

James Armstrong,
Blues at the Border
(CatFood, 2011)



With his first recording in 11 years, road veteran James Armstrong turns in a strong collection with **Blues at the Border**. The guitar lines are lean and fluid, never over the top, and they elegantly carry the songs, as opposed, say, to fattening them with obnoxious bombast. Armstrong has it all going for him: a silky, soulful voice telling satisfying stories supported by solid melodies.

Though the echoes of 1960s/'70s soul and r&b are very much apparent, Armstrong is a contemporary bluesman who, almost miraculously, eschews the "blues-rock" crutch. You can hear Muddy Waters and his generation in the distance, maybe Magic Sam or Lonnie Brooks or Albert Collins at closer range. But you won't hear much of the sound of the white guitar bands that followed in the wake of the Rolling Stones' discovery of the Chess catalogue, in other words the sound that came to define much of what passes for blues these days. If Armstrong's approach is contemporary -- and it certainly is -- it takes its own organic, undiluted place in a purer, while ever-evolving, tradition.

Some of this is social commentary, as in the sharp-edged title tune, composed by Armstrong and Madonna Hamel, about the vexing complications musicians endure trying to cross international borders as they ply their craft in 9/11's dark shadow. Dave Steen's "High Maintenance Woman," on the other hand, muses wryly on the irritations and rewards that come with being attached to a demanding girlfriend, with the amusing line "more troubles than Robert Johnson / more issues than the *New York Times*." The Armstrong original "Devil's Candy" quotes Bob Dylan's "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" (though not nearly so extensively as Dylan quoted Paul Clayton's "Who's Gonna Buy You Ribbons?" of which "Twice" amounts to a second -- admittedly improved -- draft).

In summary: if you're hungry for meaty, tasty blues served 21st-century style, come on in James Armstrong's kitchen.