

# BLUES REVIEWS

## Chicago/The Blues Legends/Today!



### VARIOUS

#### Chicago/The Blues Legends/Today!

WEST TONE

**C**hicago/The Blues Legends/Today! is every bit a testament to the city's unheralded legion that labors out of the limelight. Staying true to the music, the project's mission was as straightforward as its final result: Invite three unsung veterans—Mary Lane, Little Jerry Jones and Milwaukee Slim—into a studio; then stock that studio with a no-frills band traditionally versed in both pounding and creeping the blues; and simply let each headliner do what they have customarily done for decades. (By championing overlooked, under-recorded talent, *Today!* makes a sort of unofficial companion piece to West Tone's *Howlin' at Greaseland*, which corralled John Blues Boyd, Alabama Mike, and Henry Gray, among others, to honor Howlin' Wolf last year.)

Fear not: You may have never heard Mary Lane before, a hold-out from Theresa's underground blues lair, but once you do, you won't forget the fantastic South Side bluntness of her delivery. "Hurt My Feelings" and "Don't Want My Lovin' No More" reap the benefit of her streetwise credibility. The same assurances go for any first-time meetings with singing guitarists Jerry Jones and Milwaukee Slim. Besides being able to tell you personal stories about Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter, Jones is also the one with the boozier voice. Both, however, are authentically bar-stained.

The session's anchor is Rockin' Johnny Burgin, who leads the ensemble from behind a guitar that has worked alongside nearly every blue Chicagoan since the 1990s. That's why "I Always Want You Near" attains yesteryear nirvana on the basis of its reverb alone, whereas the bottleneck slide through "Dust My Broom" is way more Homesick James than Elmore James—a looser ride along the strings to compliment Jones' swashbuckling approach. Besides bringing out the best in their guests, the ensemble also fends for themselves with Burgin ("Things Gonna Work Out Fine") and omnipresent harpist Mike Mettalia (his own "Midnight Call") taking lead.

Liquor, rotten relationships, Magic Sam, pangs for doing you-know-what, and shuffles heavy enough to leave their imprint in the carpet all figure into the game plan at one point or another. Close your eyes and it's another night down at Jimmy's Woodlawn Tap.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### TRUDY LYNN

#### Blues Keep Knockin'

CONNOR RAY

**T**hank Albert Collins. Because the story goes that, once upon a time, the famed Master of the Telecaster invited a teen-aged Trudy Lynn up on stage for a chance to sing. That was the spark—and the rest has been ongoing history. Fifty-some years and now 13 solo albums later, Houston's venerable soul-

blues diva has yet to put down the microphone, still answering the call every time those *Blues Keep Knockin'*.

Lynn, a six-time Blues Music Award nominee, has the seniority to bend evergreens her way, as the age-worn wisdom in her mahogany voice does wonders with the defeatist anthem "That's Alright," not to mention Big Bill Broonzy's bourbon-breath'd "When I Been Drinkin'" or the original title track. Yet it's her unflagging sass that hyperventilates "One Monkey Don't Stop No Show" back to life with newfound vibrancy and happy horns. "Never Been to Spain" simmers the same tension that neither Three Dog Night nor Elvis could resist. "Would It Make Any Difference to You" showcases an even more relaxed side, relying on balladeer skills to realize the soft sadness in a lover's goodbye.

Yet provide Lynn reason to take off the gloves and she'll gladly kick out gravel from her 70-year-old throat. To that end, the back-to-back suite of "I Sing the Blues" and the self-deprecating "Pitiful" becomes a quarry, getting ground down hard from Lynn's level of vocal exclamation giving Steve Krase's burning harp and the string bends from Bob Lanza's guitar a run for their money.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

### MARK HUMMEL

#### Harpbreaker

ELECTRO-FI

**Y**ou don't have to be a fellow harpist to be brought to the point of slobbering with awe and



envy over the drop-jawed fire and ice that reedmaster extraordinaire Mark Hummel's pulls off on *Harpbreaker*. You just have to own a pair of lungs. Because the power, range, control, nuance and creative authority in his blowing is a marvel. The man's chops have chops.

This series of jeweled performances gathers from all sorts of sources: newly recorded, never released and previously issued; plugged and unplugged; studio and live; blues, jump, jazz, and wisps of third-position smoke ("Cristo Redentor"). But what puts the showcase over the top, making for a purist's delight, is dispensing with all vocals, which only end up stealing away precious space better spent on soloing.

