

BIG CITY Rhythm & Blues

REVIEWS

POPA CHUBBY AND THE BEAST BAND

*Live at G. Bluey's
Juke Joint NYC*

Gulf Coast Records

Name seven electric blues guitarists who have not been influenced by Jimi Hendrix. Name three. Arguably, there may be none. (Of course, no artist emerges pristine; all are influenced by their forbears. Who affected Jimi? Think Buddy Guy.) At the top of my LONG list of Hendrix acolytes (but not emulators) are Eric Gales, Roy Buchanan, Jimmy Thackery, Alastair Greene, Gary Clark Jr., Cristone "Kingfish" Ingram, and Popa Chubby.

Ted Horowitz, the Popa himself, is a New York native who has graced the City's metropolitan scene for over thirty years, initially supporting rock and punk bands and even a "special effects performance artist" before embarking on his own career. His newest release encompasses two CDs and represents a full two-and-a-quarter hours of blazing blues rock. (Trust me, you won't fall asleep listening to this outing.) Comprising the Beast Band are bass guitarist Mike Merritt, drummer Stefano Guidici, and keyboard artist Mike Dimeo. That trio maintains a vibrant foundation for Popa's guitar mastery, and Dimeo contributes multiple energizing organ solos.

The first CD opens with a cover of Neil Young's "Motorcycle Mama," Chubby's opening Hendrix-like introductory guitar licks giving a pre-

view of what follows. Most of the other eight tracks of the first CD are Horowitz originals, and like most of the album's tracks, they are lengthy; the penultimate, "Grown Man Crying Blues," extends almost fourteen minutes. CD 1 ends with an unexpected cover: Harold Arlen's "Over the Rainbow." Suffice it to say that Arlen probably didn't imagine this kind of interpretation.

The second CD provides more of the same



high energy blues instrumental magnetism. (This is not to downplay Popa's vocals, which are powerful and effective.) Several of the tunes have passages of entrancing slow blues, but the rhythm reverts quickly to the upbeat. Particularly interesting are three covers: of the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," Jimmy Cox's classic "Nobody Wants [Knows] You When You're Down and Out," and "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen, which appeared in a shorter version on Chubby's album "Big Man, Big Guitar."

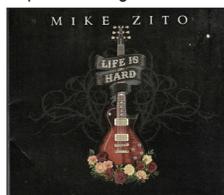
To me, this album is strikingly similar to Cristone "Kingfish" Ingram's recent double CD, "Live in London," which I reviewed in the Dec. 2023/Jan. 2024 issue. Both performers are guitar virtuosos whose dazzling instrumental chops dominate throughout. Ingram may be more adept at delivering the

most single notes in a given time span, but Popa Chubby comes very close in finger speed, and is a little more interested in demonstrating the incredible range of sounds that can be coaxed from an electric guitar. If you ever put these two men on the same stage at the same time, the venue may explode.—**Steve Daniels**

MIKE ZITO "Life is Hard"

Gulf Coast Records

Mike Zito is, arguably, one of the hardest working men in rock and blues show business today. Not only is he an accomplished guitarist and singer-songwriter in his own right, but he is the co-owner of one of the most prolific independent blues labels on the scene, with Gulf Coast Records. Having said that, he lays it all on the line on this latest release, and one would expect nothing less.



And he's back with one of the best artistic production teams in the biz, with Joe Bonamassa and Josh Smith. Both of them were involved in the production of Zito's last record that featured fellow compadre Albert Castiglia called "Blood Brothers." This latest stays in that vein but ups the ante in terms of song choices and attitude. Tracks like "Lonely Man" and the title tune highlight, not only Zito's raw guitar prowess, but his ability to

poetically and emotionally slay you with his lyrical abilities. Songs like Stevie Wonder's "Have a Talk with God" and The Guess Who's "These Eyes" run the gamut from gospel to "Wheatfield Soul." It's interesting how Zito can take somewhat standard classic pop-rock fare and bring out, not only the wonderful essence of the original, but unearth the bluesy and soulful roots of these songs that lie within. There are some more traditional nods as well like the Reverend Gary Davis' "Death Don't Have No Mercy" and Tinsley Ellis' "Dying to Do Wrong." There are other contemporaries that get the soulful Zito treatment as well such as Walter Trout's "Nobody Moves Me Like You Do" and the ubiquitous Tab Benoit's "Darkness."

