

BIG CITY Rhythm & BLUES

REVIEWS

JOHN PRIMER AND FRIENDS

Tribute to Theresa's Lounge

Blues House Records

Chicago blues maven and legend John Primer follows 2025's album tribute to his birth state, "Grown in Mississippi," with a tribute to the famed performance venue where he and innumerable blues greats honed their chops and made their names.



Now a newly minted octogenarian, Primer was born in MS in 1945, moved to Chicago in 1963, and began busking on Maxwell Street. His prowess quickly led to a seven-year gig with The Junior Wells Band, the house band at Theresa's. Subsequently he joined Willie Dixon's band, then had a four-year stint with Muddy Waters until the latter's death in 1983, and then thirteen years as bandleader and second guitarist with Magic Slim & The Teardrops. A resume can't be much more impressive than that! and Primer parlayed it into a successful "solo" career (often with his own band) that has earned him three Grammy nominations, a slew of Blues Music Award nominations and five Blues Music Awards, and induction into the Blues

Hall of Fame.

As a venue, Theresa's Lounge in Chicago was almost as famous. Founded in 1949 on the Windy City's South Side by Theresa Needham, the club hosted literally every big name in Chicago blues that you have ever heard of. Sadly, it closed in 1986, and Needham died six years later, but the legend of Theresa's endures, as do many of its alumni. For this tribute, Primer has recruited several of them, most in their 70s, 80s, and even 90s.

The result is an hour of unabashed, authentic Chicago electric blues, with Primer dealing out his usual nifty and nasty guitar licks on all tracks but giving his cohorts ample opportunity to shine.

Anywhere is a good place to start, but I recommend "Champagne and Reefer," buttressed by 95-year-old Bob Stroger in one of his seven appearances on bass. The vocal is courtesy of Willie Buck, whose voice at 87 years old has retained its vigor and power. Another singer who deserves unqualified plaudits is Mary Lane, who was the only regular female singer at Theresa's. Here she belts out "Mary's Song" as if she were 39, not 89.

One might conclude that blues is a source of long-lived vitality.

Two of my favorite tracks, "Up in Heah" and "Little by Little," are most identified with Junior Wells, whose singing growl was so distinctive. No problem; Primer handles the vocals deftly without trying to emulate Wells. The Wells groove is captured nicely, with Tony

Mangiullo on drums and Jeff Brinkman on bass comprising the rhythm section on the former track, and Stroger on bass and Twist Turner on drums on the latter.

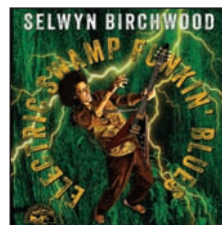
Carlos Johnson and John Watkins both appear to good effect on multiple tracks, each singing and playing a six-string, and kudos to Billy Branch, whose harmonica playing on four cuts is unsurprisingly stellar, compensating for the competent but somewhat staid harp renderings on other numbers. No keyboards are deployed on this set, but they aren't missed, as Theresa's Lounge gets the tribute that it warrants.—

Steve Daniels

SELWYN BIRCHWOOD

Electric Swamp Funkin' Blues

Alligator Records



Selwyn Birchwood plays like a man possessed! His command of various guitar styles and ability to mold them with his powerful vocals and lyrical concepts is truly impressive. His latest release is a testament to staying the course and offering an album and project that is of its time yet is timeless as well.

Recorded with his core band of bassist Donald "Huff" Wright, drummer Henley Connor III and keyboardist John Hetherington, they are most ably augmented by woodwind player Regi Oliver, strings master Eli Bishop and backing vocalists Briana Lutzi and Taylor Opie. The result is a sound that is versatile, dynamic and truly meets the musical moment.

