

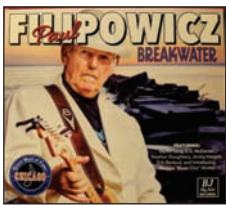
BIG CITY Rhythm & Blues

REVIEWS

PAUL FILIPOWICZ *Breakwater*

Big Jake Records

One of the common myths about the blues is that it only comes in one flavor. The fact is, the blues are reminiscent of a tree with many branches that continue to grow and evolve. Paul Filipowicz sings from the gut and plays working man blues. This is of course when he is not busy tinkering with V8 flat-



head engines, restoring vintage automobiles and writing old school hard-boiled detective stories. You would expect nothing less from a guitarist who spent many hours in the company of friends and mentors like Luther Allison, Clyde Stubblefield, Brewer Phillips and Lefty Dizz. "Breakwater" is the twelfth release on Flipo's musical journey which is now eclipsing fifty-five years. That is fifty-five years crisscrossing the US playing smoky bars, out-in-the-boonies dives, theaters, festivals and private parties. In other words, a whole lot of sweat, shoe leather and rubber tire. This recording reflects that and oozes equal parts passion, precision and organic overtones. It is a heartfelt tribute to his heroes of days gone by, whether it be Sonny Boy Williamson, Johnny Littlejohn, Freddie King, Peter Green or the aforementioned Brewer Phillips and Lefty Dizz. The ensemble

cast assembled here is a who's who on the midwest music scene literally playing on hundreds of recordings. The spot-on rhythm section of EG McDaniel on bass and Steve Dougherty on drums take no prisoners. No matter what the tempo, these cats totally mine the groove and deliver the goods, gift wrapped. The insanely talented Jimmy Voegli pulls double duty playing both organ and piano and adds that right amount of spice to bring out the best in the song. Next, both Martin Lang on harmonica and Erik Beraud on saxophones elevate everything they are featured on. A notable example is "Sonny Boy," a sincere tribute to the harmonica giant who changed the way blues harp was seen and interpreted. Special guest vocalist Maggie "Blues Chic" Aliotta makes the most of her time in the spotlight by belting out "That's Why I'm Crying." This mournful torch song really hits the nail on the head. What really stands out on "Breakwater" is the way the original material and covers are effortlessly blended and presented, leaving you wanting more. Paul's rough and tumble voice shifts effortlessly through rollicking foot stompers like the opener "Tuff Girl" and "That's the Truth" to evocative slow burns like "Breakwater" and "This Time I'm Gone for Good." The coup de grace is Flipo's gut-bucket grind on six string, always playing just the right rhythm and lead to make it feel like you are in a club catching his act. The flow of the material is like a succulent rack of ribs in a slow cooker. A lean trim offering of solid blues, all killer no

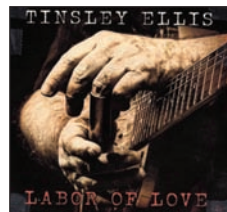
filler. "Breakwater" is without a doubt Paul Filipowicz's finest crafted work to date. Coupled with his energetic live-wire shows, 2026 promises to be a banner year for a man who plays the blues on his own terms and respects the legacy of those heroes who came before.—**Bob-O Walesa**

TINSLEY ELLIS *Labor of Love*

Alligator Records 2026

In 2024, noted Georgia blues rocker Tinsley Ellis shifted gears and released his first ever solo and acoustic album, "Naked Truth." It was an undeniable success, and this year Ellis has doubled down with another solo effort, equally praiseworthy, showing that his fingerpicking and slide artistry rivals his electric guitarslinger skills.

The album's thirteen songs are originals; only



one exceeds four minutes in length, but all are terse and potent. On most Ellis provides a thumping (probably foot-driven) percussion accompaniment; several tracks have guitar overdubs, and two tracks feature added mandolin.

Opening the set is "Hoodoo Woman," a spare mid-tempo number evoking the familiar blues theme of a female with mystical power. Right after is the infectious boogie of "Long Time," evoking memories of the King of Boogie, John

Lee Hooker. Ellis uses the biblical Garden of Eden story of Adam, Eve, and the apple as the basis for his lyrics on "Long Time." (His facility with words is present in all the tracks.) Another blues legend whose legacy is tacitly acknowledged is Mississippi Delta legend Son House; Ellis nails House's style effectively with "Sunnyland," deploying adroit slide guitar.