Perhaps one of the strongest tracks on the album is one of the leader's originals called "Forever My Love." It's one of those heart-on-your-sleeve torch songs that cuts right to the chase. There is no mistaking his pleas and he lets his woman hear the truth in his passion. It's an effective tune that really spotlights the range and nuance of Zito's voice. And, perhaps, he and his producers thought so too as there is also a radio edit version included on the record.

I would be remiss not to mention the fine personnel that comprise this exceptional collection of songs. They have collaborated with Zito to create an exceptional studio experience. Both Bonamassa and Smith need no real introduction on guitars.

They merge with the leader to blanket the album with crisp and gossamer layers of sound. Keyboardist Reese Wynans, bassist Calvin Turner and drummer Lemar Carter complete the stellar core band. But, essential to the diversity of material and arrangements, additional musicians augmented the tracks, with saxophonist Paulie Cerra, French Horn players Jennifer Kumma and Anna Spina, and backing vocalists Jade Macrae, Dannielle DeAndrea and Steve Ray Ladson.—**Eric Harabadian**

KEVIN BURT & BIG MEDICINE Thank You Brother Bill: A Tribute To Bill Withers

Gulf Coast Records



Thank You Brother Bill is Kevin Burt's 2nd release on Mike Zito's esteemed Gulf Coast Records, following 2020's *Stone Crazy*. The Iowa-based bluesman has been on the Midwest music scene for 30 years, garnering many awards. He has acted in the off-Broadway play "Klub Ka" as well as several productions put on by the University of Iowa. As an educator he has written a harmonica method book and was even honored by the governor of Iowa for his work promoting blues heritage. But Kevin Burt's biggest gift is his warm and powerful voice. On *Thank You Brother Bill*, Burt and his tight 4-piece band, Big Medicine, lovingly cover Bill Withers' catalog: the hits and some of Withers' deep tracks. Burt's voice has often

been compared to Aaron Neville and Withers, so this project seems perfectly natural. Instead of reproducing the slick original recordings, Burt and company deliver the 13 tracks in the context of a rockin' blues band. Stinging guitar solos by Kevin Valdez are peppered throughout the session. The piano figure that drives the original "Lean on Me" is played by lightly finger-picked electric guitar. The Grover Washington sax part on "Just the Two of Us" is replaced by a tasty harmonica line. The break-

down on "Ain't No Sunshine," where Withers repeats the line "Well, I know I know..." is now powered by an incessant percussion beat by drummer Eric Douglas. In other words, part of the fun of this album is how these musicians tackle the wide range of the late, great Bill Withers' canon. And of course, it is the sublime voice of Kevin Burt that holds it all together.—**Bob Monteleone**

CHRIS O'LEARY The Hard Line

Alligator Records

The Hard Line is singer/harmonica master Chris O'Leary's sixth solo release and first for the iconic Chicago-based Alligator Records. O'Leary's vocals are always soulful and power-

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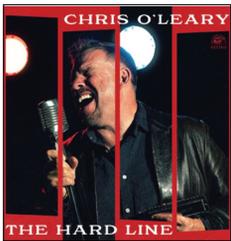
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ful and his harmonica style shows a lot of fine influences: The haunted and

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distorted tone of Little Walter mixed with the grit of Charlie Musselwhite and the chops of James Cotton, who O'Leary has performed with. O'Leary spent six years fronting and touring with Levon Helm's Barnburners. Levon, of course, is the legendary drummer and singer for The Band. The twelve original songs on *The Hard Line* were all written by O'Leary. Some of the subject matter might be informed by O'Leary's six years as a US Marine and then a stint as a federal police officer, such as the sordid story told in "Things Ain't Always What They Seem." One of the strengths of *The Hard Line* is the versatility of the album. The album glides from fast-paced numbers to New Orleans grooves to slow ballads and slow burners. The consistent recording quality and O'Leary's talent and storytelling being the common denominator. The album was recorded by Dan Vitarello (who also plays drums on the project along with Michael Bram) mostly at Cupola Studios in Ridgefield, Connecticut

and produced by O'Leary. Alligator honcho Bruce Iglauer is credited as executive producer. Guitarist Chris Viterello and bassist Andy Huenerberg are on most of the tracks and horns spice up four of the tunes. *The Hard Line* is a fine addition to Alligator Record's stellar catalog. —**Bob Monteleone**