The album begins with the dramatic "The Eagle Has Landed" which cleverly blends NASA-inspired audio snippets from the first lunar landing with Birchwood's guitar histrionics. It's as if to say, the listener is in for a wild ride. That's followed by the cosmic gospel of "The Church of Electric Swamp Funkin' Blues." This is a showcase for the leader's robust testifying vocal style and mix of wah-drenched guitar and lap steel prowess. "Damaged Goods" is a sweet, honest and self-effacing examination of one's own life reflection. It's straight up and tells you right from the get-go that this person ain't perfect, but is transparent and real. And it doesn't get any more real than the effect

social media has on all our lives. Birchwood addresses this in the thoughtful and somewhat caustic "All Hail the Algorithm." It is a cautionary tale that urges one to, perhaps, take a break from the screen and get out and make some connections with others. "Labour of Love" is a nice ballad that spotlights Birchwood's acoustic side. "Should've Never Gotten Out of Bed" has that Buddy Guy kind of humor and irony as well as "What I've Been Accused Of," which both feature excellent slide guitar and great rhythmic feel. More biting social commentary comes in the way of "Talking

Heads." Here the leader takes pot shots at the current administration and its obsession with stating everything as "fake news." It's all about critical thinking and being aware of one's social and political surroundings. Perhaps one of the sweetest and strongest tracks on the album is "Soulmate." It's an unabashed soul stirrer and heart string puller. Birchwood is at his most poetic and romantic here, with the line, "Your soulmate is waiting to be found!" It addresses looking for and finding that true love in life you can connect with. And it is hopeful that there is someone out there for everyone. The album concludes with a personal statement that hits home for Birchwood and many others in modern society, with "The Struggle is Real." This is the artist at his most vulnerable and most empathic. Listen to the lyrics and take it to heart because it is a sentiment that ultimately affects us all.—Eric Harabadian

NICKY T AND THE SNAKE CHARMERS

Ain't Wasting Time

www.facebook.com/nickysnakecharmers

Straight out of Detroit, Michigan you've got the latest and greatest from Motown blues singer-songwriter/guitar great Nick Tabarias and his Snake Charmers. He's been active on the music scene for many years having sat in with many blues greats, most notably Ronnie Earl. And, in fact, Earl returns the favor by showing up here on this new album as well.

The album features

eleven tracks that pay homage to those artists that paved the way and came before such as B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland and Magic Sam. The band consists of Nicky T (Tabarias) on guitar and vocals, Frank Greenhalgh on bass, Pete Berg on drums and Andy Szymanski on keyboards. It's a strong, straight-ahead collection of prime originals and select covers that embody the work of, and spotlight songs popularized by, the bands' said mentors and influences.



There are a number of blues hubs in the United States, be it the Deep South, Chicago, Memphis or Kansas City. But, emerging from the Motor City, Tabarias and company bring a unique and undeniable soul element to traditional blues themes and rhythms. And that is truly apparent on the album opener "That's All I Need." It's got an easy and playful sort of feel that just sets a joyful mood. You can't be bummed out and hang with this music. It will definitely cure what ails you. There is a swing and sense of melody from the start that will hook you. They keep the groove swinging, with an original horn-augmented shuffle called "Mistreating Mama." Nicky T's robust vocals and stinging guitar work blend perfectly with the wall of sound behind him.

The accompanying piano work is essentially stellar as well. Peter Berg's "Feel Like a Hundred" is a clever take on status and class, with a roadhouse ambience set off by fiery Chuck Berry-like guitar and a strong I-IV-V drive. Greg Nagy guests on a song that was originally done by B.B. King called "Guess Who." It's a rich and soulful performance of a torch song that truly zeroes in on the heart of the matter. Grab someone you love and slow dance with them on this one. "The Glass" is another Tabarias/Nagy original that features Nagy and Ronnie Earl. It's a steady swing and shuffle thing, with the refrain of "blues with a feeling" that drives it home. "Thank You Magic Sam" is a straight up rocker that really highlights Nicky T's guitar prowess. It's a simple format that really connects. The title track, "Ain't Wasting Time," further shines a light on the craftsmanship behind Tabarias' songwriting, vocalizing and guitar skills. It's a delicate balance of time and space where melodic riffs are strategically placed for emotional weight and effect. The gentle wash of organ and the rhythm section supports the autobiographical nature of the lyrics. "Waiting on the Sunshine" is a spirited original upbeat ditty which leads into a Bobby "Blue" Bland classic, fronted again by the great Greg Nagy,

called "Lead Me On." It's a minor key number the truly depicts what the blues is all about. Perhaps their theme song, "Charming the Snake," elevates the pace, with a slick and swinging instrumental that features terrific jazzy guitar musings and stellar keyboard work. It's taken at a brisk tempo and a real toe tapper. They conclude with the grounded "Life on Life's Terms." It's a bit of personal philosophy about taking things as they come and living one day at a time. Accompanied by acoustic guitar and harmonica the song is taken at a pace that's easy to digest and really resonates in your soul.

