

BIG CITY Rhythm & Blues

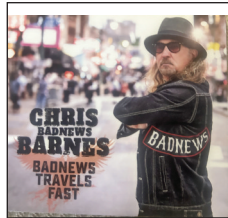
REVIEWS

CHRIS BADNEWS BARNES *BadNews Travels Fast*

Gulf Coast Records

Chris BadNews Barnes has had a wild and extraordinary career in the entertainment business, mostly under the radar. Originally a standup comic in New York, he then became a valuable member of Chicago's Second City comedy troupe, later transferring to the Los Angeles chapter of Second City. He helped write sketches for Saturday Night Live member (at the time) Jim Belushi, becoming an unofficial extra on the SNL set. He has acting credits on such prestigious shows as *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and was even a writer for the *Carol Burnett Show*! As the first writer hired by the fledgling network MTV, he's credited with creating the tagline, "I want my MTV!" He gradually inserted music into his comedy act, originally performing in front of a trio at the infamous NYC venue Tramps. Barnes' actual music career started in earnest in 2017 with the release of *Hokum Blues*. *BadNews Travels Fast* is his fourth release. The eleven original songs were written by Barnes and producer/drummer Tom Hambridge. The opening track, a rocker called "BadNews Travels Fast," jumps out of the speakers with fine guitar work from Kenny Greenberg, who shines throughout the session. Guest Jimmy Hall, of Wet Willie fame, spices this track on harmonica as well as on "A Bluesman

Can't Cry," a slow blues. "You Right Baby" starts with an acoustic Hill Country vibe and features singer Sugaray Rayford. Vocalist Tabitha Fair appears on this track as well as a handful of others. Virtuoso guitarist Walter Trout raises the ante on "True Blues." Closing song "Mushrooms Make Me A Fun Guy" is a "trip," with some Sgt.



Pepper-era treatments toward the end of this humorous song. As Chris "BadNews" himself has stated, "I'm the funny guy that does the blues." However, this album is no joke. — **Bob Monteleone**

CHRIS CAIN *Good Intentions Gone Bad*

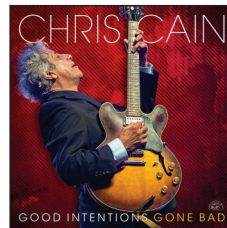
Alligator Records

Chris Cain has to be one of our brightest and best tunesmiths, in addition to a first-rate guitar player. He covers a number of stylistic approaches in his various interpretations of the blues, rock and jazz idioms and his vocals and personal writing perspective place him at a cut above the fray. There is a lot of thought that seems to have gone into the writing and sequencing of this record. And a lot of that creative influx comes from producer, multi-instrumentalist and comrade Chris "Kid" Andersen. There is a

heavy R&B and soul aspect to this record as well due to some great horn arrangements and contributions from trombonist Mike Rinta, with Mike Peloquin on tenor sax and Mike Galisatus on trumpet.

All 13 tracks on this album were composed by Cain and give you a comprehensive cross-section of the man himself. Even though a number of the tunes seem to have a first-person status, they can be easily applied to the strengths and frailties that we use all.

"Too Little Too Late" is one of those relationship-gone-awry kind of songs, with a humorous and upbeat twist. This swings like crazy thanks to the core rhythm section of Greg Rahn on keyboards, Cody Wright on bass and June Core on drums. Cain's B.B. King-like vocal inflections and seemingly effortless guitar phrasing



captivates from the outset. "Fear is My New Roommate" shifts to more of a mid tempo Albert King-type vibe. This is an existential take on a blues that describes what a lot of us are feeling post-pandemic and pre-election 2024-25. Cain can lyrically travel from lighthearted to serious and does it seamlessly. "Good Intentions" depicts what a good man tries to do for his woman, but always seems to fall

