

BIG CITY Rhythm & BLUES

REVIEWS

ELIZA NEALS *Thunder in the House*

E-H Records

When it comes to album releases, 13 is singer-songwriter/keyboardist Eliza Neals' lucky number. That's because her latest, "Thunder in the House," is the thirteenth installment in an illustrious catalog of bluesy and groovy delights. The "Detroit Diva" returns with a full-length album's worth of original



rock, blues and soul. It is imbued with the home-grown spirit of Motown as filtered through the East Coast and Memphis music scenes.

What caught this reviewer's eye from the get-go is Neals' signature graphic album design. Throughout her many releases most of her album covers naturally feature the artist in some form or fashion that illustrates the theme of a release. This current endeavor maintains that stark and indie approach, depicting Neals aligning herself with a residential sign for the street she grew up on in suburban Detroit called "Acacia." Apparently, the Acacia tree is native to Africa and is noteworthy for its remarkable hardiness and enrichment qualities. When you listen to the earnestness of the songs and the world-weary toughness in the way Neals sings them,

the comparison makes sense.

The leader has a fine crew on board for this go around, with longtime friend, collaborator and Billboard-charting producer-guitarist Michael Puwal. Doug Woern plays bass, Steve Lacross and Justin Headley are on drums, with guests Mark "Muggie Doo" Leach and "Detroit" Mike Hepner on keyboards and New England-based guitarist Frankie Maneiro making an appearance as well.

The significance of a "rooster" is a trope that has been used in traditional folk and blues songs for many years. And that is the theme of track one, with "Speedy Beady." It's an ode to a favorite pet or mascot that was proud as a peacock, a hit with the ladies and ultimately meets an unfortunate demise. Puwal and band grind out an appropriately greasy and raucous sonic landscape. "Love Will" has an uplifting message, with its mid tempo and mildly overdriven funk. It's for all people "that need a little love to brighten their day." "Blues Bombshell" will hit you like a ton of bricks, with its slow burning shuffle and sultry demeanor. Hepner really shines here on organ and piano as Neals sings: "I'm saving souls from hell...just don't kiss and tell." Puwal's slide guitar weaves perfectly, with the leader's deft and coquettish delivery. "All Alone" and "Locked Up" are two stellar and soulful ballads. The combination of strategically layered guitars and Neals' complex harmonies provide an arresting and mesmerizing effect. Moving on, "Wicked

Heart" locks in a pocket as big as a Cadillac, with one of Neals' best vocal hooks. A dash of "Tapestry"-era Carole King along with a mighty Barrett Strong sensibility constitutes an add to any self-respecting blues/pop/soul radio chart. "Unoriginal Bitch" sounds like a personal message to those in the music industry that have forgone grace and humility. That's followed by the gospel-infused "One Monkey (Don't Stop No Show)." It's heavy and funky, with a powerful uplifting message and some tasty call and response from Maneiro on guitar and Leach on Hammond B3 organ. The title track "Thunder in the House" comes in stealthily and creepy, with an almost ethereal lilt. It appears partially auto-biographical but could also play like a generic cautionary tale about childhood trauma and forgiveness.

Eliza Neals has been on the international blues-rock scene for decades and has a sizeable album roster and fan base to prove it. But she never takes her fans for granted and always seems to artistically stretch and take her sound as far as she can go. As her press material attests: "When there's 'Thunder in the House' sometimes it comes with lighting in a bottle." And there you have it!—**Eric Harabadian**

DAVE KEYES *Two Trains*

MoJojo Records

Dave Keyes has been a rehearsal pianist, sideman, session man and solo artist. He's a celebrated musician that has been

firmly ensconced in the New York City and East Coast blues and Broadway music scene for several decades.

But this new release might be his most important and impassioned work and statement to date. In the liner notes he openly shares what's going on in his head, heart and, ultimately, hands. He talks about the duality of "two trains" and what that signifies. It's that duality of good and bad, love and loss and dark and light. "Even in the darkest moments there is light," says Keyes. This album is dedicated to his wife Pat Cannon, who he was married to for 37 years, and passed away in November of 2023.