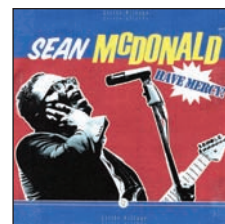
Yet the blues legend most prominent in this set is Nehemiah "Skip" James, most famous of the twentieth century bluesmen of the "Bentonia" style. During the making of this album Ellis allegedly spent some time in Bentonia, Mississippi, and he apparently soaked up its atmosphere. No less than three tracks are presented in the Skip James mode: "The Trouble with Love," "I'd Rather Be Saved," and "Fountain of Love." On each Ellis delivers delicate and tasteful guitar fingerpicking filigreed between foundational chords; the effect is mesmerizing. The vocals on those tracks, a high-pitched tenor, are eerily reminiscent of James's similar singing. Ellis is not a crooner or a song belter, but his style fits his songs.

Of the other numbers I really like, "Whole Wide World" is a lament for the state of the planet, and "Sweet Ice Tea" is an upbeat litany of delicious food that the singer craves: "I want chicken, butterbeans/Mashed potatoes, collard greens...." The most danceable tune is "Too Broke," with guitar and mandolin meshing well. The devotional "Lay My Burden Down" provides a fine ending to a fine album.—**Steve Daniels**

SEAN McDONALD *Have Mercy*

Little Village Foundation 2026

From Augusta, Georgia, Sean McDonald is only twenty-three years old, but already a musical veteran. His father is a drummer, and Sean allegedly began beating the skins at the tender age of two, followed shortly by piano, harmonica, and then guitar when he was seven. On this release he sticks with guitar while also showcasing his songwriting ability on four original tracks of the nine comprising the set. His approach is supported by a



stellar cast of cohorts: Little Village label impresario Jim Pugh on keyboards, June Core on drums, D'Quantae Johnson on bass, and the production skills of Kid Andersen. Terrific backing vocals are courtesy of the Morgan Brothers and Marcel Smith, and a simmering horn trio completes the ensemble.

McDonald has cited a wide range of influences, from the genres of jazz, gospel, rhythm-and-blues, and pop, and all those influences emerge on this album. First off, we are treated to a gospel rocker, "My Soul," which also introduces Sean as a singer. His vocalizing is characterized by a clear tenor tone, manifest as he delves into each different song style. "Fakin' It," the initial original,

is driven by Pugh's piano and a fine mid-tune tenor saxophone solo by Eric Spaulding, with Lisa Leuschner Andersen contributing voice. Nary a bar of solo guitar is heard, testimony to McDonald's fealty to the song rather than personal credit. Don't fret, though, there's plenty of excellent six-string expertise to follow, as exemplified by "Killing Me," Sean delivering tasteful jazzy licks.

On "Rocking in the Same Boat," a slow blues, McDonald reveals that he can both growl and croon, even venturing into falsetto range and spurring comparison to Stevie Wonder and one of Sean's idols, Ray Charles. "Shuffleboard Swing" is four minutes of instrumental jump blues pleasure, including an organ solo by Pugh. "Angel Baby," barely over three minutes long, is a 1950s-1960s style rocker with Sean emitting a scream of joy at the beginning of another energizing sax solo. It segues into the set's longest track, "Don't Let the Devil Ride," a slow shuffle with a strong gospel vibe.

The penultimate number, Ike Turner's "That's All I Need," is another successful melding of rock and gospel, with a terse but pithy guitar solo. The closing track, aptly named "Let's Call It a Day," is a full-on soul blues with one of the leader's longest (and best) guitar solos. It was well worth the wait.

This is Sean McDonald's first album, but you may be certain that it won't be his last. With a talent like his, he will almost certainly be a prominent part of the blues world for years.—**Steve Daniels**



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MURALI CORYELL

Soul of a Nation

www.muralicoryell.com

Murali Coryell is a storied and eclectic blues/rock singer-songwriter-guitarist that comes by such a moniker quite literally and honestly. His parents were jazz guitarist and fusion visionary Larry Coryell and his mother was Julie Coryell, a significant artist in her own right. When you grow up in such an environment, and you add life experiences like having Jimi Hendrix and Carlos Santana as family friends, it's understood there is bound to be a spiritual and existential take-away that ultimately is ingrained in you.