short. It's somewhat humorous, mixed with some sad truths and propelled by those funky New Orleans-stylized horn charts. "Waiting for the Sun to Rise" is a nice ballad. Andersen's deft skills as an arranger and orchestrator come into play here on Mellotron strings. It's a soulful and reflective track, with some moody and well-placed solos by Cain. "I Was Wrong" features a great groove from drummer Sky Garcia and percussionist Jon Otis. "Time to Cry" is another one of those cleverly phrased songs that walks that line between irony, truth and trying to find some balance in life. Here, Cain seems to embody a bit of Buddy Guy and infuses some empathy for his state of mind through some thoroughly heart-wrenching lead lines. And my man is making some changes in his outlook and wellness plan. But as the song goes, "he ain't giving up on fun." The song "Still Drinking Straight Tequila" is a swinging take on trying to shake some bad habits. "Bad Dream" and "Had About All I Can Take" is a nice back-to-back blues wallop that goes from slow and moody to swinging and punchy. And then it's time to pause and pay tribute to those parents that were there from the beginning and supported the dream. Cain's tribute to his father is simply called "Blues for My Dad." And if there was ever a song intended to stir up some emotion and make one tear up a little bit, it's this one. This jazzy acoustic-oriented tune gets to the heart of what

Cain is all about. And this track will make one pause and reflect as it should. The diversity continues, with tracks like the working person's anthem of sorts, "TGIF." "Never Let You Break My Heart" is a cool smooth jazz-blues number and the closer, "Thankful," gets a shot in the arm from guest Tommy Castro on additional vocals. It's a snappy and joyful feel good Stax-flavored cut.

And speaking of joy, there you have it! "Good Intentions Gone Bad" is a baker's dozen of spirited and uplifting new blues hits from one of the best songwriters and guitarists in the business, Chris Cain!—**Eric Harabadian**

LARA PRICE *Half & Half*

Gulf Coast Records

Here is an undeniable demonstration that the Price is right.

For her ninth release, multi-instrumentalist Lara Price confines herself to singing...but that's OK,



she excels at it. A past Blues Music Award nominee for Soul Blues Female Artist of the Year, Price bites into ten energized songs divided into two recording sessions. One session, in her current home of Austin, Texas, is produced by bassist Eric Harrison and features guitarist and vocalist David Jimenez; the other, accomplished in the Santa

Cruz, CA, area, sports guitar work by Mighty Mike Schermer and producer Kid Andersen. Backing musicians at both sessions provided tight accompaniment.

The first four numbers of the set are up tempo examples of Price at her raunchy best: brazen, brassy, boisterous, and bluesy. I especially liked the rocker "Fools Like Me," bolstered by Schermer's guitar and the thrumming rhythm section of bassist Andre Tarczy, drummer Randy Hayes, and pianist Baxter Robertson. Turn it up loud and play it at your next dance party!

"Thing Ain't Everything" steals some riffs from a David Bowie song, with the welcome addition of saxophone by Dr. Matthew Maldonado and some brief but nifty guitar noodling by Jimenez. Then we get the highlight of the album, "Rain," an almost five minute track co-written by Price and Jimenez and distinguished by organ courtesy of Trevor Nealon and dual guitars by Jimenez and Chris Tondre. (On that track, credit for "kitty purrr" is given to Kid and Lisa Andersen's cat, Jamie Lee Curtis Salgado. Does she have an agent?)

After another zesty rocker, "Days Ago," Price proves her range and wrings out lots of emotion with her cover of the moody Duke Ellington number "Solitude." "The Way Love Goes" presents Lara strong and soulful, and then sweet harmony vocals accompany Price on "Trouble, Heartache, Sadness." The set ends with "Heart on a String," the Santa Cruz ensemble and Price rocking out with

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gusto.—**Steve Daniels**

VAL STARR AND THE BLUES ROCKET
To the Blues and Back Again

Sandwich Factory Records
www.valstarr.com

Indie blues singer/songwriter/guitarist extraordinaire Val Starr is back with her seventh release of all-original material. And she always brings it, with songs that are honest, from the heart and define what good blues is all



about. Authentic blues should connect with the listener in a way that is cathartic and revelatory at the same time.

