

Blues at the Border

CatFood CFR 014 (CD). 2011.

Performance ****

Sonics ***1/2

This remarkable blues album is a small miracle. Armstrong, whose smooth, R&B-influenced style on his Hightone releases *Sleeping with a Stranger* and *Dark Night* was powerfully reminiscent of Robert Cray, nearly died from injuries suffered in a 1997 home invasion. Armstrong's left arm was so damaged that he had to develop a new way of playing guitar using only two fingers. He managed to make another album, *Got It Goin' On*, but has since concentrated on road work. *Blues at the Border*, Armstrong's first album in 11 years, is his masterpiece, an air-tight performance of story songs based on a contemporary bluesman's existence. The title track, a blues about travel restrictions since 9/11, is a brilliant piece of writing powered by Armstrong's soulful slide work. The two-guitar interplay with Michael Ross, who also produced the record, is one of the best illustrations of empathic accompaniment I've heard on a blues album in recent years. Bassist Bob Trenchard (who also had a hand in the production), drummer Richy Puga, and keyboardist Dan Ferguson provide Armstrong with a terse, understated framework for the dramatic set pieces that populate the album. Trenchard also brought three songs to the session: "Somebody Got to Pay," "Long Black Car," and "Baby Can You Hear Me?" Armstrong has a talent for boiling down dramatic situations to a few lines, as in the devastating end-of-relationship ballad "Nothing Left to Say." But the showstopper here is "Young Man with the Blues," a dark tale of generational betrayal in three acts that scans like a film treatment. Armstrong pays tribute to his musician father in the song, and goes on to compare his dad's marital woes with his own. It's a complex, postmodern blues that demonstrates how far the form has evolved. If you ever feel that contemporary blues has lost the narrative edge of the classic canon, listen to this album and have your faith restored.—**John Swenson**