Beeble Music

Many in the classic rock world, most likely, first found the name Sugar Blue show up on their radar as fans of the Rolling Stones. The ubiquitous soulful harp man and vocalist grabbed the spotlight playing the signature harmonica riff on the Stones late '70s/early '80s



disco hit "Miss You." But Blue has gone on to support a wide variety of musicians, including jazz artists Stan Getz and Lionel Hampton and also worked with Ray Charles, Fats Domino and Jerry Lee Lewis. He's also composed film soundtracks, including music for major studio pictures like "Angel Heart."

So it's obvious, with a diverse resume like Blue

has, a musical cookie cutter approach to his career just didn't make sense. Hence, feast your ears on his latest and greatest, "Colors." It's called that, undoubtedly, for the various musical colors and flavors that run through this whole recording. I think another reason the "color" scheme applies is because, not only was the album recorded at four different studios in Italy, China, Chicago and South Africa, but the Afrika Riz choral ensemble guests as well as Chinese Sheng player (a woodwind-type instrument) Ling Bo.

Save for The Beatles' "Day Tripper" James Whiting (aka Sugar Blue) solely wrote or co-wrote all the songs on the album. And he takes the listener on a wild and bluesy ride starting with "And the Devil Too." With a Bo Diddley-meets-John Lee Hooker sensibility, this track kicks open the doors, with Blue's signature and incendiary harmonica style. It's some loose, crazy and inspired playing, with a random New Orleans cadence as well. "Bass Reeves" does an about face by giving the listener a history lesson you're probably not gonna find in today's current conservative academic climate. Reeves was the first black deputy U.S. Marshall that was rustling up bad guys west of the mighty Mississippi River. Blue delivers the tale with reverence and an enthusiasm for establishing a sense of roots. "We'll Be Alright" is a hopeful tune, with a gospel edge and spirited vocals from Afrika Riz. The sole cover, "Day Tripper," is pretty faithful to The Beatles, but shifts into overdrive mode. Blue's off-the-hook vocals and harmonica note bends are super tasty. "Good Old Days" is dyed-in-the-wool country blues, with Washboard Chaz providing that rhythmic scratch. "Dirty Ole Man" comes from another angle, with a

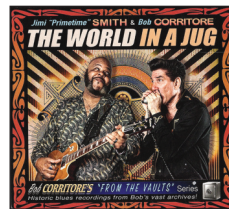
caustic megaphone-filtered vocal and gritty mid-tempo charm. Sugar Blue shows all sides of his personality and writing style, with tracks like this. "Shanghai Sunset" is perhaps one of the more unique and world beat tracks on the album. It has a decidedly Asian flair, with Blue's very lyrical and poetic vocal reading and the smooth and airy Sheng playing by Bo. "Downhill" returns to a straight-ahead bluesy vibe that is funky with a contemporary feel. It has words of wisdom that really flow. "Bonnie and Clyde" and "Keep On" were both co-written by Blue and bassist Ilaria Lantieri, with the former focusing on the infamous criminal duo and the latter offering good grooves and a positive message.

This is, perhaps, Sugar Blue's most global and cosmopolitan release. It just goes to show that the blues is universal and this particular leader is one of the music's greatest contemporary ambassadors.—**Eric Harabadian**

JIMI "PRIMETIME" SMITH & BOB CORRITORE

The World in a Jug
SVMMAF Records/Vizztone 2023

Singer and guitarist Jimi Smith is the son of distaff Chicago drummer Johnnie Mae Dunson, who worked with Willie Dixon and with Jimmy Reed, who lived with Smith's family for a



time. Jimi relocated to Arizona in 2014 and has established an ongoing and fruitful collegiality with ace harmonica player Bob Corritore. Bob himself relocated to Phoenix several decades ago from Chicago and has established him-

self as a club owner, radio programmer, and record producer, garnering multiple Blues Music Award nominations along the way for his harmonica prowess.

One of the benefits we listeners get from Corritore's wide musical base in AZ is his frequent release of compilations from past recording sessions. "The World in a Jug" is a collection gleaned from four different sessions between 2017 and 2020. Smith and Corritore are joined on the ten tracks by an impressive cast of musicians. The basic format is upbeat Chicago-style blues, but there is sufficient variation as well as ample skill to maintain interest.