And Starr is armed with a cadre of tunes forged in life challenges, disappointments, epiphanies and reasons for joy and gratitude as well. She's got a strong core band in John Ellis on bass/backup vocals, Frankie Munz on harmonica, Pamela Charles Arthur on keyboards and Kirk Hooper on the majority of drums. Perhaps the special sauce that permeates within the contents here is the input by an army of top-flight guitar talent. Timothy Brisson, Dave Segal, B. Christopher, Stephen Kimball and Ellis all have a hand in ornamenting the festivities, with generous portions of country, straight blues, jazz and rock elements. They each bring something fresh and inventive to their playing that complement Starr's conceptual and thematic lyrics to a tee.

Starr has created a lot of goodwill and built a strong fan base, with her diverse Americana blues style. Her voice is melodic, with just the appropri-

ate amount of grit. And it serves a lot of the existential and biographical material well on minor key ballads like "Bitter Pill" and the uplifting "Take a Stand for Love." The addition of saxophonists Zot and Marty Deradoorian factor tastefully throughout the album as well. Tracks like "If You Don't Blues it, You'll Lose it" and "Gratitude is the Best Cure for the Blues" show more of the jazzy side of Starr and the band via horns and Arthur's ample piano chops.

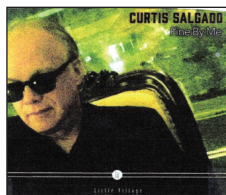
Furthermore, tracks like "Bluesin'" and "Worn Down Blues" are exceptional examples of classic country blues, with a hint of traditional vocal harmonies and a Patsy Cline sonority.

Thirteen tracks in all, Starr delivers a mother lode of emotion, spirit and soulful transparency that should connect with her loyalists as well as attract new fans.—**Eric Harabadian**

CURTIS SALGADO
Fine by Me

Little Village Foundation 2024

This is the third of Curtis Salgado's albums that I have reviewed, and my list of fresh and laudatory adjectives is becoming



exhausted.

Former lead singer for the Robert Cray Band and Roomful of Blues, Salgado has been releasing his own fine albums for over three decades. For the twelve songs on his apparent twelfth solo album, Salgado has marshaled his usual rotating array of top-notch musicians, written a slew of entertaining and witty songs, and deployed his nonpareil voice. Also as usual, he

samples a gamut of genres - jazz, gospel, rock, r&b - while adhering to his basic blues roots. The result is a triumph.

A trio of songs midway through the set exemplifies the album's ample strengths. "Niki Hoeky" is a funky number, one of the few cover songs, sporting a New Orleans vibe and buttressed by Kid Andersen on guitar, his wife Lisa on backing vocals, and saxophone and trumpet. "Hear the Lonely Hearts" is next; the moving gospel track penned by Curtis finds him intoning The Word with support from the Sons of the Soul Revivers: Dwayne, Walter, and James Morgan. The trifecta ends with "Safe at Home," Salgado and Lisa A. harmonizing nicely on the brief shuffle.

Some of the song titles hint at facility at humorous lyrics: "My Girl's a Nut," "The Only Way Out," "Better Things to Lie About," "Cheap Stuff," and "Under New Management." That last tune, a cover, which closes the album, is another zippy shuffle with guitar aces Anson Funderburgh and Billy Watts wielding dual guitars and Tony Braunagel pounding the skins. A full horn section pushes into the middle of the song, which is then graced by a dazzling harmonica solo by Salgado, one his many skilled forays on the "Mississippi saxophone."

The same ensemble delivers on probably my favorite track - it's hard to choose - Salgado's original slow blues, "You Give the Blues a Bad Name." In addition to his seven(!) Blues Music Awards as Soul Male Blues Artist of the Year, he has won BMAs for "Song of the Year," and this tune demonstrates why. Equally compelling is "I'm Gonna Forget About You," an O.V. Wright number r&b track deploying the all-star quintet of Kid Andersen on

guitar, Derrick "D'Mar" Martin on drums, Jim Pugh on piano and organ, Jerry Jemmott on bass, and Cray on guitar and harmony vocals.

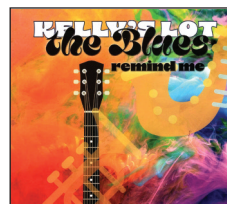
Just a word about Salgado's singing: he has lost none of his prowess. In a millisecond he can go from smooth crooning to a powerful rasping cry to a plaintive falsetto and back, never straying from perfect pitch. Just completing his seventh decade on the planet, Salgado has overcome several life-threatening health crises and remains a master of soul blues.—**Steve Daniels**

KELLY'S LOT
The Blues Remind Me

Self-produced 2024

When I reviewed their album "Can't Take My Soul" in 2019, Kelly's Lot was celebrating its 25th anniversary. Now they're at 30, with no decrease in momentum, talent, or appeal.