On this, Coryell's 10th studio album, you get the sense the socially-conscious troubadour has learned from and absorbed a thing or two from these pivotal moments in his personal history, and applied them to his view of the modern world. Hence, "Soul of a Nation" is apropos, for this is an artist and an album whose time has come, as he is right on time.

First off, Coryell's vocal style suits the music perfectly, with a textural sense of viscera and grit. You really feel his words and his lyrical commitment to detailing his unique perspective on the subject matter at hand. And his guitar work is equally engaging, which liberally draws from a deep classic rock/blues/jazz pedigree. "Pardon Me" is a not too veiled examination of the Trump Administration and a push back on the flagrant overreach of the Presidential Pardon. Over a steady mid tempo rock groove Coryell dynamically calls out hypocrisy where he sees it, with the hook, "Pardon me, set the criminals free and lock up the ones that don't look like me." In keeping with that sense of paranoia, he follows with "Severe Anxiety." It's all about dealing with the world situation and one's

own life. It's another great original tune that keeps that rhythmically engaged rock feel in full gear. The great soul crooner and songwriter Donny Hathaway is covered by Coryell in his song "Someday We'll All be Free." Imagine sitting back under a shady tree on a tranquil summer day or relaxing on the beach as you meditate on the inspiring words of this song. It's for all the dreamers and believers in true freedom everywhere. The title track, "Soul of a Nation," tackles the current state of affairs, particularly in the USA. It's got an Isley Brothers meets Curtis Mayfield vibe that's literally ripped from today's headlines. The juxtaposition of democratic crisis and an airy and breezy musical vamp marry the concepts of entertainment and political context in a very unique and memorable way. From the sublime to the mildly amusing, "Take it Off" is a jazzy and lighthearted rock-blues that really swings. Janice Dempsey offers key backing



vocals that emphasize the tune's good-natured fun. "Ukraine War Cries" was written in 15 minutes on the day the war broke out over three years ago. In interviews Coryell talks about sending the song to Ukraine's President Zelenskyy in which he received high praise from the leader. The musician's guitar appropriately screams and cries as he sings about the power to resist oppression. A song made famous by Teddy Pendergrass gets a nice treatment here on the R&B classic "Love TKO." Apparently, Coryell's version was a favorite of Delbert McClinton's and this reviewer loves it too. It's smooth as silk, with some great guitar and sax breaks that groove

like hell. "Eyes Wide Open" closes the album and is a nice original soul song, with an iconic Memphis-Stax kind of energy. It's got a relaxed easy feel, with a balance of Otis Redding/Steve Cropper style and charm.—**Eric Harabadian**

KELLI BAKER

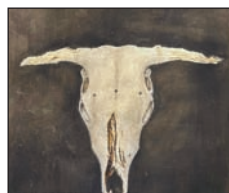
"Granite"

Gulf Coast Records

She's got a voice that is sweet and sensitive and can breathe fire and ferocity in a single bound. The depth of blues belter Kelli Baker's talent is palpable and difficult to compartmentalize. Rock, blues and soul, this Phoenix-born powerhouse does it all!

Recently signed to Gulf Coast Records, she's been on label head Mike Zito's radar for some time, and with good reason. A brief accounting of her musical resume includes performances with Zito as well as award-winning guitar stars Christine "Kingfish" Ingram and Samantha Fish. Further accolades include winning first place in competitions such as Nashville's "Blues Revival 615" that was judged by industry luminaries Kenny Wayne Shepherd, Albert Cummings and Derek St. Holmes. Also, Baker's rendition of "Dr. Feelgood (Love is a Serious Business)" topped the Roots Music Report's Blues Song chart, and she won the Long Island/Brooklyn/Queens division of the International Blues Challenge. The captivating songstress was recently honored by the National Women in Blues in Memphis, and Baker has headlined major festivals like the Women of the Blues Fest in McIntosh, MN and the Paxico Blues Fest in Paxico, KS.

