

BIG CITY Rhythm & BLUES

REVIEWS

BACKTRACK BLUES BAND

A Day By the Bay
www.backtrackbluesband.com

The live music experience has been historically a platform to really see and hear what a band or artist is all about. There is no hiding behind studio trickery or delayed gratification. You're checking out



the band—right here and right now! And that is certainly the case with this nine-track document from the 2022 Tampa Bay Blues Festival.

The Backtrack Blues Band is an ultra-seasoned unit consisting of Sonny Charles (lead vocals and harmonica); Kid Royal (lead guitar and vocals); Little Johnny Walter (rhythm guitar and backup vocals); Joe Bencomo (drums); Stick Davis (bass); Wayne Sharp (Hammond B3 organ); Latonya Oliver (backing vocals) and Dana Merriwether (backing vocals). These veteran performers are also great writers and do a nice take on Jimmy Reed's "Natural Born Lover" as well.

The band hits the stage with the gospel-inflected "Best Friend's Grave." It's a smooth mid-tempo swing number featuring great guitar work from Kid Royal and a nice wall of sound from Oliver and Merriwether. Primary

songwriter Sonny Charles handles the lion's share of original tunes and the follow up, "Make My Home in Florida" sounds like it comes from personal experience. It's a tip of the hat to the festival locale as well, with its slow burning pace. Royal digs deep for some explosive single note lines, and Charles' beefy harp tones really work the crowd. "Help Me Just This Time" is a fierce, yet relaxed shuffle. Some intriguing rhythmic figures set the mood and, again, Charles' gritty and raw blowing is a highlight. "Dixie Grill" will just make you hungry! It's a relentless grooving tune about

Southern cooking that certainly connected with this reviewer! The aforementioned "Natural Born Lover" showcases the robust vocalizing of guitarist Kid Royal. He's very soulful and swinging, supported by some tasty organ work from Sharp. "Rich Man Blues" is a strong rocker and "She Might Get Mad" offers great advice for taking care of and listening to your woman. "Times Is Hard" has a cool "Stormy Monday" kind of texture and vibe and features another stellar vocal moment for Royal. "You'll Come Back Someday" is a grand finale and a swinging good time piece that inspires instrumental spotlights from the entire band.

To quote the album's liner notes: "There's nothing artificial here—just solid, genuine music played with true passion and commitment."—Eric Harabadian

JOE KROWN Tribute

Sledgehammer Blues

Master keyboardist Joe Krown wears his heart instrumentally on his sleeve in composing and curating an album dedicated to his musical heroes and family members that are no longer physically with us. But, man, does



Krown and company inject a lot of love and life into this 11-song collection.

The keyboard maestro is joined by some of the hottest side, session and lead artists in the business. And the program is chock full of New Orleans-flavored blues/funk and jazz fare by Allen Toussaint, Mac Rebennack (Dr. John), Jay McNeely and others, in addition to Krown himself.

So, Krown gets right into the meat of the matter, with some mid-90s funk from the great composer Toussaint called "All of It." Right out of the gate you hear Krown's very lyrical and jazzy solo and melodic patterns. And the Meters-like arrangement and feel is further authenticated by guest guitarist Leo Nocentelli himself. That's followed by Dr. John's classic chart hit "Such a Night." Ivan Neville's vocals honor the good Doctor to a 'T' and it is another tasty slice of

