

JAMES ARMSTRONG

Blues at the Border

Catfood - CFR-014

Los Angeles guitarist James Armstrong opened his recording career to rave reviews with his 1995 Hightone album, *Sleeping with a Stranger*, but soon after was badly hurt in a home invasion attack, leaving him with permanent nerve damage to his left hand. He recovered sufficiently to release two more strong CDs on Hightone, in 1998 and 2000, but the recording industry then lost track of him for more than a decade, until this welcome new release on El Paso-based Catfood Records.

Of the new album's 11 tracks, eight were produced by guitarist Michael Ross and recorded in New York City, while Catfood's Bob Trenchard brought Armstrong to Tornillo, Texas, for the other three. The program gets underway with *Everything Good to Ya (Ain't Always Good for Ya)* from Armstrong's friend and mentor Sam "Bluzman" Taylor—Armstrong had wanted Taylor to be on the session, but the older man took ill and died, leading Armstrong to sample Taylor's trademark exclamation "Welll!" in the intro. As on his last two Hightone playlists, Armstrong turned to songwriter Dave Steen, this time for *Good Man Bad Thing* and the funky *High Maintenance Woman*. Armstrong also offers a take on Oscar Perry's *Brand New Man* that swings infectiously over drummer Warren Grant's rimshots, but all the rest are from Trenchard or Armstrong himself. The singer displays a wry, sardonic tone on the title track, an ode to post-9/11 travel woes, turns rueful on *Devil's Candy* and *Nothing Left to Say*, and gives thanks to his father, a jazz guitarist who encouraged his son's musical bent, on *Young Man with the Blues*. It's uncertain how much of the guitar here is Armstrong's—certainly it's his slide that's heard on *Devil's Candy* and *Blues Without Borders*—but there's no doubt that his vocal delivery retains all of its strength and emotion.

It's disturbing that an artist of James Armstrong's caliber should have gone unrecorded for so long, but it's a treat to have him back. Likely one of the year's best, and not to be missed.

—Jim DeKoster