Kicking off the party is the propulsive title track, written by Dunson. Nonagenarian Bob Stroger on bass and Fred Kaplan (formerly of the Hollywood Fats Band and the Hollywood Blue Flames) comprise the adept rhythm section, along with drummer Brian Fahey, who plays on most of the set. Present on this and all but one track is second guitarist Johnny Rapp. The same ensemble remains on Freddie King's "Love Her with a Feeling."

Kaplan is replaced on piano for the next track, a Smith original, "You for Me," by Henry Gray, former pianist for Howlin' Wolf; also a nonagenarian, Gray showed that he could still tickle the ivories shortly before his demise in 2020 at age 95. On this cut West Coast stalwarts Marty Dodson on drums and Troy Sandow on bass take their respective seats. The tune has a distinct aura of Jimmy Reed, as does "We Got to Stick Together," credited again to Dunson. A live audience shows its appreciation as Smith does a credible job of reprising Reed's drawing vocal style.

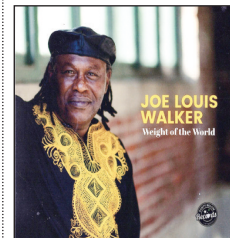
"Soul Food" is an amusing paean to that style of cuisine, and "Walkin',"

another Smith original, sports some nifty slide guitar. The set concludes with two more of the six Smith originals, "Southbound" and "Fire and Ice," the former a sizzling shuffle aided by Gray, Sandow, and Dodson, and the latter a slow number, almost six minutes long, with a pithy guitar solo by Smith and some of Corritore's best harmonica renderings. On the entire set Corritore burnishes his reputation as harp player extraordinaire. Never flashy or self-indulgent, he consistently enhances each number with tasteful fills and expert solos, using the entire range of the "Mississippi saxophone." —**Steve Daniels**

JOE LOUIS WALKER

Weight of the World
Forty Below Records 2023

Joe Louis Walker certainly has nothing left to prove. A member of the Blues Hall Fame, he is a multiple Grammy nominee and has won six of the Blues Foundation's Blues



Music Awards, among his more than fifty! BMA nominations. However, his new album proves once again that his vision and motivation are fresh and his skills undiminished.

This set benefits from the efforts of a firecracker of a band under the auspices of producer Eric Corne, who also wrote or co-wrote five of the ten tracks and played guitar or percussion on most. Walker wrote or co-wrote six of the tunes. The rhythm section is composed of bassist Geoff Murfitt, who is excellent on all tracks, and keyboard

artist Scott Milici and drummer John Medeiros Jr., who are superb. Medeiros provides driving and creative percussion, and Milici lends soulful organ renderings to almost every song. Percussion is also enhanced by Ed Jackson on bongos, and on two tracks trumpeter Mark Pender and saxophonist David Ralicke add more spicy flavor.

Half my review was almost written for me in the liner notes, which classify each track by sub-genre (although I don't always agree). There are four numbers characteristic of soul blues, a couple of more traditional blues, and a long jazz tune to conclude the set. The one alleged gospel track, "Hello, It's the Blues," sounds to me like a slow late-night blues ballad, enhanced by a violin section and the angelic backing vocal of Gia Ciambotti (who collaborates on three other songs). The ostensi-

ble foray into funk, "Count Your Chickens," indeed fits that bill, with wah-wah guitar, bongos, and infectious syncopation (also present in "Waking Up the Dead").

"Root Down," is a shuffle which departs from the traditional twelve-bar format, with no loss of appeal; it is the only song demonstrating Walker's expertise at harmonica as well as guitar. His guitar mastery, of course, is a given. On a few songs he metes out crunchy chords, but in general he relies on single note leads with crisp clarity and often a surprising and delightful delicacy. Check out "Bed of Roses," co-written with Corne; Walker's mid-song guitar solo is minimalist but powerful; he doesn't need to rip off a flurry of notes to achieve an effect. By the way, Walker's singing, slightly reedy and high-pitched, is still as strong in his seventies as it was decades ago.

Don't let me forget the one blues rock number,

"Blue Mirror." This is over six minutes of pure streamrolling, boiling grit, propelled by Walker's guitar and Milici on piano. I played it three times in a row, and then had to stop before I became addicted.—**Steve Daniels**

FRANCK L. GOLDWASSER
Who Needs This Mess?

