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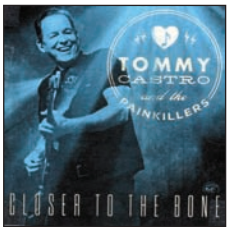
TOMMY CASTRO AND THE PAINKILLERS

Closer to the Bone

Alligator Records

Is any blues fan unfamiliar with Tommy Castro? If so, it's time to emerge from hibernation!

One of the most popular blues performers in the world for over three decades, guitarist, singer, and songwriter Castro, a San Francisco Bay Area



native, has released almost twenty praised albums and toured extensively. He has been a Blues Music Award nominee in multiple categories, and has won repeatedly for Album of the Year, Contemporary Blues Artist of the Year, and three times as B.B. King Entertainer of the Year.

"Closer to the Bone" is his first release since 2021's award-winning "A Bluesman Came to Town." His core band of the last decade, the Painkillers, remains intact: Bowen Brown on drums, Mike Emerson on keyboards, and long-time colleague Randy McDonald on bass. For this album the group has paired with ubiquitous producer and multi-instrumentalist Christoffer "Kid" Andersen and invited a host of eminent musicians to sit in on various of the fourteen tracks.

Castro's liner notes declare that this is "a real

blues album...nothing contemporary...the way they might have made blues records back in the day...the real blues side of me, not the contemporary guy, not the rock guy, not the soul guy." To that end the set includes covers by such notables as Ray Charles, Eddie Taylor (Jimmy Reed's long-time guitarist), Johnny "Guitar" Watson, Brownie McGhee, and less widely known figures like Jimmy Nolen and Johnny "Nitro" Newton.

Well, let's first clarify: despite his protestation, this album has plenty of soul. Castro cannot sing without grit and passion. It's most evident in the three covers vitalized by the backing vocalists, the Sons of the Soul Revivers: Dwayne and James Morgan. The Ray Charles number, "A Fool for You," is an indisputable soul blues song, with Chris Cain on piano; "Hole in the Wall," credited to Brownie McGhee, is a terse gospel number with repetitive refrain, aided by Andersen on second guitar and Jim Pugh on organ. The third Revivers' participation, "Keep Your Dog Inside," features Tommy's wife, blues eminence Deanna Bogart, on second vocal. The lyrics either actually refer to a wandering canine, or, I suspect, constitute a double entendre referencing either unconstrained aggression or libido. At any rate, it's a winner.

So are the rest of the album's fourteen tunes. Castro's music doesn't generally include harmonica, but here there are notable exceptions. Billy Branch wields the

"Mississippi saxophone" on a Castro original, "Ain't Worth the Heartache," with McDonald, Emerson, and guest drummer June Core excelling. Although he has no extended solos, mouth harp maven Rick Estrin lends his expertise to Eddie Taylor's "Stroll Out West" and Jimmy Nolen's "The Way You Do"; the latter has some of Castro's best stinging single note guitar forays.

Speaking of which: Castro's guitar playing is stellar all through the set without being flashy or preening. He demonstrates his versatility by dealing out some impressive resonator slide work on "Keep Your Dog Inside" and especially "Freight Train (Let Me Ride)," a Ron Thompson number that slide master Elmore James would have enjoyed; Pugh again handles piano and Andersen takes over on bass.

The late guitarist Ron Thompson was a slide boogie master, making his legendary friend and mentor John Lee Hooker proud. Boogie finds a place here in "Everywhere I Go," written by Randy McDonald, who does the vocal, with Andersen on piano and Tommy delivering some truly nasty guitar.

Among the other notable tracks are Chris Cain's "Woke Up and Smelled the Coffee," McDonald spurring the upbeat shuffle on bass and Castro doing some of his best singing, and "She Moves Me," Bogart showing her artistry on tenor saxophone while Tommy declares "I feel like I been kicked by a mule/Every

time she calls my name."