BERNARD ALLISON *Luther's Blues*

Ruf Records

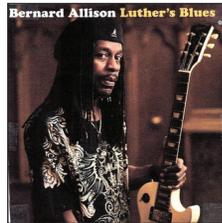
To those of you unfortunate never to have seen Luther Allison perform, there are two compensations. You can enjoy his many recordings, or grab this album of tribute by his son Bernard. Better yet, do both.

Luther Allison was born in Arkansas in 1939, and moved to Chicago with his family at age twelve. Self-taught on guitar, he became one of the biggest names in blues despite residing in France for twenty years. His untimely death from lung cancer at the too early age of fifty-seven was a huge loss to the blues world. He was an absolutely incandescent live performer. I saw him in 1969 at a pre-show for the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival, before he was widely known. He had the crowd in a frenzy.

Bernard, the youngest of Luther's nine children, began playing guitar at age twelve. After stints in

his dad's band and Koko Taylor's, over two decades ago he embarked on his own distinguished career of extensive touring and recording, earning Blues Music Award nominations along the way.

"Luther's Blues" is a lengthy double CD hour-and-a-half of twenty numbers, eighteen of which are covers of Luther's songs. Refreshingly, they



are not simply emulations. Instead, Bernard puts his own stamp on them, and in the process reveals his range of talents. The listener will be exposed to straight Chicago electric blues, pseudo-rap, rock-and-roll, quasi-gospel, and poignant slow blues.

The variety and versatility are apparent from the first two tracks: "Hang On," a feisty number with assertive lead guitar exercising lots of wah-wah pedal, and "Reaching Out," restrained and lyrical. Similarly, on the rest of the set Bernard deploys myriad guitar approaches and styles, almost entirely successfully. Likewise, his vocals alternate between insistent rasp and soothing croon. There is a dearth

of harmonica on the set, but back-up singers and a horn section are used effectively.

Halfway through the second CD, the outing hit its high point for me. "Let's Try It Again," a moving slow blues, finds Allison delivering some of his best singing and a weeping, pleading guitar solo, backed by perfect piano and saxophone accompaniment. It's followed by the thrumming shuffle "Change Your Way of Living": from despairing to danceable.

As a complete surprise, the album ends with its shortest track, "Castle," Bernard discarding his electric axe for a spare number, just him singing and playing acoustic guitar. Really nice. Luther would be proud.—**Steve Daniels**

MAVIS STAPLES *"Have a Little Faith"*

Alligator Records

for the good of humanity. And with this solo release Mavis continues that important work.

But the songs on this album were originally conceived in 2004, when Staples was without a record label, fresh from working with The Staple Singers and looking to regroup on more of an individual path. But, no doubt, it was her faith in God and a higher power, as well as a little initiative and humility, that led her years later to the door of Bruce Iglauer and Alligator Records.

Fast forward to 2023-2024 and her album "Have a Little Faith" sounds as fresh as ever. Perhaps that's because the messaging behind the song selections is universal. Everything has that signature gospel edge one would come to expect from



the leader, with a timeless production and bluesy quality that easily connects with your soul and spirit. I don't care if you're agnostic or atheist, these songs have something rich and rewarding to say and Mavis Staples is just the artist to bring it to you.

