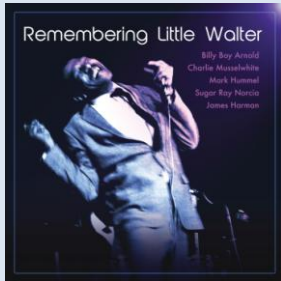


CD REVIEWS

Billy Boy Arnold, Charlie Musselwhite, Mark Hummel, Sugar Ray Norcia, James Harman, *Remembering Little Walter* by Tom Hyslop



Latter-day harp men talk about Big Walter's tone, emulate the conversational styles of both Sonny Boys, admire the power and playfulness of Cotton, and dig Junior Wells's attitude. Some may work on Jimmy Reed's high-end approach, or give lip service to Snooky

Pryor or even Louis Myers. But Marion Walter Jacobs was The Man, the player whose stylistic innovations revolutionized the way the instrument was played, and whose technique, taste, and tones continue to baffle and inspire musicians more than 60 years after his debut, and nearly 45 years after his untimely death. Little Walter's influence is so pervasive, therefore, that a certain amount of sarcasm seems almost a requirement when confronting a blues harp CD named *Remembering Little Walter*. What are the odds? At some level, after all, nearly every record prominently featuring harmonica blues could bear that title.

Built entirely from Walter's catalog, many of the songs on this album have been recorded countless times already (and, if you are like I am, you do not care if you never again hear "My Babe," though you undoubtedly still dig "Can't Hold Out Much Longer"). What, then, distinguishes this release? Enough that it is nominated for two Blues Music Awards, in the Album and Traditional Blues Album categories and for a Grammy. After years of organizing his Blues Harmonica Blowout tours, producer Mark Hummel has some practice at assembling successful packages, practice that carried over to this show, recorded at Anthology in San Diego. Start with the band. The superb rhythm section is made up of June Core (drums) and RW Grigsby (bass). The guitarists are well experienced at working with harmonica players: Nathan James (with James Harman and Ben Hernandez) and the legendary Little Charlie Baty (with Rick Estrin, in the Nightcats). The unit interprets the sounds originally laid down on Checker by the Aces and Robert Lockwood and Luther Tucker with swing, subtlety, and deep understanding.

The singers/harmonica players under whose names *Remembering Little Walter* was issued are an enviable all-star assemblage: Hummel, Harman, Charlie Musselwhite, Billy Boy Arnold, and Sugar Ray Norcia. Together they make up something like 50% of any reasonable person's list of the pre-eminent living harmonica players, and the environment, as one might expect, makes for committed and spirited performances. Sugar Ray's intense "Mean Old World" is dynamite, as is Musselwhite's take on the up-tempo "One Of These Mornings," a relative rarity, which also features a daredevil guitar break. Tone and dynamics are at an impossibly high level throughout—Hummel and the band dial in a perfect late-night mood on "Blue Light," and the way Harman drives "Crazy Mixed Up World" hard before breaking it down to a whisper at the end is masterly. Billy Boy's "Can't Hold Out Much Longer" is splendid on every level.

That recaps only about half of the program, but the rest of the songs (each performer sings two) are excellent as well. The closing number, "My Babe," features all five marquee players (not to mention Baty, who started on harmonica before becoming a universally recognized genius guitarist) blowing inspired solos on their horns. Chances are that you have already made the decision to buy *Remembering Little Walter*. You will not regret it.

Blind Pig Records — 2013

Check out: www.blindpigrecords.com

Macy Blackman and the Mighty Fines, *I Didn't Want To Do It* by Tom Hyslop

The pianist Macy Blackman, a long-time music educator and piano expert, has been an active performer since the 1960s, specializing in jazz and rhythm and blues, in particular the R&B music of New Orleans. He recently released his third album with his band The Mighty Fines. The 14 tracks on *I Didn't Want To Do It* supply everything necessary for a rollicking good time except the partygoers.



The rock-solid Mighty Fines are Jack Dorsey or Adam Goodhue (drums), Bing Nathan (bass), Ken Jacobs

(baritone saxophone—delicious!), and Nancy Wright (tenor saxophone, vocals), supporting Blackman (piano), whose singing is excellent and interesting. In contrast to the Mighty Fines' lively and infectious music, Blackman's vocal style is pretty far from excitable—not deliberate, exactly; languid perhaps comes closer. Although I have no sense that Blackman is trying to imitate the great Professor Longhair, and any similarity lies more in feeling and attitude than in sonic resemblance, his resonant timbre and playful, yet somehow grave, quality do recall Fess. That is no small asset for anyone singing Crescent City music.