Backed by an exceptional band, including Italian guitar and harmonica phenom Noe Socha and Tom Curiano on drums, Baker leads the pack through an EP's worth of smart, thought-provoking singles and rustic auto-biographical material. "Silk Flowers" is about her observations on phony relationships and the adherence to fabricated reality. It's got a strong hook, with a loud and proud cadence in the refrain. Socha adds an unfiltered back-drop of country blues and pure grit. "Right On Time" is just that—honest, forthright and direct. There is some great wah-wah guitar, with an interesting ascending structure to the arrangement that steps out of the norm. Its mid tempo and soulful rhythms provide a steady and unwavering vehicle for Baker's sultry inflections. "The Call" and "Granite



(Badlands)" almost work like an audio montage. You first hear a brief phone conversation that is a recording of Baker's late father expressing real talk about praise of her talents and career. And that's immediately followed by, essentially, the title track which is a lovely and emotional tribute to his unexpected passing 10 years ago. It's a delicate acoustic song that displays true empathy between Socha's plaintive harmonica playing and Baker's unvarnished testimony. "Where Did You Sleep Last Night" follows and further exemplifies Baker's flair for a dynamic ballad. She emotes so effortlessly, but with a caution and

eerie lilt in her voice. They pick up the pace for the final two tracks, with the light-hearted "Love in the Sheetz" and the classic Allman Brothers gem, "Whipping Post." Baker and company can swing and rock out with the best of them, as these back-to-back closing numbers will attest.—**Eric Harabadian**

MIKE DAVIS

"Whiskey Trails and Blues Tales"

www.mikedavisproject.com

Mike Davis is an independent singer-songwriter/guitarist-harmonica man from Tampa, Florida that blends the best of Americana, rustic blues, country and folk styles into a collective whole. This nine-song compilation of classic blues-styled originals is sure to satisfy anyone that appreciates fine singing, slide and finger-style guitar work. Joining Davis are an assemblage of session and side musician greats such as the late Johnny Cash/Dwight Yoakam bassist Dave Roe, jazz guitarist and co-producer Les Sabler, keyboardist Kevin McKendree, drummer George Receli and guitarist Colin Linden.

While Davis is, perhaps, the main artist on a nightclub marquee, and certainly the focus of this album, he truly engages the entire band (or project) into the creative process. Hence, the overall album has a roots-based authenticity to it, but there are some tasteful electric guitar explorations and keyboard colorations to the songs. Also, Davis is a master storyteller and can spin a yarn in the vein of some of the best blues and country-folk pickers like Muddy Waters, Johnny Cash and John Lee Hooker.

Highlights that seem to emphasize the depth and breadth of Davis' talents

include some straight up 12-bar delights like the acoustic dobro-fueled "Not Mad Anymore" and the Memphis-tinged boogie vibe of "Drinkin' Jack." "Goodbye Sardinia" is another jewel, with a nod to Canadian artist Bruce Cockburn, that depicts a first-person account of an immigrant's journey to the USA. The song is timely and prescient, without politicization or heavy-handedness. "Cownut" has a southwestern modern country feel, with tasty guitars and an ethereal backdrop. "Havana" also brings a different flavor to this collection as Davis and company delve into light Cuban rhythms, flamenco guitar and cinematic intrigue. Capping the disc, with the down-



and-dirty blues of "Red Rooster," the Leo Kottke-like acoustic mastery of "Melody for Tracey" and the laidback country blues of "Lamps," and you've got a strong set of original material deserving of wider recognition.

Mike Davis has a unique take on the blues and roots music that is based on tradition but is not bound or governed by it.—**Eric Harabadian**

Book

DANCING WITH MUDDY

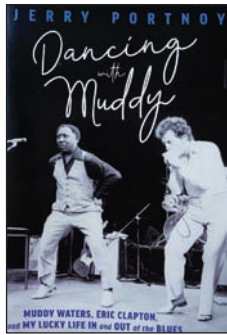
By **Jerry Portnoy**

Chicago Review Press 2025

The subtitle to harmonica great Jerry Portnoy's memoir is telling: **Muddy Waters, Eric Clapton, and My Lucky Life In and Out of the Blues.** The overwhelming impression I got from this book, which focuses on his career playing harp, is that Jerry Portnoy is

indeed a very lucky man—he fell into the blues, he picked up the harmonica, and he was able to learn from the legendary blues masters until he himself became legendary. When I saw Muddy Waters in 1978, his band included Jerry Portnoy, Bob Margolin, Luther “Guitar Junior” Johnson, Pinetop Perkins, Willie Smith, and Calvin “Fuzz” Jones, and I met Jerry later, when he played the Quad Cities, so I was eager to read this book. It does not disappoint! *Dancing with Muddy* is engaging and well-written, with memorable descriptions, context illuminated, and a narrative arc that incorporates ups and downs, betrayal and redemption.