that New Orleans sound. The leader keeps it going on James Booker's instrumental "Classified," a mid-tempo blues burner that shines a spotlight on Krown's nimble piano flair and seemingly endless melodic soloing sense. Another beautiful Toussaint tune is the ballad "With You in Mind." The lyrics and arrangement are so humble and sweet and the choice of guest Noah Hunt on vocals provides just the right balance of lightness and weight to the message. Krown's own "Ode to Mr. Davis" brings out the best in his adaptation of a Jelly Roll Morton/Professor Longhair-type style. This track also features stellar sax work from essential sideman Joe Sublett. This might have been one of Walter Wolfman Washington's final recordings and he delivers a robust vocal on Sam Hopkins' "Feel So Bad." The blend of his laid-back smoky voice and slick guitar work really stand out. Another highlight that really jumps to the fore for this reviewer is the Top Ten Toussaint hit "Southern Nights." Krown offers an understated and slightly re-harmonized intro, and then leaps into action with the song atempo. This one is upbeat and really grooves, walking that fine line between pop, country and R&B. The piano and organ wizard wraps the album as it began, with a spirited throw down of a party on his own "Gumbo Boogie." He touches on a number of blues and rhythmic clichés that are an homage to, and represent his heart, soul and love for

New Orleans and that entire culture.—Eric Harabadian

JOHNNY RAWLS *Going Back to Mississippi*

Third Street Cigar Records

Johnny Rawls has been in the music business for over fifty years. As a teen in Mississippi, he joined his high school music



teacher's band, on saxophone, and ended up backing up such stars as Z. Z. Hill, Joe Tex and Johnny Taylor. In the mid-1970s until the mid-80s he was a bandleader for O.V. Wright and then Little Johnny Taylor. Rawls has released fifteen albums since his debut, *Here We Go*. He was a staff producer/arranger for JSP Records in the late 90s and has had hundreds of his compositions recorded. *Going Back to Mississippi* is a showcase of Johnny Rawls' "real deal" voice and righteous lead guitar picking. His songwriting and arranging skills are evident, as all of the ten original songs are spiced with a 4-piece horn section. The opening two songs, "Midnight Train" and "Reap What You Sow," have a decidedly Memphis soul feel. The rollicking title track is a highlight and rocks quite a bit more than most of the other material. On the romantic ballad, "If

You Ever Get Lonely," Rawls croons softly, showing his vocal versatility. "Your Love," a duet with an uncredited female vocalist, is a nice change of pace. Recorded in two different continents: Europe (Copenhagen) and the States, at Bigfoot Studios in Ohio, *Going Back to Mississippi* is a consistently enjoyable listen, leaning on the formidable talents of Mr. Johnny Rawls.—Bob Monteleone

SELWYN BIRCHWOOD *Exorcist*

Alligator Records 2023

Two years after his last and very successful album, "Living in a Burning House," Florida bluesman Selwyn Birchwood returns with another set of original tunes true to his self-defined brand of "electric swamp funk'n' blues." What exactly does that



phrase mean, you wonder? It means an amalgam of blues, soul, rhythm-and-blues, hip hop, and even psychedelia and jazz in a full hour of high energy stew honchoed by producing impresario Tom Hambridge.

Birchwood and his band won the 2013 International Blues Challenge and have never looked back. As in his previous six albums, "Exorcist" reflects the

major influences that Birchwood cites in his development, foremost among them guitar wizard Jimi Hendrix, Hendrix's own musical mentor Buddy Guy, lap steel guitar expert Sonny Rhodes, and guitarists Albert King, Albert Collins, and Son Seals.

The first five tracks eschew adherence to a traditional twelve bar blues format and style.

"Done Cryin'," the set opener, blasts off with some guitar licks clearly reminiscent of Albert King, and a little later into the song some rapid single note runs a la Son Seals, all built around organ and walking bass. "Florida Man" sports clever lyrics as it spoofs the unique character of Birchwood's home state and its often-idiosyncratic denizens, "down where rebel flags meet Mickey Mouse." Snazzy drumming backs Birchwood's guitar lead; here and elsewhere Selwyn displays his dexterity in fleet fusillades of notes interspersed with sustained notes in the high treble range. "Horns Below Her Halo" sports more wild guitar over its repetitive title lyric, with wah-wah pedal making one of its several appearances.

"Underdog" and the title track give ample exposure to long-time cohort Regi Oliver on saxophone, with Selwyn waxing jazzy on the latter song, one of its key riffs recalling Tab Benoit's song "Medicine."