CrossCut Records 2022

www.bluesisgold.com

I have written about him in these pages before. If you aren't familiar with him yet, now is the time; no more excuses. Franck Goldwasser is one of the best relatively unheralded bluesmen around. Throughout his various sojourns in Paris, France (his birthplace and current home; he was known as Paris Slim); Oakland, CA; Portland, OR; and Carpinteria, CA, he has consistently produced high quality blues infused with



jazz and rock tropes. His musical associations are myriad; rather than listing them here, I suggest checking his website. Each of his albums is a pleasure to be savored; recent ones are "Sweet Little Black Spider" from 2020 and 2021's "Going Back to Paris."

His latest, "Who Needs This Mess," is a full hour of fifteen original tunes, ten of them recorded in 2019-2021 at the studio of noted multi-instrumentalist and

producer Ralph Carter. Carter does exemplary work on bass, abetted by equally impressive drummer Johnny Morgan, as Goldwasser dances about them with gritty chords and flurries of lead notes. On those tracks Franck ably sings in a tenor range with occasional falsetto flourishes, and on "What Am I to Do?" blows some fine harmonica. That song is less than two minutes long, but spirited, with pithy lyrics characteristic of Franck's writing: "You don't want me scratching at your door/You'd rather if I just sweep the floor/You don't want me swimming back to shore/What am I to do, what am I to do?" Similar pointed lyrics, with

a decidedly liberal political bent, grace the title tune, and also "Had a Dream Last Night," the latter embellished by the presence of Goldwasser's frequent collaborator R.J. Mischo, blowing expert diatonic and chromatic harmonica.

The title track, over six minutes long, finds Franck, Carter, and Morgan deployed with none other than Charlie Musselwhite on harmonica and award winner Sugaray Rayford, Goldwasser's former colleague in the now defunct Mannish Boys, singing the powerful vocal. On rhythm guitar is noted fretman Kirk Fletcher (Mannish Boys, Joe Bonamassa), whose interplay with

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Franck on two tunes is delightful. Similarly tasty is the dual guitar collaboration on four tracks from 2009 with Alastair Greene, who at that time was himself relatively unheralded, but currently is deservedly one of today's most popular blues rockers. Also on those four tracks is Santa Barbara drummer Tom Lackner, who just kills it! especially on "Sweet Cream," which features a frenetic and inventive Goldwasser solo.

Among my favorite tracks are the four instrumentals, "Skwurley," "Diskum Baab Uleh Shun," "Sobby Doggy Boogy," and "Raggmazazz." Don't ask me what the titles signify, but they sure do sizzle, highlighted by Franck's



innovative solos. To cap the festivities, the set ends with "Bleeding Heart," a seven-minute outing aided by award-winner Jim Pugh on piano and organ and former B.B. King band member Tony Coleman on drums. It shows that Goldwasser can nail a slow blues, too. —**Steve Daniels**

ANGELA STREHLI *Ace of Spades*

New West Records/Antone's
Records 2022

She's back! After almost two decades of recording absence, and her return is welcome.

Texas chanteuse Angela Strehli has a long and distinguished resume dating back to the 1960s. Originally from Lubbock, TX, after college she devoted herself to the blues, forming her own band and performing with a veritable pantheon of blues legends, including B.B. King, Muddy Waters,

Etta James, Buddy Guy, Jimmy Reed, Bonnie Raitt, Otis Rush, and Jimmy Reed. Wow!

Before "Ace of Spades" her last solo album was released in 2005. (She has performed with Dorothy Morrison and Tracy Nelson as the Blues Broads.) For her return, now septuagenarian Strehli and her husband and co-producer Bob Brown rounded up an all-star ensemble of musicians, many based near their northern California home. Strehli chose to focus on one tune each from some of her favorite artists.

Bobby Blue Bland's "Two Steps from the Blues" opens the festivities: it's one of five tracks featuring the zesty horn section of saxophonists Johnnie Beaumont and Rob Sudduth and trumpeter Marvin McFadden. Harmonica appears on only one track, "I Love the Life I Live," penned by Willie Dixon and identified with Muddy Waters; Mark Kazanoff deploys the mouth harp skillfully. Piano is frequently prominent and delightful, courtesy of either octogenarian Johnny Allair or Mike Emerson (of Tommy Castro's band The Painkillers). Making single appearances are guitar ace Kid Andersen on Jimmy Reed's "Take Out Some Insurance," and keyboard whiz Jim Pugh on the gospel number "I Wouldn't Mind Dying" by Dorothy Love Coates, the latter enhanced by the rousing vocals of the Sons of the Soul Revivers.