And there's no mistaking the alpha-male reigning over this expansive all-instrumental territory. Not even within a savvy pack of musicians that at any moment can include the saber-toothed guitars of Anson Funderburgh, Billy Flynn, Rusty Zinn or Little Charlie Baty. Not when Hummel keeps pulling one rabbit after the next out of his hat, magically delivering works of sheer beauty (exquisitely skating notes across "Glide On"), pudgy-toned saunters ("Ready, Steady, Stroll"), acoustic meditations ("See See Rider") and iron-fisted tangos ("Billy's Boogaloo," one of the new ones). The pulmonary panic "Harpoventilatin" and Buddy Rich's profoundly swinging "Rotten Kid" boldly acknowledge that Hummel can soar high off any bandstand on any given night. To this, add the hard bop standard "Senor Blues"—the harmonica's coolest revelation of hornlike aptitude—and *Harpbreaker* compiles all the stunning proof needed of the mighty muscle and grace capable of an instrument that conveniently fits within the palm of one's hand.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



**STEVE KRASE BAND**

*Just Waitin'*

CONNOR RAY

**H**arpist Steve Krase is out to have a good time for all to hear. Truth be told, the energized Texan got this party started back in 2014 with *Buckle Up*, which rolled into last year's *Should've Seen It Coming*, and now hurtles breathlessly through *Just Waitin'*. Stylistically, the caffeinated set zings around the room, moving with bold, boisterous gestures. Howlin' Wolf's "My Baby Walked Off," beefed up with far huger springs, bounces off the walls, as opposed to "Blame It All on Love," whose pogo-pop rebounds off the ceiling. "Settin' the Woods on Fire" never pressed this hard when Hank Williams originally cut loose. And throughout, Krase's excitable enthusiasm continually tugs at the leash, even getting keyed up while the guitars slowly burn down "Nobody Loves Me."

Although remaining the go-to harpist for Houston's soul-blues diva Trudy Lynn (her brand-new *Blues Keep Knockin'* features his blowing), Krase is quite omnivorous here, tailoring solos to fit every flavor of fun at hand. That goes for thumping "I Don't Mind" with a Bo Diddley beat or swinging on Glen Miller's "In the Mood" riff to make Wolf's "All In the Mood" dance. The ultimate tilt-a-whirl ride, however, is the Beverly Hillbillies theme, "The Ballad of Jed Clampett." Completely retooled as a shout-along, harp-squeezed zydeco workout, it's a job that calls for a party animal's cracked creativity.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

**TUNDE MABADU**

*Viva Disco*

MR BONGO

**I**n 1980's *Viva Disco* works everyone hard. That goes for the listener sucked into its series of dancehall mantras as much as for Tunde Mabadu & His Sunrise merrymakers, who sweated through these six floor-filling workouts. Starting with "Alabosi" and not resting until the waves of funk from the instrumental title track finally fade away, a one-track mindset gets maintained: Keep the Nigerian disco-boogie continuously pumping so its rubbery rhythms spin you around and 'round beneath the glitter ball without reason or opportunity to sit down. With vamps hovering around the seven-minute mark, extended grooves don't heat up the dance floor only to quickly shut down, instead providing "African Parowo" and "Angelina—Sugar Daddy" ample time to move heaven and earth, body and soul—and feet. The four-on-the-floor beat is an insidious taskmaster, racking up points for synching the concerted heave of horns and the twitch of synths and guitars. A fat bass serves as enforcer, ensuring anyone in earshot falls in line with the repetition's intoxicating hypnosis. Face it, even without having any clue of what "Amupara Ko Ma Dara" is telling you, resistance is futile: There will be jubilation and there will be dancing. From out of the deepest depths of rarity, *Viva Disco* is once again open for business, freshly offering 40 minutes of cathartic getaway. But this time that reaches beyond the nightlife of Lagos.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



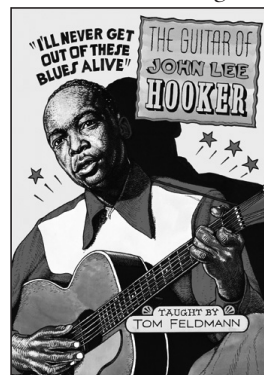
**TOM FELDMANN**

*The Guitar of John Lee Hooker*

STEFAN GROSSMAN'S GUITAR

WORKSHOP (DVD)

**S**tomping out a John Lee Hooker song on guitar comes with a certain untold power. Imagine the visceral rush from personally running down "Boogie Chillen," the groove heard 'round the world. Or knowing the ins and outs when creeping through the iconic labyrinth of doom, "I'll Never Get Out of These Blues Alive." Or having "I'm a Crawling King Snake" slither from beneath your own fingers. Tom Feldmann—who has altruistically also broken the code to Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and a score more greats—now diligently teaches you how-how-how to attain badass blues nirvana by harnessing *The Guitar of John Lee Hooker*.