"I'll miss her always, and



life goes on," says Keyes. "I feel the love of the world and the pain. That's what this CD is all about—the love and the pain. Two trains, same track; life."

This album is a journey through all the emotions one faces through love and loss. And while many of the 10 songs here are naturally coming from an auto-biographical viewpoint, the intention gathered is one of healing, understanding and empathy for anyone going through a similar personal hardship. Songs like "Blues Ain't Looking for You" and the title track balance the need for extending empathy with a cau-

tionary tale about making good choices and not letting negativity overtake you. "Boogie Till the Cows Come Home" is some lighthearted boogie wogie and the show-stopping gospel burner "I'm Alright" will halt you in your tracks, with its emotionally awesome and spiritual power. "A Long Way from Right Right Now" is a slow blues testimony about time as a healer and "Trust in Love and Fate" is not only an encouraging message in believing in oneself, but a musically sound adaptation of a legit Bill Payne-meets-Levon Helm sensibility as well. It wouldn't be a Dave Keyes record if there wasn't some honest and unabashed solo boogie piano, and the sweet dedication to his wife "Boogie for Patty" fits that bill. The album closer, "Rest in Peace," is appropriately solemn, but beautiful and essential to this collection just the same.

It's obvious this is a record that, in many ways, must have been difficult to make, but an illustrious testament to the power of music, for sure. God bless Dave Keyes and the healing qualities of the blues!—**Eric Harabadian**

LIL' ED AND THE BLUES IMPERIALS *Slideways*

Alligator Records 2026

I have been eating chocolate since I was old enough to chew, and I'm not tired of it yet. I've been listening to Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials since this version of the band was formed in 1987, and I still haven't had enough.

Slide guitarist Ed

Williams was influenced by his uncle, legendary slide player J.B. Hutto, as well as by Hound Dog Taylor and "the king of the slide guitar" Elmore James. At age twenty Ed formed the first incarnation of The Blues Imperials with his half brother James "Pookie" Young. Young still plies the bass in the band, and since 1987 the group has been completed by drummer Kelly Littleton and second guitarist Michael Garrett. The quartet has been playing together for so long that



they comprise almost a single organism. On this foray into a set of thirteen tunes, youthful keyboard ace Ben Levin complements the ensemble on eight numbers.

The result is more of what has made this band indisputably one of the best Chicago-style blues bands ever, nominated over twenty times for a Blues Music Award and twice winning as Band of the Year. Raw, raucous, relentlessly propulsive, sometimes slightly raunchy, The Imperials are also capable of delivering a moving slow blues. This outing gives them plenty of opportunity to demonstrate their mastery.

No slouch as a composer, Lil' Ed has written four of the tunes and co-written another seven. The sole cover is an over five-minute version of Willie

"Long Time" Smith's "Homeless Blues," certainly relevant in our challenging economic times. I'm a sucker for a poignant slow blues, and this cut fits the bill, distinguished by a lyrical slide introduction by Ed, whose high note forays lend emotion to many tracks, and then a beautiful mid-track solo by Garrett. Almost as long and just as tasty is "Wayward Women," also an unrushed number, aided by Levin on organ. At the other end of the tempo spectrum is "The Flirt in the Car Wash Skirt," co-written by Ed with his wife Pam; Levin on piano helps this blues-rocker sizzle.

Wry and clever lyrics abound; example: "Cold Side of the Bed," the lament of an abandoned lover: "Well, my head is in a fog/ and my eyes are turning red/Yeah my baby she done left me/and I'm sleepin' on the cold side of

the bed." Like "Homeless Blues," topically pertinent again is "What Kind of World Is This," with mesmerizing syncopation by the rhythm section. Like all the tracks, its impact is emphasized by Williams's singing; he is not a crooner, but he has powerful pipes and hits the right notes squarely.