Nicky T and the Snake Charmers are modern blues practitioners that are keeping the torch of real deal blues and Americana lit and burning bright.—
Eric Harabadian

CURTIS SALGADO
Legacy Rewind: Live in '25

Nola Blue Records

Curtis Salgado has been one busy bluesman. Since last year, he's played the Tampa Bay and W.C. Handy blues festivals, rejoined Mark Hummel's Blues Harmonica Blowout, toured the USA, England and the Netherlands, and won his ninth Soul Blues Male Artist of the Year at this year's Blues Music Awards. His KBA shelf is justifiably crowded with

five other statues, including B.B. King Entertainer of the Year, Song of the Year, and Soul Blues Album of the Year.

He's also released his first live CD, "Legacy Rewind: Live in '25,"



Curtis' debut on Nola Blue Records was honored with a 2026 Keeping the Blues Alive Award by The Blues Foundation.

"Legacy Rewind: Live in '25" is a 13-song set, recorded at Seattle's Triple Door with a 15-piece band over two shows on the same day in April of 2025. This live CD is cause for celebration as it's an outstanding showcase of Curtis Salgado as a first-class soul blues artists as well as a gifted and insightful songwriter.

I was fascinated by the story behind Curtis' 13th CD. Pre-pandemic, Seattle area fan Randy Maag approached Curtis after the loadout at the Triple Door, arguably one of Seattle's most elegant showrooms and broached the idea of a live CD. Randy proposed songs from Curtis' considerable back catalogue, including some Curtis hadn't performed. Then, the pandemic hit. Five years later, Randy reconnected with

Curtis at the inaugural Kitsap County Blues Music Festival. Their partnership sparked the magic that resulted in "Legacy Rewind: Live in '25," and Randy and Deanna Maag are credited as Executive Producers.

The CD features deep cuts from seven albums dating back to Curtis' "Wiggle Outta This" on the Shanachie label in 1999, and opens with the soulful "Sing My Song," followed by the title cut with Ben Rice, Alan Hager and Kenny Meriedeath on guitars and the rock solid engine room of Ron Tuttle on drums and John Lynn on bass. Backing vocalists Keashaun Jones,

Margaret Linn and Lindsey Reynolds add depth to these opening songs (and to each song they sing). I especially enjoyed "Money Must Think I'm Dead" – co-written with Rick Estrin – from another Shanachie CD, 2004's "Strong Suspicion." Curtis blows some pretty mean harp on this classic "more month than money" song, and I wish the CD featured more of it.

One of the more fanciful songs on the CD is the title cut from Curtis' 2024 release on Little Village, "Fine By Me." This up-tempo, guitar-fueled rocker features (spoiler alert!) dreams of Jackie Onassis, Mohammed Ali, Iggy Pop,

and Malcolm X, and it's one of the CD's delightful side trips away from soul blues.

Curtis' tenure with Alligator Records is well represented here and includes songs from "The Beautiful Lowdown," "Soul Shot," and "Damage Control." My favorites include the soul-drenched "My Girlfriend," the funky horns on "Nobody But You," and the tropical samba of "The Count of Three." Curtis takes us to church on "A Woman or the Blues" with a big band sound buoyed by Gary Harris and Timothy Bryson on saxophone, Dave Mills on trumpet, and Lars Campbell on trombone.



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Brian Harris and Brady Goss share keyboards and John Wolcott and Patrick Seals propel the song on bass and drums.