The following four tracks mine a more traditional blues vein to fine effect. "Lazarus" is a gospel blues with juicy sax-organ interplay and some of Birchwood's best singing, which is strong throughout the set. Backing vocalists enhance this, "Plenty More to Be Grateful For," and several other tracks. "La View" is another standout, a shuffle with sequential tasty piano and guitar solos; in it Birchwood's

guitar has an unusual, slightly buzzing, kazoo-like tone.

A little further along, "Call Me What You Want To" mines the jump blues genre, with some delicious interplay between piano, saxophone, and guitar. The set concludes with its shortest number, the only instrumental, "Showtune," Oliver again prominent on saxophone and Birchwood this time paying tribute to B.B. King with some of that legend's licks.—**Steve Daniels**

ERIC RAMSEY
The Blues

Self-produced 2022

Acoustic blues is far from dead, and Eric Ramsey is living proof. Ramsey is a perennial performer at multiple blues festivals, and winner of myriad awards for his musicianship and songwriting. In 2022 he repre-



sented the Phoenix Blues Society at the International Blues Challenge and topped his career trajectory (so far) by winning the IBC in the Solo/Duo category. At the same event he also won the Memphis Cigar Box award as Best Guitarist.

Ramsey's multifarious talents are evident in the modestly titled "The Blues," his seventh album by my count. The hour-long set showcases eight of his pithy, provocative, and humorous original tunes. Each is distinguished by his clever and creative lyrics and his musical virtuosity. "The Rest Is Up to You" deals with a problematic amorous relationship: "I can love you enough for the two of us/but that's all that I can do/the rest is up

to you." In this opening track, as in several of the other songs, Ramsey delivers both delicate fingerpicking and deft slide guitar, a combination that works very well for him. On another track, "Never Trust the Weary World," which is a hybrid blues, folk, and bluegrass number, he plays banjo to fine effect. Then there is "Cocoon," the poignant lament of a loner who wants to withdraw from the social world.

Probably my favorite track is the tongue-in-cheek "Hurricane Woman Blues," about his very angry partner: "Right about now she's a category 4/better look out, people/ she's about to blow down my door." Don't worry about Eric, though: "Got a hurricane woman/ but I wouldn't have it any other way/ when that storm blows over/ she loves me right/every night and every day."

Every song of this set is a delight, augmented not only by Ramsey's instrumental skill but also by his expressive and supple singing. Apparently, I'm not the only appreciator, as evidenced by the album's coda of three songs performed before a live audience: "Cocoon," "Hurricane Woman Blues," and the only cover track, a tour de force interpretation of Bob Dylan's "Crash on the Levee." The audience responded to each with lusty, and well-deserved, enthusiasm.—**Steve Daniels**

DOUG MACLEOD
Raw Blues 1

Valley Entertainment 2023

Perennial Blues Music Award nominee and six-time winner - four as Acoustic Artist of the Year and two for Acoustic Album of the Year - Doug MacLeod is as prolific as he is creative. Hot on the heels of his 2022 album "A Soul to Claim" comes this seven-track



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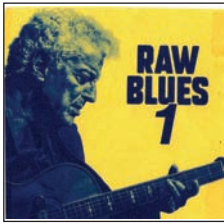
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solo outing. New label, new songs, same supreme skill.

Those familiar with MacLeod's work know that he excels not only on gui-



tar playing but also in his songwriting, able to conjure both humor and pathos...and often in the same song. Case in point: "I'm Gone," which commences the set with a disillusioned lover's lament, his pain barely concealed by his humorous rancor: "Well girl I'm finally gettin' wise/to the stuff you do/While you're lookin' out for number one/I'm step-pin' in number two/Just like a fox with a chicken/I ain't stickin'/ I'm gone." The track is driven by his foot-stomping percussion as he plies his world-class expertise in fingerpicking and slide guitar.