The set ends at a peak with a brief but animated slide guitar boogie, "You Can't Strike Gold from a Sliver Mine." Well, Lil' Ed and The Imperials have struck gold again.—**Steve Daniels**

MIKE FINNIGAN
Mike Finnigan

Forty Below Records 2026

Mike Finnigan was a giant in more ways than one. Physically, he was very tall, which probably enhanced his basketball prowess; he was accorded a basketball scholarship at the University of Kansas.

More to the point, he was an artistic giant, a "musician's musician," revered by his colleagues and many thousands of blues aficionados. The list of performers with whom he worked is truly mind-bog-



gling: Bonnie Raitt, Etta James, Buddy Guy, Tracy Chapman, Ringo Starr, Leonard Cohen, Maria Muldaur, Rod Stewart, Stephen Stills, Crosby Still and Nash....Of course, there was also Taj Mahal and the Phantom Blues Band, with whom he won two Blues Music Awards from the Blues Foundation. When he was only 22 years old, he appeared on Jimi Hendrix's classic album

"Electric Ladyland."

Way back in the late 1970s, Finnigan released two solo albums, but he was never eager for the spotlight, content to be a sideman par excellence. Sadly, we have had to wait until five years after his untimely death in summer 2021, at age 76, to savor a full set with him as the center of attention. The good news: it was worth the wait.

Nearly an hour long, the set is comprised of eleven tracks demonstrating Finnigan's mastery of the Hammond B3 organ. Bookending the festivities are two well-known numbers, "The Way You Do the Things You Do" and "20

Years of B.B. King." The latter is one of my favorite tracks. It was co-written and recorded by Curtis Salgado and received a 2009 Blues Music Award as Song of the Year. Val McCallum (alumnus of Jackson Browne's and Bonnie Raitt's bands) wields a mean guitar while Finnigan delivers a powerful vocal and a brief but pithy organ solo toward the end.

Finnigan's B3 wizardry is present throughout as he meshes smoothly but without undue fanfare with a host of distinguished West Coast blues artists, with welcome guest appearances by Stills, Joe Bonamassa, and Smokey

Robinson. Salgado lends skilled harmonica on "All That You Dream," and a dynamic horn section is present on most numbers. There are only two traditional twelve bar blues tracks; taking the prize is "Don't Answer the Door," a sublime slow blues with dual guitars by McCallum and Josh Sklair.

The remaining cuts would fit the category of soul blues...which leads me to my final words of praise. Finnigan was one of the best soul blues singers that I have ever had the pleasure to hear. He packed power, range, and ample emotion into each of his vocals.

It was my pleasure to

Nothing Left to Lose
OR
How Not to Start a Commune
a memoir
Jeff Richards

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get to know Mike Finnigan, who was an intelligent and kind person with a great sense of humor. I and we miss him dearly, but at least we have this album to remember him and his artistry.—**Steve Daniels**
Daniels Duke Robillard and His All Star Band

DUKE ROBILLARD *Blast Off!*

Nola Blue Records
 Duke Robillard is a guitarist/bandleader, national treasure and an Americana musical historian, of sorts. He's been spreading the gospel of all things rocking, bluesy and swinging for more than half a century. And with a catalog celebrating nearly 40 recordings to his credit he proves the title "Blast Off!" is not just hyperbole, but a plan of action.

This project continues the fine work Robillard and crew have always been involved with—blending an eclectic collection of rare and well-known standards with original tunes and polishing them with a roots-filled, bluesy charm and authentic feel. Joining Robillard on his current quest are lead vocalist Chris Cote, keyboardist/vocalist Bruce Bears, bassist/vocalist Marty Ballou, drummer/vocalist, Mark Teixeira, saxophonist Doug James, saxophonist Mark Earley, clarinetist Billy Novick and trumpeter Doc Chanonhouse.