The two-hour master class is a complete boogie 'n' blues kit, stocked with step-by-step guidance, tab/music notation, lyrics, and even vintage footage of John Lee performing half of the lesson plan. By transferring the blueprints to eight songs (divided between standard and Spanish tunings), along with basic Hooker design elements (landmark riffs as well as signature strum patterns, finger brushes, bass rumbles, trills, hammer-ons and bends), you'll be well prepped to springboard off into one of the deepest, most mesmeric discographies ever to have been spawned by misery. Because it is one thing to listen to the almighty "Boom Boom," but it's a vastly more intense experience to physically pump the chord while howling out "I'm gonna shoot you right down, right off your feet." As did everyone from the Doors to George Thorogood to ZZ Top, tap into that Hooker power.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

**THE LUCKY LOSERS**

*Blind Spot*

DIRTY CAT

**S**an Francisco's genre-blending Lucky Losers come to *Blind Spot*, their third Dirty Cat record, with an even surer sense of artistic self-identity. Cathy Lemons and harpist Phil Berkowitz remain the nucleus, taking turns singing but making the best magic when convening to share the job. That takes nothing away from her vocal fortitude that thrusts "Take the Long Road" past a steamrolling bassline or his ever so smooth sailing through "Bulldogs & Angels (Bring It on Out)." It's just that style points rack up doubly during their repartee, alternately blending voices into reinforced ribbons but then sharply trading lines like boxers in a ring. The prize fight is "Make a Right Turn," requiring quick reflexes and a quicker tongue to spill the lyrics in a back-and-forth flurry. "You Left Me Behind" is more vaudeville with its exchange of barbed zingers. Not only do these Lucky Losers write their own material, but they also invest some real thought when putting pen to paper, poking and prodding at life from different angles, philosophizing atop horn crescendos that make "Alligator Baptism" sweat all the more. And that mix-it-up, keep-you-guessing personality likewise spreads across melodies as irresistibly quirky as a hard-edged, bullet-sprayed "Last Ride" or, best yet, when riding up and down the hilly "It's Never Too Early." Gui-



## BLUES REVIEWS

CONTINUED

tarists Laura Chavez and coproducer Kid Andersen guest on this lyrically hard-hitting funhouse.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### ELTRAN DE L'AIR

No. 1  
SAHEL SOUNDS

**N**ever experienced an extreme-energy trance that doubles as just an everyday street gig around Agadez, an urbanized outpost stranded in the Sahara? Well, here's your rare chance. Because by simply letting tape run over the course of an impromptu open-air gathering, a perfectly unspoiled shot of amped-up guitar ecstasy was captured alive and twitching. Christopher Kirkley, who's in the regular business of introducing West Africa's desert stars to the world via his Oregon-based Sahel Sounds label, managed to bottle up lightning yet again.

And the easy part is that neither ears nor nerve endings need be versed in Niger's music scene to affirm that *Eltran de l'Air* are the region's party kings (since 1995). And that *No. 1* is a kinetic masterpiece, pulsing throughout from three competing electric guitars, a bass, a set of bashed drums and communal vocals that work circular logic with their hypercharged grooves. Everything they touch swirls with a primal, rhythmic insistence: the wickedly lurching "Tarha," "Mon Amour" that lets lead guitarist Abdourahamane Ibra "Allamine" go long and bright, or any of the five other fantastically raw and rowdy tracks. Liftoff is attained during "Hadija," ten minutes of sustained feverish pitch that gener-

ates its own naturally whooshing effect. If R.L. Burnside or Junior Kimbrough mean anything to you, you're halfway there.

Amplifiers crackle and hum in between outbursts. The amassed crowd freely participates in the frenzy, interactively shouting, clapping and firing off ululating approval that squiggles skyward like bottle rockets. Everything but the pervasive grit of sand is here. Vicarious doesn't come close to conveying the incredibly vivid you-are-there vibe radiating off this hazardously wild adventure.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### STRINGSHOT

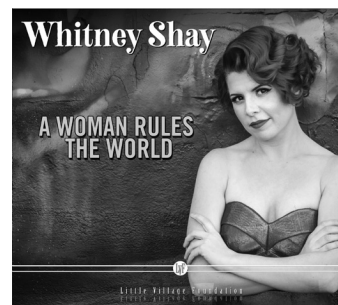
*StringShot*  
CHOPS NOT CHAPS

**C**alifornia's bearded slide guitarist Roy Rogers has always been up for a good challenge. His range has fanned out across soundtracks (*The Hot Spot*), partnerships (harpist Norton Buffalo) and signature instrumental-heavy workouts that openly declare their allegiance (*Slidewinder*, *Slide of Hand*, *Slideways*). He climbed the ranks up from a player in John Lee Hooker's Coast-to-Coast Band to producing Hook's titanic comeback records, stretched between 1989's *The Healer* and 1995's *Chill Out*. Then, more recently, there was that productive alliance struck up with the Doors' Ray Manzarek.