Gorgeous, plaintive guitar renderings distinguish "What's Been Heard," a cry of strained hope in the face of despair and loneliness. "Placquemine," named after that parish of the New Orleans region, tells of a lost love: "They say I just now missed her/She caught the red-eye to L.A./There's a big dude travelin' with her/He didn't have that much to say/So I headed back to Placquemine/A sadder and wiser man today." MacLeod's rapid fingerpicking here is dazzling.

"Children Like You" considers those millions of us impoverished and neglected in our society and evokes our common humanity; it's another example of Doug's unparalleled empathetic storytelling. "Unmarked Road" tells a similar tale, of a seeker who has lost his way.

Then we have "Hey Bartender" (not the blues classic of the same name identified with the late pianist Floyd Dixon); it's the lament of a lost soul searching for solace in the bottom of a glass: "Hey bartender, don't pour your booze too slow/Don't you know I got a lot of money here/I just ain't got no place to go."

With six songs embodying tales of distress and disconnection, one might anticipate a depressing album...but no, it is instead a pleasure created by its compassionate lyrics and sublime guitar virtuosity. At any rate, the closing jaunty instrumental "Walking with Mr. Smith" adds optimism to this brief set. I want more! No problem: I'll just play it again...and I bet that you will, too.—**Steve Daniels**

PETER STORM & THE BLUES SOCIETY *Second*

Naked/Donor Productions 2023

Who is Peter Storm? After listening to this album several times and reading its liner notes, I still don't know...or much care. This quartet of musicians has been named Best Blues Band in Portugal and has represented that Iberian country at the European Blues Challenge. Its debut



album was called "First"; now you know why they chose this new title (why mess with inspired nomenclature?).

The ten tracks are mostly originals, save for two covers. "I Feel Like Breaking Up Somebody's Home," penned by Al Jackson and Tim Matthews, is introduced by

some crunchy chords courtesy of lead guitarist Joao Belchior, who segues to lyrical single note fills and then dabbles in some wah-wah pedal antics. (On a few other tracks he vamps a la Jimi Hendrix.) Providing foundation is the sturdy duo of bassist Jose Reis and drummer Jorge "Mister Shuffle" Oliveira, the latter adding his own nifty fills. Belchior supplies the vocals in a pleasing tenor register, mostly but not always tone-perfect. The other cover tune is "Beatrice," co-written by and usually identified with the late guitarist Phillip Walker. It's handled as a mid-tempo shuffle, with an uncredited saxophone solo mid-track.

The originals are an eclectic mixture. "Write Down the Blues," which opens the album, is a rocker allowing plenty of room for the fourth member of the group, Bino Ribeiro, who on other numbers plays second guitar but here and several more times plays harmonica. He puts plenty of energy into his contributions, but his tone is often raspy rather than pure, he tends to wander, and on occasion he seems to be playing in a different key than his three colleagues. He and cohorts do mesh successfully on "Go Down & Play," a twelve-bar rave-up.

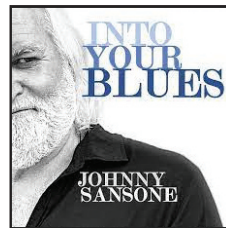
To my ear, the band sounds best on its two slow numbers. "Meditation Blues," over six minutes long, and "I Told You (Not to Treat Me Wrong)" both benefit from Belchior's best guitar leads. The latter track sounds like Fleetwood Mac in its late 1960s blues heyday with Peter Green, Jeremy Spencer, and Danny Kirwan plying fine guitar.

