

The Blues Reviews Page

Hosted by Steve Ahola

March 15, 1999

Memphis Slim USA (Delmark DE-710) © 1998

This CD includes 19 selections and alternates recorded for the United label on two days in 1954 by Memphis Slim & His House Rockers, which included Matt "Guitar" Murphy (who was with the band from 1952 to 1959). While Memphis Slim is the most recorded blues pianist in history, the recordings with Matt Murphy and the House Rockers have been relatively rare; their recordings for Vee Jay in 1958 & 1959 have been reissued in several forms, including "Rockin' The Blues" (Charly CD BM 21), but these earlier recordings are a real treat. (Delmar will be releasing recordings from the two United dates in 1952 and 1953.)

Matt's guitar playing served as the inspiration for much of Eric Clapton's work with John Mayall, and is much more prominent and unrestrained on the 1954 recordings on United. There are some similarities to Willie Johnson's playing with Howlin' Wolf at Sun Studios in Memphis in the early 50's, and to Hubert Sumlin's work with the Wolf later. "His bold attack, jazz-influenced chording and raw amplification epitomized the developing postwar Memphis/West Memphis style." [from Jim O'Neal in 1977] I see his playing as the forerunner of most blues-based rock guitar, weaving his riffs and chords between the vocals and blasting out short solos that knock your socks off. Later recordings by Matt Murphy include several albums with James Cotton in the 60's and The Blues Brothers movies and CDs.

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November 23, 1998

Fleetwood Mac (Columbia [Australia] 485316 2) © 1996

The first 3 UK albums by Fleetwood Mac have been hard to find but Columbia in Australia has reissued all three of them in a boxed set (\$33.95 at Circuit City). Castle had a 3 cd set out a few years back that included practically everything they recorded from 1966 to 1968, but this set includes the original albums with the original packaging (plus some new notes from the producer Mike Vernon). You really get the full effect of the albums as they came out, much more so than with the repackaged reissues that mix the songs up. Although Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac was not that popular in the US, their albums and singles were at the top of the charts in England and in Europe, and at one point they were outselling the Beatles and the Rolling Stones.

November 6, 1998

Fleetwood Mac The Vaudeville Years of ... (Receiver RDPCD 14 [Trojan UK]) © 1998

Except for the hard-to-find BBS sessions, this 2 cd set features the first unreleased studio recordings from Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac that have been issued in over 25 years. There have been many live recordings released in recent years but the audio quality on the ones I've heard leave much to be desired. It seems like the same studio recordings have been issued and reissued numerous times, and it's great that these outtakes, alternate versions and unreleased tracks are finally available. The bulk of the set is centered around the sessions that produced "Then Play On". The 17 minute structured jam from which "Searching for Madge" and "Fighting for Madge" were derived is now available in its entirety, which surprisingly enough sounds a bit like the Grateful Dead at times in its spaciness. Since Jeremy Spencer hardly played at all on "Then Play On", they were going to include a 5 song EP titled "The Milton Schlitz Show" featuring Spencer's "celebrity impressions", but their record company nixed that idea. Those songs are included along with a 5 song promo tape recorded shortly before the release of their second album in England in August 1968.

If you already have the other studio recordings from the 1968-1970 Fleetwood Mac and want more, then I strongly recommend this set to fill in the gaps a bit. Unfortunately there is not a lot of the more traditional blues that Peter Green was best known for (check out Otis Spann's "Biggest Thing Since Colossus" for some of Peter Green's best blues work). The 52 page booklet bound into the book-like double cd case has many quotes from Peter Green about where his head was at musically during these recordings, and describes how the sound of the band had evolved so radically in a period of less than a year. Peter Green said that he decided that he could not play the blues authentically since he did not share the experience of living as a black man in America:

"I didn't understand the blues well enough to play it so I stopped. The blues was too deep, it got too painful. See, the guitarists who copied them old black players were doing an interpretation of the blues but they couldn't get the feeling behind it 'cos none of us had that experience. It sounded okay for awhile until you started to realize that the blues is something you spend a lifetime in, and you have to understand it to play it. There's levels that most people, including me, never got anywhere close to.

"But then it got much too deep for me and I got lost. The blues ended up hurting my soul so I stopped it... I had to give it up because it wasn't mine, it didn't belong to me"

The pain he mentioned is perhaps most evident on "Love That Burns", which I always felt was the saddest and most desolate blues song I'd ever heard by any blues man, white or black. Although the emotions conveyed by that song were evidently very sincere, it was so damned sad that it was as though he acting out a part in a play- nobody could possibly be that broken up and still be able to sing and play... While you might think that such a depressing song would be all negative, the sheer beauty of his singing and playing is awe inspiring and there is a certain catharsis in the experience: as dark as my life had been at one time, it was reassuring to know that someone else had been there, too, and lived to sing about it. (Of course, Peter Green was evidently diagnosed as being a schizophrenic after leaving Fleetwood Mac, so I guess he didn't escape all of that unscathed.) In any case, this set includes a version of the song made for the radio promo tape.

