

JOHN STEPHAN BAND

Know Your Driver

CD Review by Mark Dalton, Northwest Music Writer/Bassist

As a broad musical form, the Blues fills many needs, comes in many guises. Perhaps the lowest form, in my view, comes as a simple, money-making branch of good-time pop music; the put-your-hands-together-get-up-and-boogie type of music often purveyed at blues festivals around the country. Music to drink beer and chase each other around the campground. Well-worn and formulaic. If you stretch this definition far enough (and some people do), you can find Hank Williams Jr. and his Monday Night Football Anthems on the same metaphorical stage with "blues" musicians of this ilk. Loud, energetic music; every guitar solo a muscular display of screaming vibrato; red-faced noisy harmonica playing that scrapes like fingernails on a blackboard after awhile; shouted, often nearly atonal exhortations and lyrics that range from "My baby and me are drinkin' and having fun" to "My baby left me so I'm drinkin' even more" with very little in between. You know what I'm saying here. If you're looking for deeper insight or hard-won bits of wisdom, you're gonna need to move along from this arena.

I am pleased to report that John Stephan's new CD, "Know Your Driver," is the real deal, as opposed to the above. From the title of the CD (good advice, as you will hear elaborated in the song of that title here) on through this body of work, you'll hear a talented, experienced artist doing his best to reach you on all levels of the blues. As one reviewer of Wynton Marsalis' set "The Majesty of the Blues" noted, "The blues has always been about making the most of things regardless of the situation you're in... the blues will never die for it is the universal cry of the heart for freedom; freedom from bondage, pain, abuse, neglect, want, despair..." Stephan sets out to wrestle with these things in song, bringing his considerable talents to bear; as a guitarist (particularly his amazing slide work - I've said before there's nobody around I'd rather hear on slide - a master of the form; as a song-writer (most of these are original compositions); and as a plain-spoken, soulful and compassionate singer.

Stephan and I go back to the 70's when, along with Isaac Scott and Janet Foos, we were parts of Albert Collins' northwest backup band. Albert taught us to be ready for anything, as a funk jam like "Soul Food" might mutate into a two-beat hoe-down with share-cropper Albert singing about "taking my cotton to the gin" - and then back to those dangerous city streets in the non-stop course of 15 minutes. Even then, with monster guitarists on either side, Stephan's soaring slide spoke volumes about the majesty of the blues.

The selection of songs on this CD is excellent - many of the tunes written by Stephan are so finely crafted they sound familiar - fresh takes on classic blues themes - the wise title track; the set opener, "Working on a Building;" "Hard for the Devil;" ("you make it hard for the Devil when you spread that love around..."); and the acoustic-style lament "Treatment Blues" are among my favorites. There are also some fine covers here - a rollicking version of Howlin' Wolf's "Meet Me in the Bottom;" the scary "Root Hog or Die," and the cover of one of Isaac Scott's best gospel numbers, "Let My Mind Run Back."

In fact, the only thing I miss on this set is more back-up vocals - Stephan is a convincing vocalist, but a number of these songs cry out for some gospel-style Sweet Inspirations to sweeten the mix. This is a minor note however - the songs and performances here stand firmly on their own feet, and it was a pleasure to get inside the music on this collection. To repeat - this is the real deal. Fans of the John Stephan Band will want to take this set home and play it for days on end (I have). If you are not familiar with this Seattle treasure, I suggest you do two things - get out there and check the band out live, and pick up a copy of this CD!

And it's true... Know your driver! Mark Dalton