Now, at 68, Rogers' latest test of versatility takes on the gorgeous elegance of *StringShot*, a blues-Latin fusion trio completed by dulcet-voiced Brazilian guitar virtuoso Badi Assad and Paraguayan stringed harp master/violinist Carlos Reyes. Although before taking the show out on the road in the fall, their first order of business was polish-

ing this self-titled debut to a high shimmer. Those core three criss-cross their mix of worldly strings with a sleekly smoothed sound, filled out with electric keyboards, bass and percussion. So, "Blues for Brazil" can now honor its title better than ever, indulging a vastly airier, measurably lush staging than Rogers and Charlie Musselwhite offered in 1996. And "God Prayed It," another Rogers holdover, stunningly lifts above the clouds with the greatest of ease, especially thanks to Assad's pristine voice that works wonders with the abundant bal-ladry. Slidewise, though, Rogers' bottleneck has a real ball bursting through "Back to Havana," its aqueous waves amplifying the instrumental's tropical bounce as much as does the equally excited violin.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



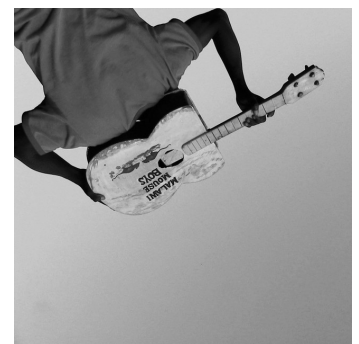
### WHITNEY SHAY

*A Woman Rules the World*  
LITTLE VILLAGE FOUNDATION

**R**ed-haired and sequined, Whitney Shay brings a fresh, new face and a ton of energy to the blues scene by way of San Diego. And if *A Woman Rules the World* is any index, then the fireball vocalist has to be leaving a trail of splinters from the 200+ stages she burns up, then tears down every year. Cosmopolitan songcraft, dressed in rich arrangements, certainly do contribute to the power. (The big-band push, with brass ablaze, through Dinah Washington's "Blues Down Home" is phenomenal.) But really it's the go-go-gusto of Shay's delivery that runs the ten tracks hardest. Unite her spunk and ultra confidence with the bluster of her musicians (including those

face-smashing horns), and "Ain't No Weak Woman," "Check Me Out" and "Get It When I Want It" are—pow!—on you in a flash. "Love's Creeping Up on You" enters into an old-fashioned soul duet with Igor Prado that, along with Denise LaSalle's "A Woman Rules the World" and Shay's own altogether calmer ballad "Empty Hand," cools down the timbre of attack. The trend continues with more original material as strong as "Don't You Fool Me No More" seamlessly blending among chestnuts borrowed from the soulful likes of Candi Staton and Bill Coday. Live, however, "Get Down With It" must be the wildest of all to experience. Caught up in the stomping fever of Shay directing everyone to interactively let loose in phases of semi-controlled pandemonium, we're putty in her hands.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### MALAWI MOUSE BOYS

*Score For a Film About Malawi Without Music From Malawi*  
TOY GUN MURDER (MALAWIMOUSEBOYS.BANDCAMP.COM)

**S**prung onto an unsuspecting world in 2012, the Malawi Mouse Boys have become known for two indelible things: The delectable rodent kebobs they hawk along the roadside in their southeast African homeland and their own brand of contagious musical euphoria. Basically, give the Mouse Boys access to a scrap yard and they'll jerry-rig a whole orchestra of DIY instruments, from a four-string sheet-metal guitar to a hi-hat fashioned out of stacked bicycle gears. Even more striking is the naturally golden weave of their voices soaring high atop. Ah, the magnificence in simple genuineness.

Here, those same sweet harmonies take to the “Sky Above.” And their guitars remain the crystalline source of “Water.” That hasn’t changed. But what has is the creative intent. Although still 100% handmade in their remote village, *Score For a Film About Malawi Without Music From Malawi* is not a successor-in-kind to the three prior Mouse Boys albums. This free-form session lets their freak flag fly.