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July 20, 1998 (revised 3/15/99)

Buddy Guy Damn Right, I Got The Blues (Silvertone 41462-2) © 1991

Buddy Guy Feels Like Rain (Silvertone 41498-2) © 1993

Buddy Guy Slippin' In (Silvertone 41542-2) © 1994

Buddy Guy Live: The Real Deal (Silvertone 41543-2) © 1996

Buddy Guy Heavy Love (Silvertone 41632-2) © 1998

By default, Buddy Guy has become the senior spokesman of the blues and he certainly deserves the title. To be honest, I wasn't really knocked out by his recordings between 1968 and 1988, and was a bit reluctant to buy his recent releases on the Silvertone label. I say that only because his recordings for Chess and with Junior Wells in the '60's were so influential; I just never felt that his later recordings captured that fire that was in his earlier work.

However, I've been picking up his Silvertone recordings one at a time and have been really impressed by them. Each album seems to have a slightly different direction and I like all of them. For an extension of his classic blues for Chess, I find his live album to be the best. "Damn Right" was the obligatory tribute album for aging blues musicians, with Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Mark Knopfler sitting in, but Buddy Guy blew them all off the bandstand! "Feels Like Rain" is a bit more subdued, with vocalists like Bonnie Riatt, Paul Rodgers, John Mayall and Travis Tritt(!) joining Buddy. "Slippin' In" features the bass and drummer from SRV's Double Trouble on half of the numbers, and Johnnie Johnson on piano (who is also the only familiar face on the "Live" album with the SNL Band) on all of them. "Heavy Love" has been getting a lot of radio play, with "Midnight Train" featuring Jonny Lang.

All of these albums are great, and I suggest that you pick up any of them that you find used. Or new if you can afford it.

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July 5, 1998

Coco Montoya Gotta Mind to Travel (Blind Pig BPCD 5020) 1995

Coco Montoya Ya Think I'd Know Better (Blind Pig BPCD 5033) 1996

Coco Montoya Just Let Go (Blind Pig BPCD 5043) 1997

After reading rave reviews on Coco Montoya's performances at the SF and Monterey Blues Festivals the past few years, I thought I better find out what they were talking about. So a few months ago I decided to get his current album (mainly because it had a cool looking BF Super on the cover). While I was very impressed by his playing, I did have mixed opinions about his singing so I did not look into his back catalog. While his singing seems to be sincere enough, it can get a bit repetitious after awhile. (One of the high points of Just Let Go is the Cate Brothers singing on their "Give It To A Good Man", which sounds like a Southern soul song from the 60's.)

I played his cd again today (actually by mistake since it was in another cd case: T-Bone Burnette's "Truth Decay" which was the one I had wanted to listen to). I was playing it mainly as background music while I worked on my '65 Pro, and for some reason it really clicked for me today, even his singing. So I went out and got his other two cds, keeping my fingers crossed as I brought them home, hoping that I wouldn't get totally burnt out on his music.

Well, I'm glad I picked them up as they are both every bit as good as his latest cd. He tries not to repeat himself too much (it is the blues so how can you avoid that altogether?) so he covers a lot of territory on his earlier albums that he doesn't touch on "Just Let Go". His debut cd is the strongest, with guest appearances by his mentor, the late Albert Collins, along with John Mayall, Al Kooper and Debbie Davies. I would go so far as to say that it is the best album that Eric Clapton never recorded...

Coco Montoya started out as a drummer and toured with Albert Collins for 4 years in the mid 70's (during which time Albert taught him how to play guitar). He later joined John Mayall's Bluesbreakers and played with them for

10 years. He has developed his own style of blues guitar which borrows from Clapton and Mike Bloomfield from the 60's, along with some Albert King and Mick Taylor. His playing does not have the bright clarity of SRV (and the long line of his would-be successors), but instead is more like the smooth distorted sounds of Bluesbreaker-era Clapton. Surprisingly enough, he doesn't usually sound that much like Albert Collins but he learned his lessons well as evidenced by his timing and by the way he builds up his solos.

I strongly recommend all three of his albums. Definitely not your typical bar blues band as his singing and playing shows a lot of sensitivity.

January 18, 1998

Junior Wells Hoodoo Man Blues (Delmark DD-612)

As you probably already know, Junior Wells passed away Thursday January 15th. This album (recorded September 22 & 23, 1965 and released in early 1966) was one of the most influential modern Chicago blues albums. As the liner notes point out, it was one of the first Chicago blues albums actually recorded as an album, rather than just a collection of singles and other songs from various recording sessions. As such it has a continuity to it that other blues albums simply did not have. On guitar was his long-time partner, Buddy Guy, using the pseudonym "Friendly Chap" as he was under contract with Vanguard at the time. For more mid-60's recordings by Junior Wells and Buddy Guy, check out the first volume of Vanguard's Chicago / The Blues / Today! (VMD-79216). (Some of those songs are included on the latest Vanguard collection of Junior Well's work from the 60's.)