This Portuguese band has a lot to be proud of, especially its robust rhythm section.—**Steve Daniels**

JOHNNY SANSONE *Into Your Blues*

Short Stack Records

Johnny Sansone is a multi-instrumentalist and singer/songwriter. He has about a dozen albums under his belt and the New Jersey native has been based in New Orleans for over 30 years. He spent the 1980s touring with such luminaries as Robert Lockwood Jr., David "Honeyboy" Edwards and Jimmy Rogers. On *Into Your Blues*, Sansone focuses on vocals and harmonica through the eleven original tunes. Although



Sansone has embraced Cajun and Southern soul along with the blues through the years, on *Into Your Blues* he sticks mostly with Delta and Chicago blues, calling this his long-awaited "blues album." His harp playing is heavily influenced by the great Jimmy Reed and his raspy vocals are the perfect vessel for the material presented here. The album features the stellar twin guitar attack of Dallas-based Mike Morgan and Delmarc artist Johnny Burgin. Both guitarists are traditionalists and complement each other, working wonderfully together here. "Willie's Juke Joint" is a duet between guest Little Freddie King's electric guitar and Sansone's harmonica as Little Freddie spins a spicy yarn from his past. "Blowin' Fire" features fellow harmonicaist Jason Ricci and is a highlight. "Single Room" stands out with its jungle beat and ominous organ; it rocks. "Desperation" has a Memphis soul feel with a tasty horn chart with saxophonist Steve Lands blowing a nice solo. The tune's

fadeout features some B.B. style guitar work as well. The album closes with the instrumental "Southern Dream," a nice departure featuring the leader on resonator guitar.—**Bob Monteleone**

LADY ADRENA *Recipe for the Blues*

Sweet Success Records 2023

By now it's a familiar story: young person grows up steeped in the rituals and music of the Christian church, falls in love with gospel music, becomes a gospel performer. To the list of such artists add a new name: Adrienne Palmer, who performs as Lady Adrena.

A Mississippi native, Adrena also played drums in her formative years (as have many other blues musicians, before switching to other instruments). From gospel she segued to Southern soul music, and then (inevitably?) into the blues. Her new extended play album declares her current allegiance on its first track, "Blues Chose Me." A high energy outing, it features a seething amalgam of horns, organ, steady percussion, and thumping bass as Adrena name-checks a litany of those who have influenced her: B.B. King, Bobby Rush, Little Milton, Howlin' Wolf, Etta James and Koko Taylor. It's conceivable that Adrena may some day join that pantheon, judging by her vocal skills. In this track she waxes sassy and spicy in her alto range, easily reaching into brief falsetto.

The slow blues "Borrow My Pans" follows, sporting a 1920s vibe and distinguished by some nice piano riffs. It's a tune reminiscent of myriad variations of "you can take my wife/but don't mess with my woman": "You can borrow my pans/But don't mess with my man." Next up is "Traveling Woman,"

delving successfully into the funk genre, with a nifty guitar introduction and female backing vocals. During a strong mid-song guitar solo The Lady delivers some talking blues.

More traditional twelve bar blues isn't neglected, as evidenced by "Good



Girl Gone Bad," a danceable track with some more admirable guitar leads. The brief set concludes with "No Ring No Thang," a soul blues with a horn introduction, expressive piano, and more backing vocals lending support to Adrena's saucy singing.

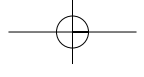
The entire set of this EP clocks in at less than twenty minutes, not counting a six-minute concluding promotional coda which presents snippets of each of the preceding five songs. Backing musicians (not identified by name anywhere that I can locate) do a more than credible job.

We are sure to hear more from Lady Adrena, and I'm looking forward to it.—**Steve Daniels**


SUNNY BLEAU AND THE MOONS *"Slow Burn"*

www.sunnybleau.com

This is the second album for Michigan-based blues rockers Sunny Bleau and The Moons. They are riding high off the success of their debut "Breakfast Served Cold." Vocalist Sunny Bleau and guitarist/multi-instrumentalist/producer Nicholas Cocco are at the helm of this project. Their music is mostly all original and spans the gamut from Bessie Smith and Big Mama Thornton to Paul Rodgers, Joe Bonamassa, and the inclusion of contemporary pop and soul