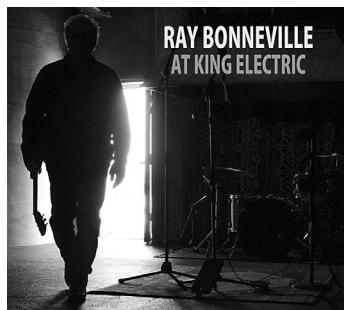
Edgy and purposefully fractured, its 15 shards of sonic abstraction were intentionally designed for heightening moods—contemplation, rumination, elation—of what would have been flashing on the silver screen. Regrettably, however, the commissioned soundtrack was never used. Undaunted, the orphaned work now stands on its atmospheric own. “Eclipse” and “Power Lines” do their haunting amorously, within a group of instrumentals that release mercurial ghosts from such everyday objects as water buckets, a machete, shovels, insects, and the wind. But how “Alone” generates its Pink Floydian sonar pings in the middle of rural nowhere is anyone’s guess. Call it ingenious bush art.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

**RAY BONNEVILLE**

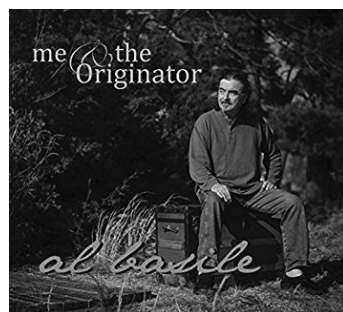
*At King Electric*  
STONEFLY

There’s trouble afoot. And, thankfully, Ray Bonneville is knee-deep in it. Because the Austin-associated singer/songwriter embraces anguish by laying pen to paper and fingers to guitar, trying to scrape together a sliver of prospect for his empty-hearted characters. After piling up enough thumbnail sketches of unsettled souls and internally



brewed storms, the stellar *At King Electric* sessions triggered. More so than on his eight prior trophy-winning emotional downloads, the air grows tighter here, closing in around “Next Card to Fall” and the no-better-off “It’ll Make a Hole in You.” Like his restrained grooves which rarely hurry, Bonneville’s wise and world-weary voice carries a natural gravity that commands attention. The subject matter only heightens the situation, transmitting personal communications from down in the ditch of life, be that a prison cell (“The Day They Let Me Out”), the addict’s room (“Codeine”) or anywhere light is not welcome (“Waiting on the Night”). His uncompromised integrity extends to a small, patient band that paints thick atmospheric counterpoint. Of the bunch, electric piano often trickles through the hornless Americana landscape eroded by Bonneville’s non-showy, brooding guitar and occasional harmonica wails. Even “Riverside Drive” stays in murky mood on its wordless slither through rolling drumbeat thunder. Depending on how the light hits this set, shades of J.J. Cale and post-Dire Straits Mark Knopfler can be heard. That said, in a just world, Ray Bonneville’s rootsy run-ins with flesh-and-blood strife would be a household name.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



**AL BASILE**

*Me & the Originator*  
SWEETSPOT

After tenure in Roomful of Blues and then building a hefty discography on his own, Al Basile may well have found the ultimate forum for all his artistic creativity. The ambitious *Me & the Originator* employs a

design not commonly encountered within the blues idiom: the concept album. And the concept is this: Enact the fictional tale of a blues musician starving for original material, who discovers a trunk full of uncredited lyrics that ends up altering his life in more ways than imagined. But the added twist is to tell that tale by marrying Basile’s songcraft, cornet playing and singing with his award-winning poetic indulgences. So, he continually alternates between the first-person storyteller giving spoken narration and then performing his character’s songs. Inspiration for the design came from *Louis Armstrong: My Musical Biography*; the rest, though, came from Basile himself.

Musically, a familiar cast of New England all-stars readily personify the crack band, whose ranks include saxophonist Doug James, drummer Mark Teixeira and noted kingpin Duke Robillard. Besides producing the project, Robillard keeps very busy by crafting solo guitar lead-ins for the 13 spoken tracks as well as injecting some of his finest fretwork into the 12 horn-laden songs (the belly-aching lead and fills throughout “She Made Me Believe It” are spectacular). But then again, the universal level of musicianship is spectacular throughout, be that cornet’s round brassy tone in “Here Comes Your Trouble” or the group-bounce given “My J-O-B.” Basile makes his best music yet—delivered on every other track, interspersed among his multitasking one-man play.