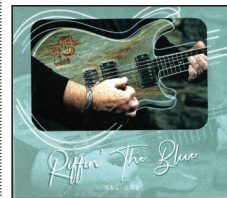
On all tracks the bassists and drummers can be heard clearly and mesh flawlessly. Not least are the contributions of guitarist Mike Schermer, who has been associated with Strehli for a couple of decades. He shines throughout, particularly with his luscious solo on Otis Rush's "Gambler's Blues."

Strehli's pipes have weathered some over the years, but still sound good; she can segue easily from a slow soul blues to a rocker like Chuck Berry's "You Never Can Tell." Her reverence for the musicians who influenced her is most evident on the closing number of the set, its only original, "SRV," her tribute to her late friend, guitar maven Stevie Ray Vaughan. It is buttressed by the pensive B3 organ embellishment of John Lee Sanders and provides a fine coda to the album.—**Steve Daniels**

TAS CRU *Riffin' the Blue*

Subcat Records 2022

What exactly is a riff? Is it a hook, motif, theme? According to the dictionary, it is "a short repeated phrase in music"; Tas Cru calls it a "melodic guitar hook." Whatever your pre-



ferred definition, this album is replete with catchy riffs in an album showcasing Cru's mastery of eclectic blues styles.

Based in central New York, Tas Cru is a prolific musician, recently releasing almost an album per year. He also tours extensively, sometimes as a soloist and sometimes with a band. He is a Blues Music Award nominee, and recipient of a Keeping the Blues Alive award for his educational efforts. His songwriting aptitude is evident in this set's eleven original tunes, and he is supported by long-time stalwarts Mary Ann Casale (backing vocals), Andy Hearn and Ron Keck (percussion), and Bob Purdy (bass). His past albums have featured noted keyboardists Victor

Wainwright and Anthony Geraci; this one deploys equally renowned pianist and organist Bruce Katz on all but one track.

An added bonus is the presence on the opening and closing tracks of guitarist Mike Zito. Midway on the opening title tune Zito rips off a sizzling solo, and on "Memphis Gone," the last track of the set, he plays stirring slide guitar which blends beautifully with Katz's soulful piano. Backing vocals accentuate Cru's equally soulful singing. On the upbeat "Brown Liquor Woman" it's Cru's zesty guitar which coheres with Katz on piano... as it does consistently throughout the set. Katz switches to organ on "Stand Up," an irresistible number reminiscent of outings by the Staple Singers or Sly and the Family Stone; you will indeed be standing up and boogieing.

Turning down the tempo, the ensemble addresses the set's longest track, "One More Time," and the almost eight-minute number is a triumph. It's a slow blues with more of Katz's organ magic, and Tas's lead guitar is gorgeously pensive and heart-rending. Almost its equal is the remaining slow number, "House of



the Blues," with fine harmony backing vocals.

There are three mid-tempo numbers occupying the middle of the set, and there is "Miss This Man," a rocker with bubbling piano. Finally, there is "Let It Happen," an "advice of life" tune replete with humorous lyrics.

My assessment: this album is one of Tas Cru's best; it's terr-riff!—**Steve**

Daniels

MARTIN LANG & RUSTY ZINN

Mr. Blues, Mr. Blues
Random Chancer Records 2022

Bi-coastal fireworks! West Coast guitar maestro Rusty Zinn meets Chicago blues harmonica whiz Martin Lang and his gang of Windy City all-star musicians, and sparks fly.

Although active for less than three decades, Zinn has created a legacy through his work with Mark Hummel, Luther Tucker, Kim Wilson, and myriad others, as well as on his own recordings. (He has also made forays deep into the reggae genre.) Lang likewise has released several respected albums while working with such legends as Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, Tail Dragger, and John Primer. Here the duo dig into fourteen tracks spanning almost an hour. Most are cover versions, although five are Lang compositions and one is Zinn's.

Propelling the action is drummer Kelly Littleton. Bass, keyboards, and second guitar chores are shared in rotating fashion by eight other bluesmen, all whose efforts are consistently in the pocket, with nary a misstep.

If there is a caveat, it is that the set, honchoed by blues historian and veteran producer Dick Shurman, is comprised with only a few exceptions of basic twelve-bar electric Chicago blues. However, the potential downside of excess repetition is easily superseded by the insistent grooves and impeccable virtuosity. Both Lang and Zinn, and the several keyboard players, have ample opportunity to deal out zesty solos, but nobody takes an extended ego trip that upstages the appeal of each song itself.