Take a song like "Step

Into the Light." This is a tune about ascension, but it's not, necessarily, only about reference to Heaven. It also speaks to the concept of ascending to one's better self. There's no denying that "Pop's Recipe" is Staples speaking about her father in the most reverent of terms. This track is a love letter to the precepts of life and music Pops taught to his family. And the verve and passion in Staples' voice jumps out and grabs the listener. The title track is so uplifting and elegant in its construction and delivery. It's the perfect song for these troubled times and is as relevant now as when it was first conceived. "A Dying Man's Plea" is based on a traditional blues tune that features some tasty Dobro work. And then a tune like "Ain't No Better Than You" really gets to the heart of race relations. It proves, again, how a number of aspects of religion, spirituality and general human interaction are always in flux as much as they are timeless and unwavering constructs. However, Staples lightens the mood on a funky and hook-filled track like "I Still Believe in You" and levels the playing field of everyone's station and purpose in life on "At the End of the Day." "There's a Devil on the Loose" and "Times Like These" further push a contemporary narrative. And

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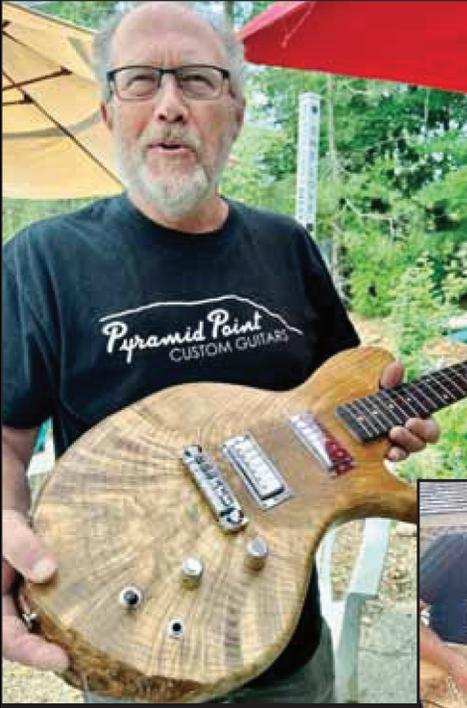
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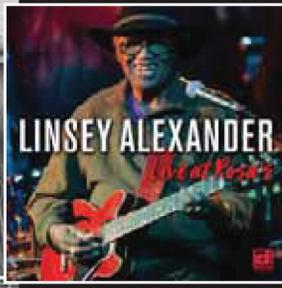
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the grand dame of gospel-inspired blues concludes the album, with the standard "Will the Circle Be Unbroken." It's an excellent choice and fitting, as it was one of the first songs she ever learned. Again, it's still relevant now and is a timeless gem.

And, frankly, that's how I ultimately feel about Mavis Staples; a timeless gem that still has so much more to say, with a voice that is essential, soulful and distinctive.—**Eric Harabadian**

DANIELLE NICOLE BAND "The Love You Bleed"

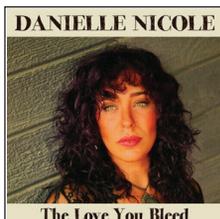
Forty Below Records

This is the latest and greatest from one of the premiere blues and soul singers on the contemporary global scene, Danielle Nicole Schnebelen. With her brothers she entered the music business via the group Trampled Under Foot. Since then, she has gone on to amass numerous awards and recognition as a blues and soul woman of distinction in her own right.

"The Love You Bleed" says it all, as this is sort of conceptual in the breakdown of songs about love, perseverance and passion. Behind the scenes is producer Tony Braunagel putting his award-winning stamp on the album. And, although Nicole is the marquee name as singer-songwriter and bassist, she knows she's in the best of company with Brandon Miller on guitars and mandolin, Damon Parker on keyboards, Go-Go Ray on drums and Stevie Blacke on violin and cello. Together, Nicole and company are a tour de force that brings dynamics, drama and that human element that no A.I. could ever replicate.

Honesty is, perhaps, the main ingredient that fuels these songs and there is a richness and craftsmanship to the writing that makes this sound so good. "Love on my Brain" is such a song. Nicole's vocals

from the outset are aflame, with passion and purpose. You are locked in from the get-go and realize you're gonna be taken on one unique and emotional ride. Ray's initial rumble of the drums paired with her voice is magical. When she says "love has her and it won't let go" you realize she's speaking from experience. "Make Love" is a tune the whole world could and should be singing right now. It's sort of a mantra, if you will, that could apply to various levels of human interaction. It's got a soulful and easy Memphis feel, with a '60s/'70s sentiment. That eases right into the



The Love You Bleed

Aretha Franklin/Mavis Staples-vibe of "Right By Your Side." This is an exceptionally strong composition, with a great hook and tasty organ fills by Parker. "How Did We Get to Goodbye" examines the dynamics of a relationship gone south. It's an appropriately moody, minor key piece that takes a very mature and responsible look from the perspectives of both sides. "Head Down Low" picks up the pace, with an electric traditional groove. Miller's adept mix of blues styles and Dobro playing fits Nicole's vocals like a well-worn glove.