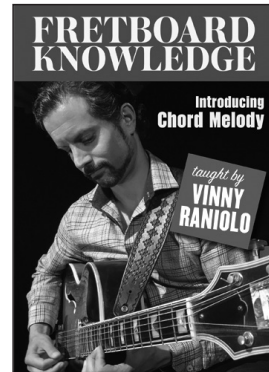
DENNIS ROZANSKI

**VINNY RANILOLO**

*Introducing Chord Melody*  
STEFAN GROSSMAN’S GUITAR WORKSHOP (DVD)

Not on guitarist Vinny Raniolo’s watch. No longer will the congenial “Four Leaf Clover” get looked over, passively. Instead, the timeless standard joins three others as demonstrative work-

horses that bring to life how to get the chords under your fingers to interact with a melody line. In other words: *Introducing Chord Melody*. After first breaking in the valuable technique with



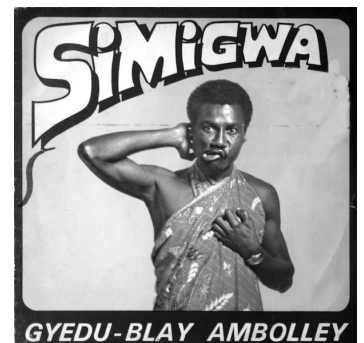
a series of warm-up exercises, Raniolo jazzfully guides you out into open waters once charted by Billie, Ella and Benny, and sailed by your fellow fretsman Joe Pass, Kenny Burrell and George Benson. That’s where the line between practical application (single notes, chords, chord voicings) and gorgeous expression blurs tremendously. Just as sumptuous now, each classic example comes with its own fine details, be that the bluesy bridge swinging across “Moon-glow” or some of the most cottony E flat, C minor and F minor chords you’ll ever hear put to use floating “These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You).” For dare-devils, there’s that finger-busting A minor voicing in the midst of “All of Me.”

DENNIS ROZANSKI

**GYEDU-BLAY AMBOLLEY**

*Simigwa*  
MR BONGO

What is this curious little record with the most unforgettable yellow cover? For one thing, *Simigwa* is ongoing proof that Mr Bongo’s deep dive to retrieve sunken African treasure hasn’t come remotely close to nearing the bottom. The second, more precise answer is that 1975’s sonic secret is a concentrated shot of everything-but-the-kitchen-sink Ghanaian stew:



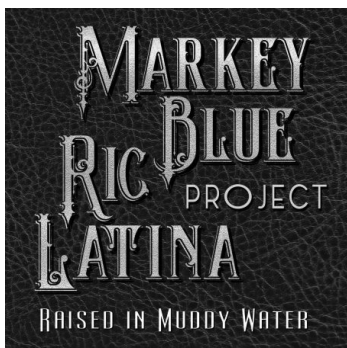
## BLUES REVIEWS

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30 minutes of grooving high on the homeland's highlife, Fela's Afrobeat, American-made funk, a dash of Afro-Cubanism, and a freewheeling sense of originality. But the music's key role model gets snatched on every time a "hit me now!," "good god!," or, the real giveaway, "sex machine!" erupts with James Brownian flair. All those vibrant sources got mixed together, then cooked under the constant heat of horns and percussion, and served up by the super-sized personality that is Gyedu-Blay Ambolley.

While Ambolley would later go on to found and grow the highlife movement, a crossbred style of hip hop with highlife, these six tracks find him at his earliest phase of getting Ghana up on its feet. To do so, he stokes his cocksure strut with the saxophone-trumpet tête-à-tête "Akoko Ba," a reggae-infused "Adwoa," and the syncopated call-and-response bubbling from both "The Hustling World" and "Kwaakwaa." Plus, he's got game on the mellowed "Toffie," playing up his pseudo sweet talking and Soul Brother shrieks. The danceable jams on the inside of *Simigwa* burn into your memory cells as much as does Ambolley's striking image on the outside cover, staring right through you with jaw akimbo.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



### MARKEY BLUE/RIC LATINA PROJECT

*Raised in Muddy Water*  
ELLERSOUL

The blues-rocking band formerly known as Markey Blue now requires a longer marquee to accommodate their newly expanded name: the Mar-

key Blue/Ric Latina Project. The division of labor stays the same, equitably placing a microphone in Markey's hand and a guitar in Ric's. It's just that, starting fresh with *Raised in Muddy Water*, the frontline officially receives double billing.