The disc's last song, "20 Years of B.B. King," from 2008's "Clean Getaway" on Shanachie, caps an exceptional live CD. While I thought the CD ended way too soon at just over an hour of live soul blues, I highly recommend this retrospective of Curtis Salgado's music for the way it captures one of the leading lights of soul blues music live at Seattle's Triple Door. - **Eric Steiner**

HARRELL "YOUNG RELL" DAVENPORT *Young Rell*

Little Village 2026

This is the debut album of a veteran performer...at age nineteen. Another child prodigy (we can never have too many), he has been playing harmonica and guitar since he was seven and has already performed at hallowed venues and renowned festivals and received multiple award nominations. One of his mentors, ace harmonica Billy Branch, claims that "he plays and sings the blues like a fifty- or sixty-year-old veteran."

That's a lot of praise to live up to, but Young Rell's album meets expectations. The dozen tracks, ten of them originals, reveal his multi-faceted talent. His songwriting is adept, with both poignant and witty lyrics. His guitar forays are tart and tasty without being ostentatious. His harp renderings are proficient, with emotive force and clear tone. And the man can sing!

Produced by another harmonica maestro, Matthew Skoller, the set features an ensemble of some of the best West Coast musicians. Keyboards are courtesy of Jim Pugh, impresario of Little Village Foundation

and formerly with the bands of Etta James and Robert Cray. Kid Andersen lends guitar, June Core supplies drumming, and bass chores are shared by Andre Tarczy and "Q" Johnson. With this group, what could go wrong?

Nothing. The set opens with two presumably autobiographical numbers.

"Tomorrow" acknowledges Rell's youth by advising a woman pursuing him: "She



said she wanted to take me home/ I said 'Come back tomorrow/ when I'm grown/Then maybe we can be alone.' He realizes that he's too young, we think, but a few bars later he adds a humorous and unexpected jolt: "I really hate to leave you but I got to go/ I got a big fat woman on the thirteenth floor." The succeeding "Fatherless Child" is a soul blues lamenting his single parent upbringing and the concomitant loneliness, while lauding his struggling mother. The lyrics are a little too self-pitying, but the song is redeemed by Rell's plaintive vocal with some falsetto flourishes, and with fine harmonica fills.

"Spinning" adds horns effectively, and the measured "Giving Me the Blues" is succeeded by "Richland Swing," one of two instrumentals on the album. It does swing! as does the other instrumental, "Nite Creepin'," which is a unequivocal dazzler that reminds me of both legendary harmonica players Rod Piazza and Kim Wilson at their best. "Hurt People, Hurt People" graces the album mid-set with nice interplay between Pugh on piano and Rell delivering coun-

try-blues-style harmonica riffs.

Notable also are the two cover tracks. "I Hear Some Blues Downstairs" is a tune by the late Fenton Robinson, delivered as a mid-tempo shuffle, and distinguished by some excellent lead guitar, presumably by Rell. Then there is "Masters of War," a famous anti-war song from sixty years ago by a certain Nobel Prize winner named Dylan. Here it's turned into another Chicago shuffle, driven by Davenport's insistent vocal and pithy harmonica rendering.

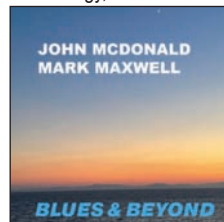
This is a terrific debut album by a musician whose future looks very bright.—**Steve Daniels**

JOHN McDONALD & MARK MAXWELL *Blues & Beyond*

John McDonald is a Georgia-based singer-songwriter/guitarist who, prolifically as a solo artist and in partnership with fellow guitarist-bassist Mark Maxwell, has released a series of independent blues and Americana recordings. "Blues and Beyond" is the latest from this duo and it is a tour de force and a soul-stirring ensemble project that also includes pianist Jason Fuller, keyboardist Pat Strawser, saxophonist Mindy Towe, harmonica player Glyn Denham, drummer William Kissane and vocalists Janis Maxwell and Sarah Lawing.

