

James Armstrong Finds Blues At The Border



A new album by singer-guitarist James Armstrong, **Blues at the Border** (CatFood Records) is a cause of celebration for blues lovers. This is only the fourth album by Armstrong who debuted over a decade ago on Hightone with **Sleeping With a Stranger**. After a home invasion attack stabbing left him with permanent nerve damage in his left hand, he rebuilt his guitar style and resumed touring and musical career as his brings a lean and deft, razor-like guitar style together with a soulful vocal attack. Comparisons will obviously be made to Robert Cray which may both reflect artists who bring a strong soul base to their blues and both generally employing an unstated approach to their songs.

Recorded in New York City and Texas, the set was produced by Michael Ross, Bob Trenchard and Armstrong himself. Armstrong's bands bring lean, yet crisp backing to the mostly original material that displays Armstrong's ability at crafting songs dealing with everyday life with judicious use of wit and irony. Armstrong's wit is obvious on the opening *Everything Good To Ya (Ain't Always Good For Ya)*, with his choral refrain noting his father's advice that candy tastes good but causes tooth decay and eating an apple a day may be good but too many apples gives one a tummy ache. *Somebody's Got To Pay* is a soulful number by Trenchard and Sandy Carroll about one giving too much and the other taking too much in their relationship as he pleads with his women to stop believing outsiders.

The title song, co-written with Madonna Hamel, is a humorous complaint about being an international traveler having to deal with getting back to the United States in these post-911 days and how the world has changed with some slide guitar providing mood to his vocal before a concise slide guitar break. More of his controlled, clean slide playing is heard on *Devil's Candy*, with an emphatic rhythm in the backing. The lyric is about a lady with an intoxicating effect that left obsessed with her. He gave her his heart, but she wanted his soul. It's an impressive performance that exhibits that even though he shows considerable restraint, Armstrong generates smoldering intensity in his performances.

Dave Steen penned "*High Maintenance Woman*" on which Madonna Hamel adds a guest rap-vocal playing the high maintenance woman in Armstrong's life who keeps him on the run. Still, despite her high costs to maintain, she keeps him warm. *Young Man With the Blues* is a moving tribute to his father, a jazz musician who raised James as a single father. It's a song about James' mother walking out, making Armstrong's dad a young man with the blues. *Brand New Man* is a shuffle where he sings about how his love made him a brand new man and he doesn't want to lose her. The album closes with Trenchard's *Long Black Car*, in which one won't get to heaven in unless one slows down and turns one's life around.

Armstrong's nuanced performances reward careful and repeated listening. **Blues at the Border** is a most notable new blues recording.