There are plenty of guaranteed house-rocking and hip-shaking delights on this dazzling set of solid soul-stirring hits. What you have is Robillard's Roomful of Blues essence mixed with dollops of other bluesy influences as well. There are tunes that'll get you on the dance floor and chill you out in the next breath. And it all works as one cohesive whole.

As aforementioned Robillard, as well as his crew, are musical historians whose rich knowledge

of all things rock, soul, blues, jazz and swing is unparalleled. Reaching into their magic trick bag, the Floyd Dixon classic "When I Get Lucky," springs out of the gate. With a nice relaxed and easy swing, the band trades multiple solos that cut like a knife through melted butter. Louis Armstrong made the somewhat comical "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead (You Rascal You)" one of



his signature songs back in the day. It is revived here, with all the charm and sly humor intact. Lead vocalist Cote and Robillard alternate singing the verses and the band swings like crazy. "Feel My Cares" is a mid tempo blues number Robillard wrote when he was 17 years old. And it still resonates strongly today. It is funky and soulful, with some great guitar breaks. The leader actually toured for a time with singer-songwriter Tom Waits. So, to record his tune "Lowdown" seemed like a no-brainer. It's a horn-drenched rocker and chameleonic singer Cote does a great job mimicking Waits' signature rasp. An obscure mid-'50s instrumental by the Rocking Brothers called "Play Boy Hop" offers more of that rocking swing, with the spotlight on Doug James' baritone sax playing. "Confusion" is a track written by New Orleans' own poet laureate Allen Toussaint. It's a real soul shaker that highlights the choral vocal talents of the band. The title track is an original instrumental, with an early '60s feel that Robillard and the rhythm section concocted in the studio while waiting for the

horns to show up. "Stand By Me" is not the classic pop standard, but a shuffle swing from Guitar Slim. This is the kind of stuff Robillard and his cohorts specialize in, and they nail it. "The King" furthers that big band jazz narrative, with some of that Count Basie swing. They totally switch gears for the delicate "Warm and Tender Love." This track showcases Cote's incredible diversity and vocal range. This is one of those classic heart-stirring slow ballads. They pick up the pace for the final two tracks, with the Booker T. & the MGs meets The Meters vibe of "Galactic Grease" and tackle some post-war late '40s/early '50s swing, with "Look a There, Look a There."

Robillard and company continue to establish themselves as the kings of classic and swinging blues and the aptly named "Blast Off!" is one of their best!—**Eric Harabadian**

OMAR COLEMAN & IGOR PRADO *Old New Funky- and-Blue*

Nola Blue Records 2026

What we have here is a successful melding of two cultures into one burbling musical stew.

A Chicago native, Omar Coleman has carved out a niche in the Windy City as a respected singer and harmonica player; Living Blues magazine has cited him as Outstanding Musician (harmonica). Left-handed Brazilian guitarist Igor Prado received a Blues Music Award nomination as Best New Artist in 2016 from the Blues Foundation and has released several notable albums from his base in Sao Paulo. Recorded in Sao Paulo, this set of eleven tracks employs Prado's band: drummer Yuri Prado, bassist Ted Furtado, Felipe Magon on organ, Luciano Leaes on piano, and horn players

Bruno Belasco on trumpet and Denilson Martins on saxophone.

The presence of a horn section gives a hint that this is indubitably a soul blues album, heavy on the funky. Of the tunes, six were co-written by the principals. Despite Coleman's origin, there is hardly a hint of gritty Chicago-style blues. In fact, the only undeniably pure blues track is the finale, "Blue Line Train in Chicago." Its harmonica introduction is followed by over five minutes of quality vamping, courtesy of Prado and guest Rodrigo Belloni each wielding an acoustic guitar. To me, it sounds strikingly like one of many songs from Bobby Rush's catalogue.