"What You Gonna Do About Me" opens the album, with a great mid tempo groove. It sets the scene for some duet vocal and lead guitar fireworks from McDonald, Lawing and Maxwell, respectively. It's a straight-ahead blues that challenges a lover's decision to leave a relationship from a male and female perspective. The classic "I Put a Spell on

You" gets a nice relaxed and jazzy treatment here, with fine solos on guitar, piano and sax. "Drive" continues that mellow vibe, with a Chris Isaak-type coolness. It's all about casting your troubles aside and, with the soundtrack of the blues on the radio, driving into the night. "Heart Attack & Vine" is a tune that was popularized by Tom Waits. It gets an appropriately gruff and rustic take here, with McDonald adding a fervent growl to his rich and expressive vocals. This is low down and dirty blues at its finest. "Best in Town" picks up the tempo and energy, with some



hellacious licks from Maxwell and a great arrangement from Strawser and Towe. This is super funky and is sure to get some folks on the dance floor. "All That Makes Me Happy is the Blues" is, perhaps, a song for our troubled times. It's a tune that describes the perfect antidote for what ails you. As McDonald states on the track: "just like an old friend, it'll pull you through." McDonald and Lawing collaborate again on "Well, I Done Got Over It." It's got a traditional Muddy Waters and "Tobacco Road" kind of feel combined with a roadhouse vibe. "Same Old Blues" follows and is anything but. There is a simple backbeat and cool repetitive riff from Maxwell, but the structure is augmented by some keen orchestration from the keyboards. It's a tasteful use of space and rhythmic push and pull. The album closer, "Rub Me Raw," features some stunt guitar work from Maxwell and sort of typifies the

intent of this record. This is one of McDonald and Maxwell's bluesiest works to date.—**Eric Harabadian**

BAMBI ALEXANDRA *True Story*

Self-produced 2026

How did Bambi Alexandra carve herself a niche in blues music? It's counter-intuitive. She was born in New York, but lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, not exactly known as a hotbed of blues. (It's far from a blues desert, though; think of the late, excellent soul blues singer Wee Willie Walker, who lived there, as for years did current California resident and harmonica ace RJ Mischo.) Her family background includes Celtic and Caribbean roots, and she grew up listening to folk icon Pete Seeger.

Nonetheless, since her teenage years Alexandra has been a lover and purveyor of blues, and she has honed her craft well. "True Story" is only her second album, following 2019's "The Devil You Know." "True Story" is a jaunty and juicy collection of eleven of her original songs, and she belts or croons her vocals in front of a septet of skilled supporting musicians. The dependable rhythm section, comprised of bassist Felipe Herrera, dual percussionists John Wright and Mike Dubois, and keyboard player Ryan Bynum is augmented by horn players Mitch Brown and Mark Froelke, with Andrew Guerin providing adept guitar crunches, runs, and grooves.

The set gets right to it with the first track. It's a mid-tempo shuffle with both organ and piano, and some snazzy guitar licks, as Bambi assertively proclaims

that "this ain't rock-and-roll/This ain't three dollar soul/This is the blues." It sure is. Bambi displays a wide vocal range, a timbre that reminds me at times of Susan Tedeschi's singing, and an occasional emphatic growl. What's wrong with rocking, though? Nothing, as evidenced by the succeeding tune, "Shoot 'em Down." "Sliverado," next, is one of the most intriguing numbers of the album,



with syncopation and a shimmering quality. "Messy Baby" is a poignant slow blues, allowing Guerin to demonstrate his chops. Bynum shines on another rocker, "Keep Your Man," with Froelke and Brown adding rousing back-up vocals.

On "Lovespell" we get more shimmer and syncopation, with Brown's trumpet skill front and center. The band coheres pleasingly on the zesty "Too Sweet" and "Got to Have It All," with Herrera's nicely audible bass driving the former. "Big Roll Daddy" is an upbeat shuffle that will appeal to dancers, and "Without You" is another fine slow blues, Bambi's vocal winding silkily around the sax and trumpet. The set ends with another danceable shuffle, "Rey [Ray?] of Light."

