

These Blues: The Best of Donald Ray Johnson

Mar Vista Music – MV-7



Donald Ray Johnson is a veteran drummer and vocalist with an extensive track record in pop and R&B, as well as blues. His greatest claim to fame might be his propulsive percussion work on Boogie Oogie Oogie, the 1978 disco-funk hit by A Taste Of Honey. He's also cut several blues releases on his own.

The opening track, a cover of Al Green's Ain't No Fun to Me, could almost be a Green outtake—Johnson's vocals, while somewhat deeper than Green's, are similar in timbre, and the horn charts and rhythmic patterns are based closely on producer Willie Mitchell's legendary sound at Hi Records. Individual credits aren't provided, but a leather-lunged harp player and some sweet, fatback-funk guitar and bass further season this track.

Most of the other offerings here hew closer to standard-issue, 12-bar blues laced with uptown sophistication; the influence of B.B. King, Bobby "Blue" Bland, Rosco Gordon and other ex-Beale Streeters is obvious, and there are nods to icons such as Jimmy Reed, Albert King and Little Milton as well. Nonetheless, with the arguable exception of his Al Green cover, Johnson does not sound like an imitator. His take on the ballad Always On My Mind is a masterpiece of meditative regret that never descends into bathos; his original creations (nine of the 13 songs here are his) reveal him to be a deft storyteller, capable of bringing new life to well-worn blues conceits. Again, one wishes he'd seen fit to credit his musicians; the guitar solos on Johnson's straight-blues offerings are fierce and intense, but musically coherent and focused; his bassist has a deep pocket; the horns sound brawny and sure.

Although he tends to mine most of his influences from earlier eras (Here to Stay is the closest thing on the disc to contemporary-sounding soul-blues), Donald Ray Johnson infuses everything he does with emotional immediacy and musical vitality—let's hope he can further establish himself on the contemporary blues scene.

—David Whiteis
Living Blues magazine