The playlist, reflecting Blackman's long history and close involvement with this repertoire, includes standards and obscurities alike. The latter category includes the woozy rocker "Help Yourself," credited to Allen Toussaint, and "The Good Book," a brooding, gospel-inflected number in a minor key. Blackman sings the standard "What Do I Tell My Heart" beautifully, his 12/8 piano figure reflecting Fats Domino's version; the saxophone charts are sublime. Blackman's friend Dr. John penned the lovely ballad "Just The Same" and, with Doc Pomus, the sly, bouncing "Never Fool Nobody But Me." More familiar are "Who Shot The La-La," a classy take on Irma Thomas's "Somebody Told You" with a solid Wright vocal, the title track—a romp from The Spiders' catalog with a chorus and a descending hook that you'll recognize at once if you have ever heard it—and Chris Kenner's immortal "I Like It Like That," one of those songs that seems to encapsulate everything about New Orleans music: rippling piano, soul-clap snare hits, honking saxophones, Afro-Caribbean flavor, stop-time rhythms, and an instantly memorable melody and lyric.

Blackman draws from other sources as well. The deep soul ballad "Dreams To Remember" is presented in an arrangement not far from Otis Redding's original, with Blackman, playing the only guitar part on the album, filling Steve Cropper's role. Blackman's piano rhythms are quietly spectacular on a jaunty "Something's Got A Hold On Me." Wright sings lead on that Etta James classic and on Ike and Tina Turner's "A Fool In Love," which is enhanced by a tough sax solo and such delightful touches as the bold fill by Dorsey at 2:31. The Brook Benton-Dinah Washington duet "Rockin' Good Way," shorn of strings and its politely rocking, straight-eighth-note rhythm, is recast as a syncopated, shuffling New Orleans strut, and Jackie Wilson's immortal "Higher And Higher" closes the program on a high note, sounding very much like a one-pass (and maybe one microphone) take that builds on Blackman's block-chorded introduction, with rowdy hand claps,

uninhibited drumming, and wild saxophones creating an irresistible, pure party atmosphere.

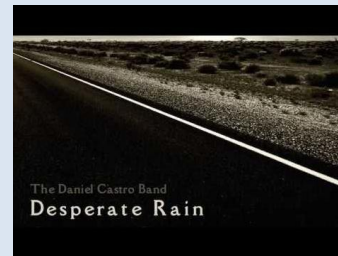
That sense of fun is at the heart of what most of us think of when it comes to the R&B of New Orleans, and Macy Blackman and The Mighty Fines convey it perfectly. *I Didn't Want To Do It* goes further, showing rarer aspects of New Orleans music: Saturday night and Sunday morning, romance and heartbreak, high seriousness and low clowning, all skillfully played and sung.

MamaRu Records — 2013

Check out: www.macyblackman.com

[TGGBS and Tom Hyslop received review copies of this CD from Blackman's publicist PR by DR.]

The Daniel Castro Band, *Desperate Rain* by Joseph Jordan



Daniel Castro has developed into a consummate artist, and a musician fully laden with grace and fire.

Desperate Rain is not for the faint of heart, but a tough, gritty, and

brilliant glimpse at Daniel Castro's still burgeoning legacy as one of the finest singer/songwriter/guitarists on the West Coast. He has now emerged at the forefront of the gifted San Francisco Bay Area blues scene.

Along with his biting, blistering slide and flat-pick work, Castro's powers are in full measure on this, only his third LP (since 1999's *No Surrender*) in an outstanding career. It's a remarkable representation of his full command as a modern bluesman. His vocals are stronger than they've ever been, and that's saying something.

With his co-producer, Joel Jaffe, Castro shines in his role as band leader; however, the Daniel Castro Band is just about as important. Bassist Johnny Yu and drummer David Perper, who both add superlative background and harmony vocals, are seemingly made for this band. Castro chose both of them well, as Yu's fluid, sharp, and melodic bass lines complement Perper's more than accomplished drum work. This trio sounds huge.