Those fortunate to have seen Tommy Castro and his band perform live know that he always provides catharsis and joy; people always leave his shows feeling better than when they arrived. That feeling is conveyed in this album, and Tommy assuredly enjoyed making it, as evidenced by his frequent mid-song exclamations of pleasure. I let out a few similar yelps while listening to it.—**Steve Daniels**

JOHN HAMMOND "You're Doin' Fine: Blues at the Boarding House June 2&3, 1973"

Owsley Stanley Foundation

When the term "Americana" is bandied about these days it's quite often attributed to everything from alternative rock to blues, soul or country. As long as it's "American-Made" music the tag seems to get slapped on an album or artist.

But when you talk about an artist like John Hammond you're talking about going back to the source. Hammond, now in his early '80s, was a contemporary of folkies like Peter Yarrow and Bob Dylan. And he was, and is, a legendary guitarist/vocalist and elite devotee/archivist of American blues and all the grandeur and history that is tied to that.

This is a three CD package that is absolutely beautiful. It features Hammond playing solo acoustic and resonator guitars and harmonica before an intimate and very attentive audience for

two nights in 1973 at San Francisco's Boarding House. The 60-page bound booklet filled with photos, essays and illustrations is well worth the price and is appropriately respectful of the material contained within.

It was recorded by Owsley "Bear" Stanley, a producer and sound engineer that had gained fame designing stage sound gear for The Grateful Dead. And he outdid himself on these consecutive nights by brilliantly captur-



ing these momentous performances. This was originally recorded over 50 years ago and it sounds like it was done yesterday. The audio is clear, pristine and you hear all the detail and nuance of Hammond's intricate vocals, harmonica and guitar work.

Over three discs you get 45 tracks, with some alternates that practically detail the history of American blues music. Hammond's repertoire is surefire and astute, with spirited takes on tunes like Willie Dixon's "Wang Dang Doodle," Muddy Waters' "I Can't Be Satisfied" and Slim Harpo's "King Bee." The title track of this package and the tune that kicks off Disc 2 is Little Walter's "You're So Fine." After some dialogue with the audience Hammond lets it rip, with a walking bass line and warm soulful vocals. Disc 3 begins with

Jimmy Reed's great boogie number "Go On to School." And it really gets interesting when one of his heroes, John Lee Hooker, is actually in attendance while he plays a slightly abridged version of Hooker's "Ride 'Til I Die." Another highlight featured on this final set is Chuck Berry's "No Money Down." Hammond liked blending the deep cuts in with more familiar material to great effect.

This is Hammond captured in his natural element. Probably for many the name John Hammond might be relegated to history books or slightly veiled folk/blues references. But, make no mistake, he is a "BAD" man! And here he is in all of his resonator and harmonica-fueled glory. It's an amazing document and is as relevant today as ever. Make sure to file this under "essential listening!"—**Eric Harabadian**

BOB ANGELL WITH KELLY KNAPP Brand New Blues

Rawtone Records

Providence-based guitarist Bob Angell has been a mainstay on the East Coast blues scene for decades. Angell was inducted into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame in 2015 and is credited with forming the first electric blues band to come out of that state, the Blues Outlet, in 1966. *Brand New Blues* is Angell's 2nd release on the UK's Rawtone record label. Sassy vocalist Kelly Knapp is featured on 5 of the album's 17 tracks. Interspersed in the set are

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some very cool, short instrumental pieces. One of these, "Shake For Hubert," is a duet with Duke Robillard, a tribute to one of Angell's mentors, the late, great Hubert Sumlin. The two guitarists tangle with their Statocasters to the tune of Howlin' Wolf's "Killing Floor." Another instrumental highlight, "Jelly Bean Bounce pt. 1," sounds like it could have been an outtake from *Led Zeppelin III*. *Brand New Blues* is an apt title, as Bob puts it, "Much



as I love the old blues music, I feel it's time to push the boundaries of the form a wee bit." Examples of this would be the string-drenched ballad featuring a wonderful performance by Knapp, "A Woman Alone Without Love" and the opening track "Good as I Been to You," which jumps out of the speakers with Doug James' tenor and baritone saxes "airing it out." A highlight is the moody Angell original, "Drinkin' All Alone," with another fine turn by the Boston-based Knapp. The guitar tones on some of these tracks are deliciously filthy! The album closes with the spiritual a Capella rave up "John the Revelator" and finally the somber church organ of "Amen." A very satisfying listen all the way through.—**Bob Monteleone**

GILES ROBSON & JOHN PRIMER *Ten Chicago Blues Classics*

Blues House Productions 2024

Giles Robson, still a few years shy of the half century mark in age, for over a decade has been a premier blues harmonica ace.