"Fireproof" follows and is more of a rocker, with some screaming guitars and a wicked pocket. "A Lover is Forever" is one of these conversational kind of songs where Nicole speaks her truth within a relationship. It's an acoustic ballad, with a beautiful sentiment about going through the motions of love. It's more than just wearing a ring. "Say You'll Stay" has a classic shuffle that recalls old school

grooves. "Fool's Gold" is more straight-ahead soul where "Walk on By" (not the Bacharach/David composition) ushers in cool, syncopated rock beats and lean linear breakdowns. Once again, Nicole astounds with stratospheric vocals on "Who He Thinks You Are." And "Young Love on the Hill" blends exquisite country blues with sweet mandolin and strings.

The Danielle Nicole Band can jam with the best of them and has proven it time and time again on the concert stage. But this is a step beyond mere guitar prowess or grandstanding toward human connection and songwriting on a higher plane.—**Eric Harabadian**

JENNIFER PORTER Yes, I Do

Cougar Moon Music

Those of us blues fans heretofore unfamiliar with Jennifer Porter are in for a treat. Until listening to this, her ninth album, I was one of that cohort of the uninitiated, but consider me now enlightened.

An actress, composer, and film music scorer as well as accomplished keyboard performer, Porter has previously made forays into American, jazz, pop, blues, and even opera. Here she and co-producer Jonathan Wyman deliver a brief but tantalizing set of six Porter originals and two covers. The album fills only a half hour of one's time, but is well spent.

Leading off the festivities is "Before We Call It a Day," a jazzy shuffle enhanced by trumpet and saxophone, each soloing briefly, and Porter's jaunty piano. Tempo is moderated in the following, title tune, again supplemented by horns and some tase and subtle guitar licks by George Naha; this time Porter plays organ. "Over You," a sublime ballad of

nostalgia, features a pared-down bass-guitar-drums ensemble with Porter again on organ.

Then we get "All I Needed Was You," decidedly up tempo number benefiting from the accordion contribution of guest C.J. Chenier (son of the late "king of zydeco," Clifton Chenier). Another notable guest artist, pedal steel guitar maven Cindy Cashdollar, sits in on "Don't Worry No More." Jennifer's vocal here is particularly haunting, and an additional percussionist adds syncopation behind a succinct Naha guitar solo.

After these five quality original numbers, Porter and company tackle the hoary Leroy Carr blues standard "How Long," giving it a slow and sensuous treatment with fine interplay between keyboard, guitar, and flugelhorn. After the penultimate "Lucky Dust," a bouncy horn-driven New Orleans



piece, the set concludes with its second cover, "Good Ol' Wagon," a track featuring only Porter on piano and vocal and Randy Andos on tuba.

Colleagues Naha, Dana Packard, Damon Banks, Steve Jankowski, Vinnie Raniolo, and Doug DeHays are stalwart, but the emphasis of the set is Porter's singing...as is appropriate. The best adjectives I can find to describe her vocals are smooth and buttery. Her voice is supple and sultry, and she can glide at an instant from depth to high soprano.

"Yes I Do" offers variety and virtuosity. It's not a dance party album, but is perfect for an evening in front of the fireplace sipping wine.—**Steve Daniels**

PATTI PARKS Come Sing with Me

Vizztone

For her third album, chanteuse Patti Parks, a practicing nurse from western New York State, is out to heal your blues with the blues. The album comes only three years after the release of her well received "Whole Nother World," also on the VizzTone label.