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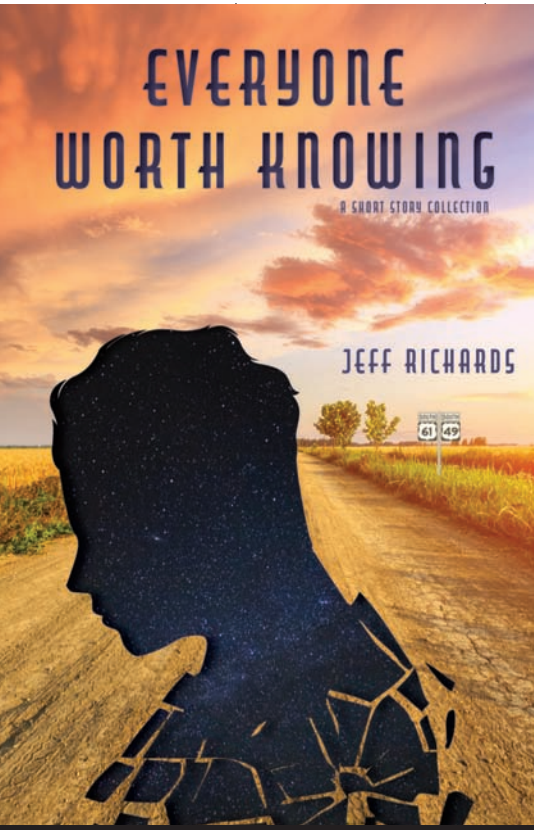
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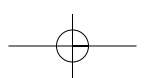
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influences.

The dozen tracks here begin with a musical overture, if you will, entitled "Electric Blue Prelude." It is a fairly comprehensive overview of various blues and guitar styles that instrumentally set the scene for what the album might musically bring. "Inside of My Head" features hot guitar and a rock production sheen from



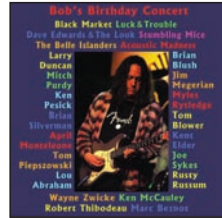
Cocco. It's a song about manipulation and the constant push and pull between the relationship of the artist and the music industry. Sunny channels that struggle through her ample pipes and searing lyrics. "Stratocaster Boogie" is a fun-filled jam of a tune. It's an ode to that mainstay of electric guitars, the fender Stratocaster. Sunny sings about all the things she loves about a Strat while Cocco repeats the title of the song in a low and funky voice. "Burnin' Sky" is the title track from bad Company's 1977 album. Both Sunny and Cocco are big fans of Bad Company's lead singer Paul Rodgers and do their own unique take on the song. It's a raw and soulful version with a feminine twist that is in a category by itself. Nice! "Rollin' Baby Blues" shows their diversity and roots in the very nature of the blues. It's a smooth mix of slide and crunch rhythm guitar work, with Sunny's incisive vocals cutting through. "Violet Eyes" tackles a heavy topic in the form of Alzheimer's disease. It is a story based on the experience of residents, afflicted with this condition, that band members have encountered volunteering their time entertaining at their local senior community living facility.

The lyrics really bring things in perspective to one family's situation, "Behind those violet eyes lives a man lost in disguise...between reality and what used to be." The "Ooo Song" is essentially an instrumental, with Sunny doing wordless vocalizing behind Cocco's inspired riffing. This has a Santana/Pink Floyd/Jeff Beck vibe to it. The title track, "Slow Burn," is a classic-sounding piece in the style of Sam Cooke. There is a tasty solo break here by Cocco reminiscent of Roy Buchanan or Clapton. "Every Inch of You" is an original that harkens back to the early days of artists like Bessie Smith or Alberta Adams. This is Sunny Bleau exhibiting coquettish swagger and sass, with a heavy dose of seduction. Ooh La La! "Starship" is a solid rock-blues tune that uses outer space metaphors and astral traveling in telling a kind of love story. This song has a big arena rock feel, with plenty of radio-ready savvy. Originally written by Isaac Hayes for Sam and Dave, "Hold On, I'm Coming" is a classic that's been covered by many. Sunny gives it a unique laid-back feel that almost leans into country blues. Cocco and Sunny share call and response vocals here. "I Feel Fine" caps things on a pop-friendly note, with an original piece that is upbeat and vibrant.—Eric Harabadian