A native and resident of England, he picked up the harmonica at age fourteen. After seeing the country blues duo of guitarist John Cephas and harmonica adept Phil Wiggins play, his course was set. His cooperation with guitarist Joe Louis Walker and pianist Bruce Katz on 2018's "Journey to the Heart of the Blues" won a Blues Music Award.

John Primer, of course, needs no introduction to blues lovers. His decades playing Chicago blues, and stints in the bands of Muddy Waters and Magic Slim as well as subsequently with his own band and in cooperation with Phoenix harp ace Bob Corritore, have earned innumerable awards and membership in the Blues Hall of Fame. Now



approaching eighty, he remains in his prime.

Robson and Primer met several years ago, and since have toured together in a band format and as a duo. Here they find themselves in the latter configuration, paying tribute to some of their legendary Chicago blues predecessors. Does the album suffer from lack of a rhythm section? Not in the least; it's a delight.

Among the ten songs recorded are four identified with Muddy Waters. "Blow Wind Blow" kicks off the set and immediately confirms the virtuosity of the two principals. Primer provides the foundational rhythm, along with a brief but dazzling solo toward the end, while Robson delivers splendidly on the mouth harp. The other Muddy songs covered admirably are "Rollin' Stone," "Long Distance Call," and "Got My Mojo

Workin'." The latter is one of three instrumentals on the album; the longest track at almost six minutes, it features intricate interplay between guitar and harmonica.

The other instrumentals are the Little Walter Jacobs's standards "Juke" and "Last Night." "Juke" is arguably the most popular (and challenging) blues harmonica instrumental song in history; Primer sticks to a steady rhythm while Robson dances flights of fancy around the basic theme. "Last Night" receives a slow and pensive treatment.

Tunes by Eddie Taylor, and one each by Sonny Boy Williamson I and S.B. W. II, round out this distinguished set. On those and all the other non-instrumentals, Primer, a more than competent singer, is content to play his axe while Robson vocalizes. Giles's supple tenor works well, although particularly on the Muddy tunes it lacks the power and seductiveness that Waters brought. (To be fair, pretty much nobody since Muddy has been able to match his vocals.) Robson's mouth harp magic is impressive throughout; in contrast to most contemporary blues harmonica players, he provides lots of chording instead of just cascades of single notes.—**Steve Daniels**

J.P. REALI *Blues Since Birth*

Reali Records 2024

At least for those in the Washington, D.C. area, J.P. Reali will be a familiar name. Although now relocated to Delaware, New York native Reali spent nearly four decades in the nation's capital, where he garnered multiple award nominations, and three times won the D.C. Blues Society's battle of the bands and represented the society at the International Blues Challenge. His background also includes

a stint as lead guitarist in a psychedelic band and as half of an acoustic blues duo.

Reali's current focus is on roots blues, as reflected in his new release. His co-producer and collaborator was Jim Larson, with whom he has created music on and off over several decades. Larson handles percussion, and a turn on mandolin on one track. Completing the rhythm section are Gill Glass on bass and Josh Borden on keyboards.

The brief half hour set is composed of eight original numbers and one cover. The latter is a version of Bob Dylan's "It Takes a Lot to Laugh, It Takes a Train to Cry." The group gives it a pleasant lilt, buoyed by Borden's piano and a nice slide guitar solo mid-song by Reali. (Despite his guitar proficiency, the album sports few extended guitar solos.) Reali's singing here is unlike Dylan's, although on several other tracks he does resemble the Nobel laureate, particularly on "Eileen Left," where he sounds like



Dylan in the latter's early "Bringing It All Back Home" phase.