For this set of ten songs, she has assembled a sterling crew of musicians and several notable guests. Six of the tunes were written or co-written by her husband Guy Nirelli, also the keyboard artist of the ensemble. Plying guitar is Aaron Flynt, drums are handled mostly by Hugh Arthur, and doing bass duty is Tony Cammilleri. Multiple others join the festivities, including soul blues singer Johnny Rawls, who also produced the album.

Rawls steps right in on the opening track, "I'm in Love with You Baby," which he and Nirelli co-wrote; the tune benefits from a trifecta of vocalists: Parks, Rawls, and Robin Grandin, who also appears on several other cuts. That mid-tempo number is succeeded by the rollicking "DJ's Boogie," piano courtesy of renowned ivory tickler Anthony Geraci. Following is a cover of "One Foot Out the Door," written by Derrick Procell and Terry Abrahamson. Parks wrings lots of emotion out of this slow blues, overcoming its infelicitous lyrics. ("Your heart has one foot out the door?"

"Your love is waiting for a taxi?") The ensuing "Sing Around the World" features nice background vocals by Zuri Appleby and Kimera Lattimore, with saxophonist Kenny Parker, trumpeter John Maguda, and organist Aaron Blackmon stirring the mix.

"I'm Sorry" gives guitarist Flynt some room to

strut, and "Hamburger Man" is a funky gut-bucket blues skillfully deploying guest harmonica player Richard Rosenblatt. The lyrics of this double enten-



dre number about food as metaphor for sex again don't work for me, but the music is fine...as it is on "Why," another slow blues abetted by Blackmon. "A Lotta Man," by Procell and Abrahamson again, turns a frequent blues trope on its head: instead of a big-legged woman or a woman with plenty of jelly, Parks croons for an hombre with an ample body.

One of the best tunes of the set, the penultimate "How Much Longer" is a quality soul blues with the Parks, Rawls, and Grandin vocal trifecta and with Rawls also playing guitar. The set ends with "Good Day for the Blues," a shuffle with egotistical lyrics ("I don't care about your problems/cause I got mine too") but sweet interplay between Flynt's guitar and Nirelli's piano. As is the case for the entire set, the occasional waver in Parks' vocals is offset by her ability to convey sincere emotional depth.—**Steve Daniels**

PHIL COYNE AND THE WAYWARD ACES

Sound and Fury
Self-produced

From Melbourne, Australia, this band is releasing its first album, for the delectation of blues lovers worldwide. Listeners will have to settle for only a half dozen songs clocking in at less than a half hour but will be impressed by the furious energy offered. It's a blues power trio, led by

singer and harmonica player Coyne, abetted in musical crime by drummer Will Harris and guitarist Oscar LaDell.

On the opening track, "Brother," LaDell begins



the festivities with several bars of unequivocally Bo Diddley-style guitar riffs. Soon Coyne joins with chugging, rhythmic harmonica, and about a minute into the song his raspy vocal enters, engaging in a call-and-response interplay with himself on harp. Harris wallops his drum kit, LaDell segues into low-range, bass-like guitar chords, and the trio maintains more than five minutes of controlled blues rock frenzy. The same motif is repeated in "I'm Gone," less than half the length but with plenty of high energy.

Showing that the band is no one-trick pony, it next chews into "F U Blues," a slow number with Coyne shouting and growling his vocal and playing his best harmonica of the set. Following that we are treated to a long cover version of Howlin' Wolf's classic "How Many More Years," here turned into a shuffle.

"Blackjack," the penultimate track of the album, starts with syncopated interplay between guitar and drums before Coyne enters; it ends with a long Coyne harmonica solo. Concluding the outing is "Sweet Little Riff," indeed a dulcet number which proceeds at a languorous pace, with subdued but lyrical guitar.

Interestingly, and refreshingly for blues aficionados sated by too many ostentatious guitar solos, there are virtually

none in this set; LaDell is often the de facto bass player in the arrangements, and neatly fills the bill, as does adept drummer Harris. Coyne's mastery of vigorous harmonica is apparent, and in the final track he demon-

strates that he can play with some sugar as well as spice. As for Coyne's vocals throughout: their conviction and emotion mostly compensate for his limitations of range and true pitch.—**Steve Daniels**

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