There is no forward or introduction here, but there is a prologue. Entitled “807 Maxwell Street, Chicago 1981,” Jerry revisits the deli he knew as Lyon’s for the first time in over 30 years to discover it’s exactly as he



remembered it except for the name and a different owner, Nate. Much is revealed in their conversation. We hear about Jerry’s father, who used to own a store just up the block: Max Portnoy & Son, King of Carpets. We are introduced to Jerry as the harmonica player in the Muddy Waters Blues Band and heir to the iconic Little Walter. And Jerry comes to the realization that he and Nate had, “in a certain sense, mirror-image backgrounds. I was Jewish, trained in a Black environment. He was Black, trained in a Jewish one.”

To help us understand

that insight in more detail, chapter 1 opens in 1948, where we are immersed in the smells, sounds, and sights of Chicago’s Maxwell Street Market; a 4-year-old Jerry is soaking it up, setting the stage in his subconscious for revelations to come years later. “Music abounded all around the market area, with gospel groups and singers.... But the spot opposite Lyon’s was where I spent the most time. It was also Little Walter’s preferred location. In 1948 Walter Jacobs was an eighteen-year-old budding harmonica genius.” At the time, Jerry admits, even though the blues was all around him, he thought that music was just a part of his childhood soundtrack. “When I heard the blues again twenty years later, it was a siren song calling me home and, like the siren song of legend, it was irresistible.”

It takes a spell to get to that point. But the chapters are entertaining, each with

blues lyrics for the title, giving a hint of the chapter’s contents: “I’m a little schoolboy too,” “I got ramblin’ on my mind,” and Sonny Boy I’s “You got to walk straight and tote a rifle, Uncle Sam want to use you a while” are good examples. As author/musician Elijah Wald comments, “Jerry Portnoy is best known as a stellar harmonica sideman, but what I loved about this book were the early stories of growing up on Maxwell Street and his adventures as a pool shark, paratrooper, and multitalented hustler, before he hooked up with the famous names.” At every turn, until he discovers the blues, the young Jerry doesn’t know what to do; he’s basically rudderless. But by the end of the book, the sun has shone in his back door, and he’s been saved.

Before the epilogue, we are there with Jerry as he finds himself in Muddy Waters’ band and travels the world, as that group dis-

bands, as he goes on the road again with the Legendary Blues Band, as he becomes a “rock star” playing with Eric Clapton. Whether it’s Carnegie Hall or the Royal Albert Hall or smaller gigs worldwide, the amount of detail Jerry remembers about individual performances is astounding!

In the Epilogue, Jerry reinforces the theme of luck. He knows he is fortunate to have learned his craft from the generation of “great Black musicians who left a life of backbreaking labor under the hot sun of the Mississippi Delta and the heel of Jim Crow to bring their music north and create what is now called Chicago blues: people like Muddy Waters, Sunnyland Slim, Eddie Taylor, and Big Walter Horton.” Jerry expresses his gratitude to those who “forged a music, born of suffering and hardship, that touched people across every barrier of nationality and culture and formed the bedrock of

American music. To be accepted unreservedly into their incredibly warm and creative culture was one of the great gifts of my life.” Jerry’s luck in his professional career was capped in 2017, when Hohner Harmonicas put his picture on all their packaging for Marine Band harps, the company’s flagship and Jerry’s favorite for over 50 years.

I quote Jerry at such length because his writing is so articulate. As an English professor, I especially enjoyed his technique of description followed by a colon [:] followed by a list of examples. About *Dancing with Muddy* author Robert Gordon says, “Jerry Portnoy was born into the electrifying heart of Chicago blues, and his book never loses that grit. He has played with extraordinary talents, and his memories sing like his harp.”—Karen McFarland

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