That vocalizing, which will be a matter of taste to listeners, is a reedy tenor that often departs from perfect pitch. On a number of cuts Reali's singing evokes memory of Neil Young during Young's 1970's heyday.

The set has variety. Its opener, "The Devil's Take," is a boogie at a slower tempo than most boogies. Following is the typically relevant "The Virus Blues," penned during the Covid pandemic. "The Bad Dog Blues," clocking in at a terse two minutes, is a

shuffle, and the set closes with the title tune, again brief but distinguished by some of Reali's best guitar playing.—**Steve Daniels**

DEAN ZUCCHERO *Song for the Sinners*

Pugnacious Records 2025

Although he has had a long and distinguished career in music, Dean Zucchero here releases only his second album, after 2023's well received "Electric Church for the Spiritually Misguided." A New York City native, Zucchero had a busy career there in rock and blues bands before embarking on a decade-long stint in Europe. Since 2013 he has been back in the U.S., ensconced in



New Orleans, and the album reflects the musical tones of that famed metropolis.

The title of "Electric Church" suggested Zucchero's pleasure in crafting lyrics; all the tunes on that album, and this new one, sport both his music and lyrics. He also produced the album. As in his previous outing, his rotating cast of accompanists includes skilled NOLA players, many with recognizable names. All the singing is done by others, while Zucchero plies his bass and helms the steady rhythmic foundation. The dozen songs range from rock to gospel to blues to jazz inflected.

The opening number, "Biting Through," is a thrumming shuffle led by noted guitarists Johnny Burgin and Jimmy Vivino, the latter who does the vocal. The syncopated "South Side" introduces a horn section and a raspy

vocal by Glen David Andrews, with harmony singing by Tiffany Pollack. "Lullaby" eliminates horns but adds dobro and the harmonica stylings of octogenarian Bobby Rush. Burgin teams with pianist and singer Victor Wainwright on the rocker "She's Saturday Night." The slow ballad "Crawfish No More" about love lost has a smooth vocal by John Boutte, and the first half of the set ends with Albert Castiglia handling guitar and vocal on "Shine"...shortly followed by Castiglia's frequent colleague Mike Zito likewise doing the singing and guitar work on "Tone of the City."

More variety ensues. "Mama's Bottle" is jaunty, with Wayne Thibodeaux providing fiddle; soul blues singer and harmonica virtuoso John Nemeth leads "Never Fade Away," and "Cold Shot" reintroduces the horns, with John Papa Gros waxing lyrical on organ. The set ends with two radically differing tunes. "Suicide for Jesus" is a solemn blues dirge, and "Fowl Play" is a humorous ode to a stolen chicken, vocal and "chicken guitar" by Little Freddie King: "She was my lady/fair feathered Katie/and now she's just somebody's gravy."—**Steve Daniels**

KID RAMOS *Strange Things Happening*

Nola Blue Records

Kid Ramos should be no stranger to blues audiences. He's a guitarists' guitarist that has served tenure in a host of popular and established bands in the blues world. He's plied his trade for the James Harman Band, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, The Mannish Boys, Los Fabulocos and The Proven Ones. And he brings his distinctive jazzy blues-based sound to the fore of everything he does.

For this latest venture Ramos received a phone call from an old pastor friend that was doing missionary work and had lost confidence in the people he was supporting and where the money was going. The pastor told Ramos he wanted to put



his efforts into supporting gospel musicians and asked him if he wanted to make a "God record." Ramos agreed and called on powerhouse vocalist Brian Templeton, formerly of The Radio Kings, to lead the charge.

Templeton has an independent label, Straight Street Records, and has a strong background in Christian music.

Also on board is the other featured vocalist on the album, Johnny Ramos. As Kid's son he's a true chip off the old block. But he comes by it honestly, with a smooth and sensual approach that plays off Templeton's robust soul-drenched style. Rounding out the core band is Dave Limina on keyboards, Mike Tuturro on bass and Stephen Hodges on drums.

This is a very hip gospel blues fusion that blends some of the best contemporary and classic music of the genre from musical stalwarts such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Mahalia Jackson, The Soul Stirrers and Bob Dylan, in addition to original material by Kid Ramos himself.