All the rest of the set exhibits the characteristics of soul blues. There is plenty of syncopation, dealt out skillfully by Yuri and Ted. The singing, by Coleman (with occasional backing by Igor), is excellent; Omar can both croon and belt. While never obtrusive, the horns add a welcome zest. Prado's saucy and steamy guitar fills are spot on. If anything, even more guitar solos would have been welcome...as well as more of Coleman's harmonica, which is deployed on only four cuts.

Some of my favorite



numbers: "I Only Have Love," combines harmonica and guitar fruitfully, and is reminiscent of outings by the venerable band War. "Answer Your Phone" mines a deep groove, easily danceable, as is much of the album. "I Let a Good Girl Go" is a slow track, with Eduardo Belloni on acoustic guitar, allowing Omar's vocal to shine, and

Coleman's harmonica chops get a workout on "Night Fishin'."

For those blues lovers who appreciate a tour of the funk zone, this album is right up your alley.—**Steve Daniels**

BOOKS

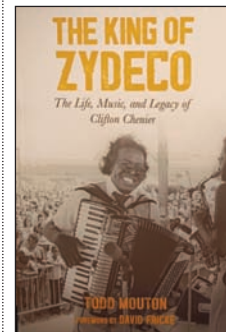
THE KING OF ZYDECO:

*The Life, Music,
 and Legacy of
 Clifton Chenier.*
 By Todd Mouton

The marketing blurbs on the back cover of *The King of Zydeco* are especially enticing: Keith Richards says, "Zydeco and Clifton Chenier have been with me since forever. It's Deep South with some interesting French." Adds Buckwheat Zydeco, "Cliff was the James Brown, the king of the accordion." Journalist and Louisiana native Todd Mouton has crafted the first standalone biography of the inventor of zydeco by building on his 2015 book, *Way Down in Louisiana: Clifton Chenier, Cajun, Zydeco, and Swamp Pop Music*, and he has created a fitting portrait of this master musical innovator. Using interviews with the musicians and analyses of Chenier's recordings, the author projects a picture of Chenier as a hard-working man who knew exactly what he was doing in "originating" a new kind of music—much like those other American innovators Bill Monroe, Muddy Waters, and Chuck Berry. As Mouton notes, "Clifton's ability to both traverse and straddle genres made him a unique human jukebox, with the real magic happening not necessarily when musical elements were gained, lost, or traded, but when their power was somehow transformed in the process." This book is not only an engaging biography but a fascinating

look at Clifton Chenier's creative process.

After a foreword by music journalist David Fricke, Mouton writes in the introduction that "Clifton was bilingual and musically fluent at an almost incomprehensible level, changing the keys of songs nightly and mixing and matching genres and verses from tunes from across his experience."



The rest of the book outlines what he experienced, with the sections in chronological order, and each one with a suggested listening list at the end. The first chapter covers from Clifton's birth in 1925 to 1963, then 1964 to 1968, 1969-1976, and 1977 to his death in 1987. The afterword by the author is a glowing tribute to the King of Zydeco and a summary of his legacy.

Clifton Chenier grew up in a French-speaking home, and his father was a musician for house parties, playing button (diatonic) accordion. Beginning as young as five, Clifton would accompany his father to the dances, absorbing multiple musical influences. "He heard two-steps and waltzes with French lyrics along with the blues piano, organ, and harmonica licks that also would become his trademarks," notes Mouton. Ever the innovator, even at a young age, Clifton decided he wanted to play the bigger, heavier, but overall more versatile piano accordion instead of the button accordion that it seemed everybody else (even his idol Amede Ardoin) was playing.

Throughout the book, and in various contexts, Clifton asserts that he can play anything on the piano accordion, and he can change keys for different sounds. He seems to have been a natural musical genius, being self-taught and picking up eclectic tunes from the radio. As a teen, he followed his older brother Cleveland, who played a rubboard, and together they played dance jobs, ending up years later in Port Arthur, Texas. Driving a truck for oil refineries by day, Clifton first put together what would become his Red Hot Band in Port Arthur. In 1946, at age 21, Clifton designed the *frottoir*—the metal bib or vest that has since become standard for rubboard players—and asked a Cajun metalworker to manufacture the instrument that Cleveland would debut.