Good, expressive singing, songs with catchy hooks, and a supple and talented band...what's not to like?—**Steve Daniels**

BOOK

BLUES THERAPY: VOLUME TWO

By Anita Schlank Ph.D. & Mike Zito

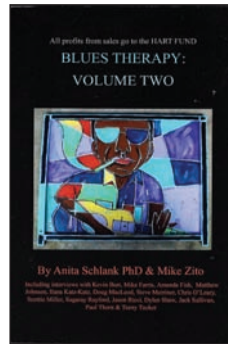
48HrBooks

Volume Two is a welcome addition to the first Blues Therapy, which was released six years ago and was reviewed by me in the April-May 2020 issue of Big City Rhythm & Blues. That initial effort was spearheaded by Virginia psychologist Anita Schlank, with the cooperation of Louisiana bluesman Tab Benoit. Fourteen blues musicians were brave and candid in discussing their personal mental health challenges.

The sequel follows the same format. Schlank provides an introductory chapter on "Blues & Mental Health," succinctly summarizing the

theme of the book: "While it can be wonderful to have a career in the music industry, there are some aspects of it that are not necessarily good for an individual's mental health. Sleep deprivation from moving between time zones while on tour, the poor diet...easy availability of alcohol and other mood-altering substances... Additionally, the musician's lifestyle can strain relationships...many musicians do not have health insurance...and their tour schedule may make it difficult to attend therapy appointments..."

As well as exploring disorders related to the travails of touring, contributors also focus on arguably more innate conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and childhood familial dysfunction. One of the most useful, and moving,



entries is co-author Mike Zito's extended sharing of the severe grief that he suffered during and after the terminal illness of his wife, who died in January 2023 after an extended bout with cancer. Excerpts from his blog during her illness reveal the stresses of performing and creating while helping to care for her...and, counterintuitively, the joy of sharing their mutual love while recognizing its approaching end.

Among the fifteen other contributors are

such recognizable names as Sugaray Rayford, Kevin Burt, Amanda Fish, Doug MacLeod, and Jason Ricci. Each is candid about their personal struggles. No single approach to coping and/or healing is advocated, as is understandable. Each individual is unique. Some contributors laud the concern and care of close relatives and friends and

even casual music fans; others assert their need for solitude and "space" to process and address issues. Interestingly, an admonition expressed by several contributors is for those concerned with their welfare not to ask "How are you doing?" which may be inexpressible and may feel intrusive, but rather to demonstrate empathy by saying "I hope that you are doing well" or "My

thoughts and support are with you."

Speaking of support, all proceeds from this book, as with the initial 2019 first volume, go to the Blues Foundation's HART Fund, which aids musicians and their families in dealing with their health dilemmas. Kudos to Schlank, and to Mike Zito and his fellow musicians for their honesty and informative insights.—Steve Daniels

Good Blues to You



BIG CITY Rhythm & BLUES

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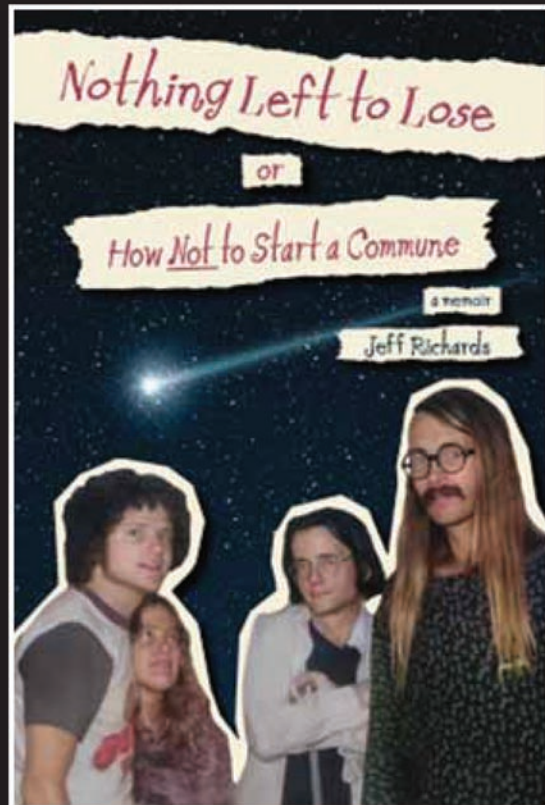
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