The title track "Strange Things Happening" comes out swinging, with a vintage lounge feel. The mix of Ramos' soulful chord work, Limina's Jimmy Smith-type organ and Templeton's authoritative vocals is a magical combo. "How I Got Over" is more

of the same, with a focus on Ramos' T-Bone Walker execution and some tasty piano. "I'm Working On a Building" is genuine and sanctified. This track's jaunty syncopation and participatory hand clapping feel will put you in the spirit. "Oh What a Meeting" has a slow blues mood and features Johnny Ramos' smoldering and emotive vocals. The backing voices here really complement this piece and make it a highlight. That's followed by a rabble rousing number featuring Templeton called "Jesus Dropped the Charges." Here is some great mid-tempo funk, with an extremely catchy hook that addresses the power of forgiveness. "An Answer for Isaac" brings in more of a traditional raucous roadhouse feel where the droning styles of John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters converge. And that's followed by the Johnny Ramos-led sweetness on the country-flavored "God Walks the Dark Hills." It's a wonderful ballad, with some beautiful Floyd Cramer-like nuance from Limina on piano. "Satan's Jeweled Crown" changes the musical landscape again in fresh and exciting ways. Templeton and Johnny Ramos collaborate over rich flamenco guitar, horns and a Mariachi feel and melody. "Nobody But the Lord" swings in a relentless fashion. Kid Ramos does some tasteful guitar comping as Templeton's gritty and inspirational delivery will blow you away. "Every Grain of Sand" is another great ballad, with a nice balance of traditional sounds. "More Love More Power" opens, with a Santana meets Robin Trower rockiness. But then it quickly evolves into a Latin-like choral tone. As all the tracks here, it focuses on the power of worship and unabashedly will touch your soul. The album closer "I'm a

Pilgrim" is a straight ahead gospel number, with heart pounding rhythms and spirited lead guitar.

This is one of the best releases to come out so far this year. It's jazzy, bluesy, honest, heartfelt and authentic. And, above all, it's a spiritual record in the best sense of the word. So, if you're searching for existential answers, in communion with the Holy Spirit, or just wanna be uplifted, look no further, my friend!—Eric Harabadian

TOMISLAV GOLUBAN WITH CROOKED EYE TOMMY
Nashville Road

Overton Music 2025

In the two years since I reviewed his album "20 Years on the Road," Croatian harmonica expert Tomislav Goluban has continued his peripatetic ways, touring, recording, and adding to his career resume as a blues educator, festival organizer, and radio programmer. He cooperated on several projects with the popular



Los Angeles band Kelly's Lot. Along the way he connected with guitarist and fellow singer and songwriter Tommy Marsh. Before relocating to Tennessee, Tommy and his brother Paddy Marsh comprised the core of the Ventura County, California band Crooked Eye Tommy, forging a loyal West Coast following and achieving a high finish at the International Blues Challenge.

This set of nine tracks was recorded in late 2023 in Nashville with the staunch aid of Alphonso Wesley on drums, Eric

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Robert on keyboards, and Doug Seibert on bass (with a few other guests). Goluban wrote eight of the songs and vocalizes on two; Marsh does the remainder of the singing, with skill, and handles equally well almost all of the guitar chores.

The set begins with an instrumental, "Hard Run," immediately demonstrating the chops of the rhythm section; Wesby is especially impressive here and throughout. Goluban dazzles on mouth harp, but the number lacks focus. Then "Rock Dog," an upbeat boogie, features Marsh's strong and supple vocal, and "Up Is Down" maintains the rapid pace behind Goluban's raspy tenor singing. Marsh resumes singing on "Bad Choices Make Good Stories," and he and guitarist Jasco Duende provide some beautiful guitar fills. "Hip Hop Shake" is an irresistible upbeat instrumental, with Seibert's bass front and center.