Mouton can also pinpoint the date in 1964 when zydeco as an artform was born. On February 8 (the day before the Beatles' U.S. debut on Ed Sullivan!), the founder of Arhoolie Records, Chris Strachwitz, brought Clifton and Cleveland into Gold Star Studios in Houston, and along with a drummer and piano player, they recorded 7 definitive tracks. The single released from that session has the Creolized "Ay, Ai Ai" on one side and a "slow, stomping blues" on the other. Fifteen months later, on May 11, 1965, Clifton and Cleveland and the band were again in Gold Star Studios, recording their first LP for Arhoolie, *Louisiana Blues and Zydeco*. Mouton notes: "During Clifton and Strachwitz's first album session, they recorded hard-grooving, organ-inspired full-band R&B tracks alongside low down harmonica blues and deeply percussive trio versions of Louisiana folk songs. The Chenier Brothers' mix of Creole tunes and Delta

blues with R&B accents made for a powerful combination..."

Throughout the book, Mouton is a wordsmith using a musicologist's precision in describing every song Clifton Chenier ever recorded. He is also able to make a little more clear the complex cultural relationships among the Creole, Cajun, and black populations of south Louisiana, as well as letting Clifton explain, in his own words, the origin of the word *zydeco*, and how he uses it as a verb as well as a noun. *The King of Zydeco* is structured around stories (for example, how Clifton got his crown), and it's loaded with photos and sidebars about people and places important in Clifton Chenier's life. To see how many well-known musicians started out in Clifton's Red Hot Louisiana Band is eye-opening: Lonnie Brooks, Elvin Bishop, Etta James, Buckwheat Zydeco (he started on organ), Sonny Landreth, and Clifton's son C.J. Chenier (he started on sax), to name just a few; not to mention the numerous artists who've covered Clifton's songs. Following the arc of Clifton's musical career, the author details not only the recording history but also live performances, from the dancehalls of Texas and Louisiana, to Paris and Carnegie Hall, to festivals worldwide.

Mouton makes a good case that Clifton Chenier deserves the title The King of Zydeco because not only did he forge a new style of music, but he also brought that music to audiences worldwide in shows legendary for going four hours with no break. Clifton appeared during the first season of *Austin City Limits* in 1976. In 1983 he won a Grammy for *I'm Here* on Alligator Records. The following year, Clifton received the coveted National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. After his death in

1987, he was inducted into the Blues Hall of Fame in 1989 and the Louisiana Hall of Fame in 2011, and in 2014 he received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Ten years ago, the Library of Congress chose Clifton's *Bogalusa Boogie* to be preserved in the National Recording Registry because of its cultural significance.

Last year was the centennial anniversary of Clifton Chenier's birth. To honor his legacy, Valcour Records issued *A Tribute to the King of Zydeco*, featuring artists like Taj Mahal, Steve Earle, David Hidalgo, Lucinda Williams, Jimmy Vaughan, and Marcia Ball, and a Rolling Stones' cover of Clifton's signature "Zydeco Sont Pas Sale" was released on a single. The proceeds from the album go to the Clifton Chenier Memorial Scholarship Fund at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Also in 2025, Smithsonian Folkways released *Clifton Chenier: King of Louisiana Blues and Zydeco*, a comprehensive collection of Clifton's recordings and captured live performances. "His talent was near supernatural," Mouton summarizes at the end of the book, "and his relentless drive led him to develop not just a life's path for himself, but an entirely new style of music that sprang from the many cultural currents of his homeland." Mouton notes that, at the 1975 New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, after the second number, a blues shuffle, Clifton Chenier tells the audience: "See what we're doing. We're putting French music and rock'n'roll mixed up together here." —Karen McFarland

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