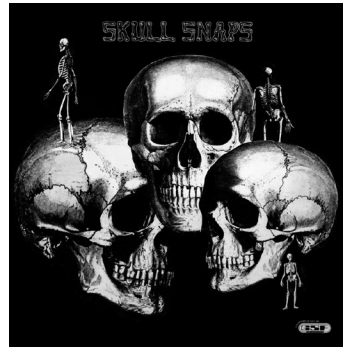
And that teamwork wastes no time cowriting this entire record that often draws a Southern identity, lyrically lurking around backwater Mississippi and Louisiana while a slide guitar snakes about accentuating the swampiness all the more. First to capitalize on the combination is the leadoff title track, whose hoodoo majestically ebbs and flows. "Walking Over This Line" is a breathy, cottony-soft, tear-stained crusher that slows the pace and dims the lights to nurse its wickedly tortured case of lover's envy. "Red Room," a devilish roadhouse with "Hotel California"-like properties, benefits from Ronnie Owens' harp cameo. But the leading guest spot gets taken when Markey teasingly jousts over "I Like It Like This" with the late, great Eddy Clearwater, who died in June, at age 83. The Project traffics in wider circles, as further revealed by nods to Taj Mahal (the perky "Corrina Shine"), John Prine (the glassy "A Little More I Die"), and Delbert McClinton ("Come and Go," a horn-battered, chicken-fried, chest-beating parting shot of a breakup song). Then, for a jazzy finale, "Drowning in His Ocean" offers live, onstage proof in its swinging gait that the Project doesn't rely on studio smoke and mirrors to pull off their sound.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

### SKULL SNAPS

*Skull Snaps*  
MR BONGO

**S**kull Snaps comes in handy. For when conversation turns to competitive one-upmanship in trying to stump others with vintage vinyl obscura, knowing this gone-missing slice of 1970s soul-funk will win bragging rights. Just don't dare try the first track, "My Hang Up Is You," unless you have a half-hour to spare. Yeah, the whole album is



just as grabby as those first four minutes that tensely march past while pointing fingers. For an overall frame of reference, think the Temptations during their edgier *Cloud Nine* period, along with the Isley's *Brother, Brother, Brother*.

Before evaporating into obscurity, the mysterious Skull Snaps managed to fire off this one self-titled salvo in '73. If their band name alone didn't throw R&B fanatics off the trail, then the skeletal artwork on the jacket cover surely did. Bewildering? Yes, but fantastically rewarding for the intrepid who discovered them nonetheless. Because waiting inside—true to the times—tough funk ("Trespassing") alternates with towering Northern soul ballads ("Didn't I Do It to You"). The vocals are sturdy and fabulous, no matter which of the leads is temporarily in control, shielded by the others' harmonies. Equally secure is the music, thick with wah-wah guitars instead going wacka-wacka, beds of strings, banks of horns, and a domineering lock between bottomless bass and hissing hi-hats. Yet no matter how downright *Super Fly* the streetwise rhythm and rhyme of "I'm Your Pimp"—"I wear my hat on the side and walk with a limp"—was, those few seconds of drumbeat skipping into "It's a New Day" are what hip-hop samplers eventually jacked. One of the year's best out-of-the-blue surprises.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

### ROCKIN' JOHNNY BURGIN

*Neoprene Fedora*  
WEST TONE

**R**ockin' Johnny Burgin has worked alongside all the cool Chicago cats. The short

tally runs from Jimmy Dawkins, Johnny Littlejohn, Taildragger, Eddie Shaw and Jimmy Burns to Sam Lay, Willie Kent, Lurrie Bell, Dave Myers and Paul DeLay. Not bad, huh? But, after decades of bandstand and studio service, the city's go-to guitar (and harp) resource has recently migrated from the West Side all the way to the West Coast. Imaging that, an Epiphone stranded in the golden land of Fender.

*Neoprene Fedora* is a response to Burgin's new incoming stimuli while still acting upon what's been long engrained. At seven-and-a-half minutes, the title track makes a decisive opening statement: Chicago's loss is California's gain. The epic surf instrumental erupts in multiple stages, finding Burgin slinging oceanic reverb, diving off the whammy bar, and working the high treble while a saxophone digs out the bottom. It's the way blues sound around Big Sur, like a Dick Dale fandango cheered on by Magic Sam. The set keeps right on tipping heavily with originals, regardless of stylistic slant. "I Did The Best I Could" is the kind of organ-drenched soul music that implores guest vocalist Alabama Mike to chew on his syllables as well as his heart. "Smoke and Mirrors" is mod and nefariously funky. And "Kinda Wild Woman" joins "Our Time Is Short" on a zydeco detour to respectively boogaloo and waltz away the blues alongside a buzzing accordion in the mold of Clifton Chenier's Red Hot Louisiana Band.