Junior Wells had recorded many singles in the 50's for Chief records, and was one of the second generation Chicago bluesmen (like Buddy Guy and Otis Rush). He had played harp with Muddy Waters band after Little Walter left to pursue a solo career. There was a hip sensibility to his singles from the 50's, although that could have been the influence of his producer, Mel London.

I remember seeing Junior Wells and Buddy Guy at Ruthie's Inn in Berkeley in the early 70's. They played very well to an audience of about 20 people- definitely not one of their bigger shows. [Revised 7/5/98]

December 25, 1997:

Albert King (Recordings from the 60's)

I finally found "Jammed Together" on cd (Stax SCD-8544-2 (STS-2020)) with Steve Cropper and Pops Staples, and backed up by the Stax house band (i.e., Booker T & the MG's and the Bar-Kays). The cd has a 1990 copyright date but I had not seen it before in any of the local stores. What's nice about this album is that it puts Albert in a more relaxed and casual setting than his more formal studio recordings for Stax. Some of the album is very dated, like Steve Cropper's octave fuzz box on his leads for "What'd I Say", but Pop Staples' rhythm guitar parts with vibrato are a timeless example of what was so great about those old Fender amps. Albert's 5 minute instrumental version of "Knock On Wood" features some of his hottest recorded leads, and would always blow away rock guitarists I'd play it for ("Who IS that guy?!?")

"King of the Blues Guitar" (Atlantic 8213-2) was the reissue of the album released in 1968 which duplicated many of the songs from his "Born Under A Bad Sign" album on Stax the previous year. The bonus tracks on the cd are those songs on "Bad Sign" that weren't included on the Atlantic album, so you are basically getting both albums for the price of one! This cd includes most of Albert's "hits" from the mid 60's, many of which were covered by Cream, John Mayall, Led Zepellin (uncredited!), et al.

Fantasy Records (who bought up at least part of the old Stax catalog) has been doling out unreleased Albert King material a few tracks at a time like on "Funky London" and "Hard Bargain". They did supplement his classic "Live Wire/Blues Power" (released in 1969) with two cds of other recordings from the same shows: "Wednesday Night at the Fillmore" and "Thursday Night at the Fillmore". And they have reissued all of his other albums from Stax: "Years Gone By" and "King Does The King's Things" (whose covers of Elvis songs include some very tight arrangements from the Stax gang and top notch playing from Albert).

While all of the above titles are from his Stax recordings, his early work on Bobbin and King should not be overlooked. "Let's Have A Natural Ball" (Modern Blues MBCD-723) is a digitally remastered reissue of his "Goin' to California" (King KSD-1060) with a few bonus tracks. His guitar playing wasn't as strong as it became later, but with its thinner sound it is still very hot- you can almost hear the electricity sizzling from his guitar strings; these are the songs that influenced the first generation of blues/rock guitarists like Mike Bloomfield. There is another cd released in 1995 with live recordings from the same era- "Live On Memory Lane" (Monad MOA 502), but the arrangements and selection of songs are practically identical to "Natural Ball" and it doesn't really add much so I would recommend it only to someone who insists on having a complete collection of Albert King recordings.

I have only referred to Albert's guitar playing, but his singing was also very notable on all of these recordings; I've always thought his vocals were like many of the big band blues belters from the Kansas City area, almost to the point of being downright corny. No disrespect intended here: I always enjoyed the contrast between his guitar playing, which was always modern and hip, and his singing, which sounded like a throwback to the 40's. I respect him even more for not trying to be cool (unlike many blues singers who were always modernizing their sound to be accepted by their audience). Albert King is the genuine article, singing and playing from his heart.

November 19, 1997:

Boz Scaggs Live at The Fillmore (10/8/97)

If you only remember Boz from the disco years of the mid-70's, that was just one phase in his musical career which stretches over 30 years. He released an album earlier this year paying tribute to some of the blues and r&b songs that influenced him when he was growing up. Perhaps you think he's just another aging rocker jumping on the blues bandwagon, but Boz has always loved the blues.

Boz's band was tight, and they played selections spanning his career, equalling or surpassing the studio recordings. Loan Me a Dime has always been one of my favorite blues songs, with the original from Boz's first album featuring some of Duane Allman's best non-slide guitar work. That song was very influential on the rock scene at the time as it illustrated all sorts of things which could be done in the framework of a blues song. Boz's guitarist from NY (I couldn't make out his name) did justice to the song, following along in the footsteps of Duane Allman for most of the solo, and then branching off into some jazzier directions. I like a lot of songs, but only a few give me goosebumps and this was definitely one of them.

This 2 1/4 hour show was broadcast live on KFOG (104.5) in SF.

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