

JOHN STEPHAN BAND

Know Your Driver

CD Review by John Mitchell, Blues Blast Magazine

Reviewer John Mitchell is a blues enthusiast based in the UK.

John Stephan hails originally from Alaska where he started playing guitar at a very young age and formed a band (The 3 Js) that still gigs from time to time in the NW USA. However, here he is fronting a four piece band which features John on guitar and all vocals, long-time bass player Tom Roesch, drummer Trev Cutler and Jeff Conlin on organ. Piano is added to most tracks by either Steve Flynn or the memorably nicknamed Eric "Two Scoops" Moore! The CD was recorded in Seattle and is a well-produced record of the band's repertoire.

The CD is mainly original material written by John. The three covers are a traditional tune, one Willie Dixon number and one by the late Isaac Scott, a Vancouver bluesman with whom John used to play backing up Albert Collins when Albert was touring in the NW. John's voice is well suited to the generally laid back nature of much of the material here, not unlike Eric Clapton's at times. His guitar playing is to the point, none of the tracks being very long, so solos are kept to the minimum (the longest track is 4.30) and the rhythm section and keyboards support him well.

The original material is reasonably varied. I was a little surprised that "Working On A Building" was selected as the opener as it is one of the more pedestrian tunes, both lyrically and in terms of rhythm. The title track "Know Your Driver" is good, driven by rolling piano, the lyric recommending that you check on your companions in life: "If you're out there catching a ride, you should know who's at our side. You best get acquainted before you trust someone with everything you got, you better check your load before you climb on board, know your driver, know your driver." "I'm Your Weatherman" is a slower paced number about how, in a mature relationship, the partners can see each other's moods changing, just like the weather.

"Root Hog Or Die" is listed as a traditional song, not one I have heard before. It starts with brooding slide guitar before the uptempo rhythm appears and drives the tune along, recounting a tale of hard times and how one is forced into doing things one does not want to do in order to survive - the meaning of the title. The next track "Hard For The Devil" was the pick for me, a slide driven rocker with well-crafted lyrics: "He's out on the street, walking like a man, looking for a sucker wherever he can, so make it hard for the devil, you make it hard for the devil when you spread that love around."

"Let My Mind Run Back" is a gospel infused tune written by Isaac Scott which might have benefited from some backing vocals, but still works well, with a graceful guitar solo in the middle set against very nice churchy organ. It is followed by "A Day At A Time" which is in similar vein. The church-like spell is definitely broken by "Down In The Bottom", the Willie Dixon tune best remembered for Howlin' Wolf's version. The JSB uses slide but takes the tune at a slower pace than is often the case. The piano is a strong element here, along with John's keening slide, the whole getting the toes tapping.

Having got us up and dancing again, the band carries on with a further slide driven tune "Trouble Machine", a tale of unreliable vehicles. I liked the start of the lyric, with its reference to Robert Johnson's classic: "We're always breaking down, if you know what I mean. There's just something about us, we're a trouble machine." A fun song, with the Elmore James riff present and correct.

"Treatment Blues" is a slow paced solo acoustic tune about taking a case of the blues to the Doctor's. The lyrics are clever, but the arrangement is rather sparse for my taste. It does provide another dimension to the CD, however, and shows another facet of John's playing. The full band returns for "Hard Worker Down" which portrays the tough economic times in which we are all living. The final track "Last Call" is subtitled "A Tribute To Albert Collins & Isaac Scott" and is a slow paced instrumental which at times recalls "Soul Serenade" and is mainly a feature for some soulful and reflective guitar playing.

Overall I found this a good CD which grew on me as I listened to it. It gives a good feel for the variety of the JSB and I hope that it introduces them to a wider audience.