Based in Los Angeles, the band is fronted by singer/songwriter Kelly



Zirbes and her husband, guitarist Perry Robertson. Long-time cohort Matt McFadden holds the bass guitar chair, and also returning is drummer Mike Sauer. Keyboards are tinkled by Mo Beeks, a rotating cast of horn players vigorously augment the sound, and a few other principals make brief appearances as the band demonstrates its usual proficiency in several modes.

All ten songs are originals composed by Kelly and Perry. Counterintuitively, since most albums begin with an upbeat tempo, this set

commences with a slow number, "I Gotta Sing the Blues," this one tune co-written by Beeks. The song is introduced by somber piano and organ, followed by Beeks' query, "Kelly, what does the blues remind you of?" She replies in her smooth alto, which I described five years ago as suave and supple. If anything, her singing is even better now, and Beeks and Kelly harmonize beautifully.

Lest you prepare to sit back and mellow out with a glass of wine, you won't, because the next track is "Boogie Bus," and let me tell you, it will make you move. Goosing it along is Frank "Cisco" Hinojosa wailing on harmonica. Shortly after, horns enter the picture on "Mama's Blues," a moving ode to Kelly's mother, whom she credits for inspiring her and introducing her to the blues. The terse shuffle "It Ain't Always" is succeeded by the sublime "Man in the Moon," which features some delicious flugelhorn courtesy of Gary Bivona. The rhythm section of Sauer and McFadden drive "Without You," which at first seems like a bitter farewell to an obnoxious partner but is soon revealed actually to be about a certain former president.

"Just Tell Me the Truth" is an especially jaunty shuffle, with the participation of frequent collaborator Rob Zucca on guitar and with Aviva Maloney on both flute and alto saxophone. "Blessings," a high point of the album, then affords us the pleasure of Kelly's full vocal and emotional range as she reminds us... "Love can hurt you... Life can hurt you." "Aces" takes advantage of the harmonica prowess of the band's Croatian colleague Tomislav Goluban, with whom Kelly's Lot often gigs on their frequent European tours.

The concluding number

of this delightful set is "Love and Understanding," whose obvious theme is aided by some snazzy slide guitar by Robertson. A fitting end to a fine album.—**Steve Daniels**

KATIE KNIPP
Me

www.katieknipp.com

Northern Californian Katie Knipp is, frankly, someone this reviewer was not previously aware of. But now that we've experienced her work, I have to ask "where have I been all this time?!" Ms. Knipp is, indeed, a revela-



tion! Is she blues, jazz, beat poet, a neo-classical composer? Maybe a little bit of it all.

And while she has garnered multiple awards, such as being a three time Top 10 Billboard Blues Artist, she is certainly a one-of-a-kind musician that is blazing her own trail.

The raven-haired vocalist and multi-instrumentalist has a rich and esteemed background in opera and employs that aural majesty in everything she does. Her depth and range really add to the dynamism and drama within each track here.

Opening tracks like "Mud" and "Outlaw Doc" blend bluesy piano and rustic hard edges. With the panache of Laura Nyro mixed with the Avant Garde wordplay and diction of Annette Peacock or Diamanda Galas may truly give one pause. This is not an album you can easily categorize or dismiss. Knipp and her studio cohorts are carving out their own unique place in the indie blues world.

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and Space” run the gamut from reaching for the vocal stratosphere to delicate and nuanced. There are also some great horn-inflected tracks here as well such as the slightly funky single “Go” and the Latin/Salsa-like vibe of “The Devil’s Armchair.”

“Dirty Cables” is a clever and letter-perfect take on the life of a traveling musician. Chris Martinez’s lead Dobro guitar work is seamless in his contribution to Knipp’s honest and stark on-stage accounts.