Vocal chores are alternated between the two principals, with an interesting contrast. Zinn sings in

a soulful tenor; a good example is on "You've Gotta Stop This Mess," which also features one of his best guitar leads. Lang's vocals, in contrast, are lower, grittier with a hint of drawl evoking memories of someone like the late Johnny Dyer or even Little Walter. His harmonica playing also brings Little Walter to mind...which is intended as a high compliment.

There are three instrumentals, varying in tempo but not in quality. "Rose & Kelly's Boogie," a four-minute spirited romp, is itself worth the price of admission, Lang up front for most of the tune on harmonica but Zinn providing a fine mid-song guitar lead.

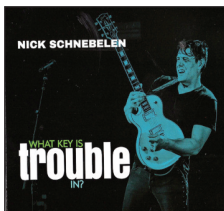
Kudos should be given to second guitarists Billy Flynn and Frank Krakowski, both deservedly well known nationally to guitar appreciators for their talents, and to Dave Waldman and Johnny Iguana on piano; the latter is dazzling on his four tracks, especially the rocking "Loan a Helping Hand," a track where Zinn's blistering guitar evokes memories of the late Hollywood Fats...again, an intended high compliment.—**Steve Daniels**

NICK SCHNEBELEN *"What Key is Trouble In?"*

Vizztone Label Group

Nick Schnebelen is a Kansas City native who first gained notoriety as a member of the family blues-rock band Trampled Under Foot. Along with bassist/vocalist sister Danielle Nicole and drummer/vocalist brother Kris, Nick Schnebelen's considerable lead guitar and vocal skills led that group to multi-award-winning status.

Schnebelen's latest project should easily satisfy virtually any maven or devotee of the guitar and then some. He comes loaded for bear with some



of the most hellacious axe-sliding tones and melodies you are likely to hear. Opening with "Ten Years After, Fifty Years Later" the leader emerges with a spot-on homage to "I'm Coming Home"-era Alvin Lee. It's a high energy rock and boogie tune that recalls the passion and reckless abandon of the Woodstock generation. The title track keeps things rolling, with an old school in-the-pocket groove. It's just a feel-good toe-tapping jam filled with seemingly endless soul-embossed riffs. "Love in My Heart" is up tempo, funky and targeted straight for his woman's heart. 'Nuff said on that! "Blues Night" is a nice minor key ballad.

It's got a classic feel and rhythmic noir-influenced sound. "Hard Driving Woman" is filled with rich mid-range tones on the guitars. It's a sweet and easy tempo piece in the style of Albert King, with vocals like Gary Moore. Schnebelen adds some tasty grit and sustain on his leads to "Will I Stay." It's got a cool funky feel and some nice breaks. "Pain Aside" changes the game in a swinging vein. A smooth jazz solo shows the guitarist's diversity. "Poor Side of Town" is another noir-like themed piece, with an after-hours club feel. The crunch of ZZ Top combined with the rawness of John Lee Hooker is what you'll find on the tune "Jonny Cheat." The sax work by Buddy Leach is a nice touch. "Big Mean Dog" has a deep and cavernous sound. It's kind of a Stevie Ray Vaughan-meets-Hendrix groove, with a taut use of

dynamics and overdriven guitar to set the tone. "Over the Cliff" employs an intricate network of riffs and motifs that complement spacey and emotive vocals. This is one of the album's more advanced storyline cuts that leads into the somewhat traditional sounding "Throw Poor Me Out." Red Young's bluesy piano offsets the tune's hard rock edge. "People Worry About Me" is classic Chicago-style blues, with a nod to one of its leading lights, Buddy Guy. It's got plenty of juice and in his impassioned delivery Schnebelen wails "People worry about me. I'm doing the best I can despite what you see." We believe Nick Schnebelen is, indeed, doing the best that he can. This is an artist at the top of his powers as a guitarist and as a fine singer-songwriter too. He's the complete package.—Eric Harabadian

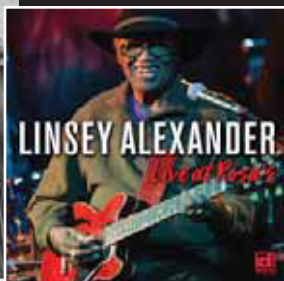


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