Still, the vast majority of time gets devoted to Chicago-anointed shufflers (Blueblood McMahon's "Guitar King"), grinders ("My Baby's Gone") and Otis Rush-styled moaners



(“Give Me An Hour in Your Garden”). That said, capturing the many changing moods of Rockin’ Johnny Burgin now calls for a soundtrack to catch a wave in addition to, of course, logging the blues.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



**SÉKOU BAH**

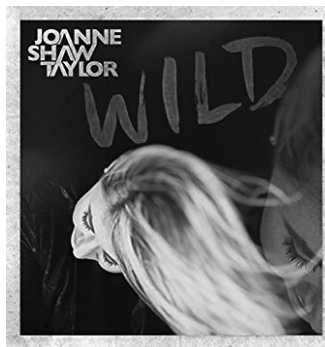
*Soukabbè Mali*  
CLERMONT

**I**t’s a real tossup. Which is breezier: Bassist/guitarist/composer Sékou Bah’s graceful way with innervating a groove or how his singing glides through the action with equal fluidity? Both work their sense of freeness with cool-headed composure, even when the percussion is really boiling over and the guitars are peeling off note-flooded runs. That goes as much for the popcorning “Doke Doye” as for the majestically flown title track to *Soukabbè Mali*, Bah’s deliriously smoldering record. Whatever the flow, the intricately

textured sound of virtuosic West Africa washes over you.

And virtuosic it is, since Bah began as an 11-year-old child prodigy in the grown-up Nangabanou Jazz orchestra before going on to be crowned “the monster of Malian rhythm” and eventually enhancing the work of world-stage godhead Salif Keita and Wassoulou diva Oumou Sangaré. So, given such quality control, his own forward-looking band gets stocked with scintillating talent at all positions (listen no further than the flying-fingered chain reaction lit inside the “Planete” jam). Everything is always on the move: “Dogon Oulon” briskly stacks its vocals; “Nge Mounkila” splashes funk every time Yacouba Konè’s foot squashes the wah-wah pedal; and “Kalan Ko” lunges forward on Bah’s bassline punching through this (and every) mix. Yet the contemporary, synth-free tracks can get endorsed by Malian signatures as ancient as the crystallized pluck of kora or a balafon’s hollow tumbling rumble. Still, a pair of booming remixes soup up their big beat all the bigger to induce ecstasy out on the parquet while reinforcing that these breezes are meant for today.

DENNIS ROZANSKI



**JOANNE SHAW TAYLOR**

*Wild*

SONY

**S**ony Music has huge plans for blustery British blues-rockers Joanne Shaw Taylor and her roaring guitar: A freshly-inked global deal calls for three albums starting in early 2019. But first paving the way is the full-press reissue of her last two albums, letting 2016’s *Wild*, along with 2014’s *The Dirty Truth*, build a bigger buzz now than Taylor’s own limited-distribution boutique label, Axehouse Records, originally could. So, if you missed out before, now’s the time to get back up to speed on the guitarist who was hired at age 16, in 2002, by the Eurythmics’ Dave Stewart to inject fire into his DUP supergroup and has since fully evolved into the all-around artist who wows audiences from Buckingham Palace and Royal Albert Hall all the way to the Rams Head, just a few short weeks ago in August.

Not only did Taylor come to these *Wild* sessions with her Lemon Drop Les Paul, her 1966 Fender Esquire and a clutch of nails-tough handmade songs, but she also brought producer Kevin Shirley, who, having made records with Joe Bonamassa, Aerosmith and Iron Maiden, knew how to further tighten down and turn up a band of marauders. Right from the start, the hard galloping “Dyin’ to Know” sets the tone with its heads-down thrust soon infiltrating “I’m in Chains” and the drum-whipped “Wanna Be My Lover,” whose stressed-out riffing smacks of Stevie Ray. “Ready to Roll” and “Get You Back” kick just as hard, while Taylor, never a showy singer, unleashes a secondary fury with her steely voice on narratives typically bargained from a position of strength. Even when Gershwin’s “Summertime” wafts in, the encore is far more Janis than Ella, expectedly more overt flames than radiant heat. Yet, when the gap of vulnerability in Taylor’s armor gets exposed, the standout ballad “I Wish I Could Wish You Back” does so with a glorious ache that speaks to anyone who ever had a relationship slip away. Until the first of those three upcoming albums arrives in spring, *Wild* will more than tide us over.

DENNIS ROZANSKI

**CREATIVE ALLIANCE**

Chicago guitarist, vocalist and songwriter Nick Moss is a bona fide bluesman down to his soul, a 30-year veteran of the city’s take-no-prisoners blues scene. Moss paid his dues gigging in Chicago’s rough and tumble West and South side blues clubs under the tutelage of some of the city’s greatest blues luminaries. *Blues Revue* says, “Nick Moss is at the top of the blues world ...ambitious and intense... He can play traditional blues with the best.” New Jersey’s Dennis Gruenling is considered among today’s best blues harmonica players. His high-energy, full-throttle playing has earned him comparisons to the late James Cotton.

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