BOB'S BIRTHDAY CONCERT
Various Artists
Hanzie Records & Films

On March 11, 2011, Detroit guitarist (and current BCM staff member) Bob Monteleone put together a monumental concert to celebrate his half century of being on the planet. He held it at Callahan's Music Hall and had it recorded on multitrack as well as filmed. After years of collecting dust he started mix-

ing, "fixing", and editing this double CD of 29 songs and 14 chapter DVD, including live and rehearsal footage plus interviews. Many of the bands and artists Monteleone had been in and was involved with participated. Iconic reggae band Black Market reformed after a multi year absence and closed the



show. Blues rockers the Stumbling Mice performed. Ex-Refreshments guitarist Brian Blush came up from Tennessee to reform Luck and Trouble with Bob. The Look performed their hit "We're Gonna Rock," while The Look's lead singer Dave Edwards played a bunch of material from his solo career and also sang with the Belle Islanders, a rockin' reggae outfit featuring Black Market members Mitch Purdy, Jim Megerian as well as Bob and his wife

April. Acoustic Madness backed up singer/songwriters Ken McCauley and Robert Thibodeau. In the left channel throughout the entire proceedings is Monteleone's versatile Stratocaster guitar. Much of the video footage was lost due to a faulty hard drive. However, Bob and Echo Multimedia's Barry Ryan were able to find alternative footage to match the audio recorded that night. A highlight is footage of Black Market performing "School Girl" at a backyard party in the early 1980s that synced up perfectly with the audio at Callahan's. *Bob's Birthday Concert* is a very entertaining package and arguably an important historical musical document.—Andy Moss

BACK TO BATON ROUGE
Lil' Jimmy Reed
with Ben Levin

Noia Blue Records

In the mid-1950s, the young bluesman Leon Atkins stood in for the legendary Jimmy Reed for a

concert the star was too "ill" to perform. A local DJ knew that the teenage Leon at that time played exclusively Jimmy Reed music and managed to pull off the show. That's how the moniker Lil' Jimmy Reed was born.

Back To Baton Rouge is Reed's fourth release, as he didn't start putting out



albums until 1996 with *School's Out*, following a two-decade career in the military. *Back To Baton Rouge* was produced by the young Cincinnati-based piano phenom Ben Levin, who also tickles the ivories throughout the set. The ten songs are a mix of originals and covers, including three Jimmy Reed tunes and the Joe Liggins & the Honeydrippers hit "In the Wee Wee Hours." Most of the originals were written by Reed with Ben Levin or

with Ben and Ben's dad Aron, who plays second guitar on the session. Lil' Jimmy is one of the last of the great Louisiana bluesmen. As a child growing up across the street from a nightclub in Hardwood, LA, he heard firsthand legends like Muddy, John Lee Hooker and of course, Jimmy Reed. Lil' Jimmy's guitar style is pure blues and he plays a mean, rack-styled harmonica, expertly squeezing high notes like his namesake. *Back To Baton Rouge* is kind of a laid-back affair, no histrionics or gut-bucket screaming, it's calm, just like the man himself. "They Call Me Lil' Jimmy" tells the story of how he got his stage name. The title track tells "how I miss my old town, I'll be there before the sun go down." "Engine Light" laments the fear of every traveling musician, the automobile breakdown in the middle of the night. *Back To Baton Rouge* is a thoroughly enjoyable listen and a testament to the talents of the great Lil' Jimmy Reed.—Bob Monteleone

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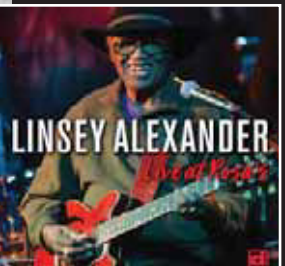
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