"Hard Candy" lets Marsh loose for more zesty guitar, and "Keep On Moving On," Goluban's second vocal foray, is a mid-tempo tune with some of Tomislav's best harmonica mastery. The set closes with two numbers with diametrically differing emotional moods. The penultimate track, "Life Is Good," is three minutes of lilting joy, the musicians cooperating splendidly, and then the set ends with Marsh's

sole writing contribution, "There Is a Train," a drop-dead gorgeous slow blues about death: "Can't buy no ticket/Can't make no reservation/But this train gonna take you to heaven or to damnation." Don't be surprised if it is nominated as blues song of the year.—

Steve Daniels

BOOK

MASTERS OF THE HARMONICA: 30 MASTER HARMONICA PLAYERS SHARE THEIR CRAFT

By Margie Goldsmith

The subtitle of this book is 30 Master Harmonica Players Share Their Craft. And some of my favorites are here, including Sugar Blue, Billy Branch, Magic Dick, Rick Estrin, Dennis Gruenling, Adam Gussow, Delbert McClinton, Charlie Musselwhite, Paul Oscher, Annie Raines, Jason Ricci, and Kim Wilson. Margie Goldsmith makes all the chapters interesting, and the other masters are given their due, many of them teachers. The interviews are arranged alphabetically, and all the interview questions are printed in bold, which makes this book very readable.

In the preface, Goldsmith explains how she came to learn and love harmonica. As a lifestyle writer she has had over 1,000 articles published,



and she's won 85 awards for writing. During her career, she came to realize that music is her passport to the world, so with the help of one of the masters, Jon Gindick, she took up harmonica and joined his Blues Harmonica Jam Camp in Clarksdale, MS. When she returned to New York City, she studied with another master, Welshman Lee Edwards. Then she became a member of the Society for the Preservation and Advancement of the Harmonica (SPA) and wrote for their magazine, Harmonica Happenings.

As a professional writer, Goldsmith's talent is asking good questions, asking follow-up questions, and allowing the interviewees room to complete their answers. Many of the questions in each interview are similar, but the overall effect is that we learn each master's back story: how they came to play harmonica (most are self-taught), and what they've learned through music. Goldsmith introduces each master and gives them an epithet before the interview

begins.

It's fascinating to find out how these masters came to their craft. For Country Music Hall of Famer Charlie McCoy, it was seeing Jimmy Reed live. Lee Edwards says, "I'd heard lots of harmonica in various recordings, but hadn't really HEARD it. Then, all of a sudden, I listened to 'My Babe' for the first time, and something in my brain must have been switched on..." The harmonica went from a play toy to an instrument for the young Delbert McClinton when he heard Jimmy Reed's "Honest I Do." Early on, Kim Wilson was "tutored" by the likes of Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers, and Albert Collins. "They taught me how to be human, and that was more than any musical thing I could learn."

I was impressed by the first master, Cheryl Arena, "Baddest Harp Player." From Boston, she's also a singer, songwriter, and bandleader. She remem-

bers that at first she didn't know there were different keys for harmonicas, and she became very frustrated. The next master, Grammy-nominated recording artist David Barrett, "is the world's most published author of blues harmonica lesson material." Asked if his teaching program will make a student a professional musician, Barrett responds, "It means that you have mastered the techniques of tongue-blocking, bending, position-playing (first, second, and third), their music theory is up to a level that they can communicate with and accompany other musicians well, they can song-write and improvise well."

Besides stories about how these 30 harp masters learned their trade, they offer simple tips and techniques like Billy Branch and Sugar Blue who remind students that it is essential to practice. Magic Dick thinks that you should first master one

style - lip pursing or tongue blocking to master your tone. Rick Estrin learned a lot by just listening to the songs that he wanted to play. Joe Filisko, who is considered an expert on traditional diatonic harmonica, prefers tongue blocking to produce a bigger sound. Dennis Gruenling recommends practicing scales and you will learn from your mistakes. Kim Wilson can have the last word. "I like giving a lot of sounds—that's one thing Little Walter was fantastic at. There were times, I think, when Little Walter was playing through a cardboard box with a speaker in it, but he made it sound good."—Karen McFarland, Professor of English, was an organizer of the Mississippi Valley Blues Festival & a former board member of The Blues Foundation living today in Greenbelt, MD contact: somanybonnets@hotmail.com



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