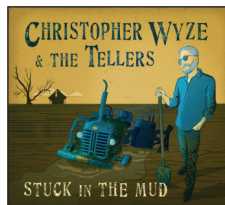
The album showstopper has got to be “Stillness.” This is where the rubber meets the road and all bets are off. Knipp doubles down on her vocal chops and displays flawless technique. Not only can she hold a note forever, but her ability to create a sense of drama, anticipation and uneasiness in one fell swoop is off the charts.

Katie Knipp is a well-rounded vocalist, keyboardist and guitarist that

operates within a number of musical settings while navigating under the blues and Americana landscape. And, within that framework, she creates a sense of adventure and surprise in everything she does. And we wouldn’t have it any other way!—Eric Harabadian

CHRISTOPHER WYZE & THE TELLERS
Stuck In the Mud
Big Radio Records

Indiana native Christopher Wyze has been fronting blues bands for two decades, singing mostly blues covers. All those years have paid off, transforming Wyze into a formidable songwriter, resulting in him being recognized recently by the Nashville Songwriters Association as “One to Watch.” *Stuck In the Mud* features 13 original songs, or “stories,” all co-written by Wyze, mostly with the project’s producer, Ralph



Carter. Ten of the tracks were recorded in Muscle Shoals, and three more songs, like the intimate “Soul On the Road” (featuring some nice acoustic slide work by Cary Hudson, of Blue Mountain fame) were laid down in Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Wyze claims all the songs were written. He says in the liner notes, “In the Delta, songs seem to write themselves.” The album bounces from full band arrangements to more stripped-down affairs, like the lyrically potent “Life Behind Bars”, featuring guitarist Eric Deaton (who has worked with Hank Jr. and the Black Keys) and a tasty harmonica solo by Wyze. In fact, the vocal delivery on “Life Behind Bars”

could remind one of the many great Willie Nelson songs. Musically, the material never strays from the blues. Some are stompers, like “Good Friend Gone,” some are swamper, like “Hard Work Don’t Pay.” The backing musicians lend fine support for Christopher Wyze to weave his vivid and cinematic tales throughout the album. Kudos to Koldo Barroso for the original illustrations and the fine CD packaging that

includes a full color 20-page booklet including all the lyrics and photos of the recording sessions.—**Bob Monteleone**

BILLY PIERCE BAND
Billy Pierce Band Live
Got Slide Records

Delaware-based slide guitarist Billy Pierce’s previous release, *Take Me Back To The Delta*, featured such luminaries as

Sonny Landreth, Johnny Neel and Charlie Wooten. Pierce’s latest, the 21-track, double CD *Billy Pierce Band Live*, is a stripped down live document of one exciting evening last fall at the Granite Run Taproom in Port Deposit, Maryland. About half the songs here are written by Pierce. The covers are an interesting mix of old and new: Robert Johnson’s “Walking Blues,” the classic “St. James Infirmary,” the Billy Boy

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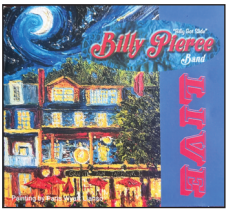
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Arnold/Hot Tuna track "Wish You Would" and compositions by current blues artists like Johnny Sansone and Tab Benoit. There's even a take on the Procol Harum hit "A Whiter Shade of Pale." Billy's tight band includes the versatile Suzanne Ludwig on violin and guitar and the rhythm

section of bassist Mike "Pup" Williams and drummer Chris Sherlock. Although Pierce is known for his expertise on the slide, he is also a master of straight, standard-tuned guitar as well. He does show his mastery of Sonny Landreth's unorthodox slide playing on the two songs that open Disc 2, "Song for Sonny" and "Acadiana." Ludwig is the band's secret weapon, as her violin graces such songs as "Window Yesterday," "A Whiter Shade of Pale" and others.

That fiddle separates the Billy Pierce Band from hundreds of other blues-based bands and adds a nice texture, especially on the New Orleans-inflected songs "Cajun Boy Blues" and "Good Gumbo." *Billy Pierce Band Live* contains quite a range of styles within the context of a great live 4-piece band and would make a perfect souvenir for someone attending one of their shows. — **Bob Montealeone**

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