

# Blues Bytes

## Pick Hit

*December 2011*

**James Armstrong**  
***Blues At The Border***  
CatFood Records



It's been 11 years since **James Armstrong's** last release, an eternity in the music business. When he burst onto the scene in the mid '90s with his debut recording for Hightone Records, he seemed destined to be the "next big thing," but they don't call this music the blues for nothing. Armstrong barely survived a robbery in 1997, in which he was nearly stabbed to death and his son was nearly killed. The stabbing affected his guitar playing and he compensated by learning to play slide guitar, but his songwriting and vocal talents were unscathed as he went on to record two fine subsequent albums for Hightone in 1998 and 2000.

Eleven years later, Armstrong is now with CatFood Records, and his latest release, *Blues At The Border*, shows that his absence has been our loss. He's still writing some impressive tunes. The humorous title track examines the difficulties musicians face traveling by air and overseas and was co-written with Armstrong by his girlfriend, Madonna Hamel, who lives in Canada. He also penned a few more conventional blues titles, including "Nothing Left To Say" and "Devil's Candy." "Young Man With The Blues" is a moving tribute to his father, a jazz musician who raised Armstrong as a single parent and gave him his love for music.

Armstrong also covers a pair of tunes from Dave Steen ("High Maintenance Woman," featuring a cameo from Hamel, and "Good Man, Bad Thing."), along with a trio of songs from Catfood's all-around man, bass player/producer Bob Trenchard (the cool blues shuffle, "Long Black Car," "Somebody Got To Pay," co-written by Sandy Carroll, and "Baby Can You Hear Me," co-written by Kay Kay Greenwade). "Everything Good To Ya," was originally done by Armstrong's mentor, the late Sam "Bluzman" Taylor, whose signature "Weeeellll," is sampled at the beginning of the song.

Three of the tracks were produced by Trenchard and Armstrong at Catfood's homebase in Texas, while the remainder was produced in New York by guitarist Michael Ross. Both sessions update Armstrong's sound considerably from his previous release, easing him toward

more of a soul setting than before. That works perfectly fine. It's great to have James Armstrong recording again and even better that he's still growing and evolving as a musician. Don't let this one pass you by.

--- *Graham Clarke*