

John Kessler's Top 10 Blues Albums of 2016

Tedeschi Trucks Band—Let Me Get By Concord

TTB are true originals, and possibly the most highly arranged “jam-band” around. In fact, their artistry comes from playing very complex music in a way that sounds like they are jamming. The 13-piece group with 2 drummers, back-up singers and a horn section has a huge sound, but careful arrangement leaves space for Susan Tedeschi's voice and Derek Trucks' luminous slide guitar work. Bassist Tim LeFebvre ups the groove ante considerably and I'm going to call his work on “Don't Know What it Means” the “*Bass part of the Year.*”

Greyhounds—Change of Pace Ardent

This album grabbed my attention with lush yet airy psychedelic production, heart-wrenching song-writing and Stax-worthy soulful vocals. A duo out of Austin, Texas, Greyhounds distinguish themselves with artful use of sampling, loops and studio expertise that support their mellow vibe. The uplifting spirit of their music reminds me of Curtis Mayfield, and their grooves are 21st century southern Soul.

William Bell—This is Where I Live Stax/Concord

This is more than a comeback album, it's a beautifully written and recorded collection of modern Soul and Blues, performed with the authority of a true music business veteran. Bell's first successes in the 60's came from the hit songs he wrote for himself and others, notably “You Don't Miss Your Water”, “Everyday Will Be Like A Holiday”, and “Born Under A Bad Sign” which was made famous by Albert King. Pairing him with Producer John Leventhal, who is also known for his song-writing chops (Shawn Colvin, Rodney Crowell, Rosanne Cash) was a brilliant move, and has brought out some thoughtful and touching songs and performances from Bell, whose voice has aged pleasantly.

Marcus King Band—Marcus King Band Concord

I literally got goose-bumps when I first put this album on and heard the song “Ain’t Nothing Wrong With That”. Within a few minutes I could tell that 20-year old Marcus King is a phenomenally talented guitarist, singer and songwriter, who plays with maturity well beyond his age. Like other Allman Brothers followers such as Devon Allman and Derek Trucks, his music is a melting pot of Southern Rock and Soul, and producer Warren Haynes of Allman and Gov’t Mule fame has done an excellent job corralling the 6-piece band into a cohesive tight-but-loose sound. This is the most promising young talent I have heard this year.

Rolling Stones—Blue and Lonesome Universal

Not since their very first release in 1964 have the Stones done an entire album of Blues. Apparently the idea for this release started when the band was jamming a Little Walter song while warming up before a recording session. It sounded so good, they decided to go for it, quickly recording a dozen lesser-known Chicago Blues tunes from people like Magic Sam, Eddie Taylor, Howlin’ Wolf and Willie Dixon. This is actually when the band is at their best--their casual interplay and rough and raucous demeanor suit the music perfectly, and the fun they are having is easy to hear.

Colin James—Blue Highways True North

Colin James is better known in his native Canada, but he is musically rooted in traditional American Blues. Besides his convincing singing and astonishing guitar work, this album stands out for it’s original renditions of Blues standards like “Big Road Blues” and “Going Away Baby”. He keeps things in the Blues realm, but re-imagines the songs in rhythmically and harmonically fresh ways. Fantastic harmonica support from Steve Marriner.

Janiva Magness—Love Wins Again Fathead

Janiva Magness has always been a great Blues and Soul singer, but by investing herself in songwriting, she has taken the meaning and impact of her performance to new levels. While Janiva is an ace interpreter of other people’s songs, the authenticity of her voice on her original music is hard to deny. Janiva has also cultivated an excellent band to support her—Guitarists Zach Zunis and Garrett Deloian are both exciting players, and bassist Gary Davenport is a subtle groove-master.

Lil' Ed and the Blues Imperials—The Big Sound of Lil' Ed

Alligator

Lil' Ed has been cranking out danceable, party-time Chicago Blues since the 1980's, in a boisterous style reminiscent of Hound Dog Taylor and Elmore James. Lil' Ed picked up his slide mastery from his uncle, Blues legend J.B. Hutto, and doesn't seem interested in modernizing the basic template. Their continuing success speaks to the band's obvious talent, but also to the timelessness of good Chicago Blues.

Nick Moss—From the Root to the Fruit

Blue Bella

Nick Moss has deep reverence for the Blues, stemming from his days backing up legends Jimmy Dawkins and Jimmy Rogers. His latest project is a double CD of mostly original Blues and Blues-Rock, that follows the evolution of the Blues from the 1940's through it's more experimental and rock periods. While Moss may be the driving force, the album also features the powerful vocals and songwriting of Michael Ledbetter, a descendant of Blues and Folk hero Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly. Raucous and rowdy from top to bottom.

Eric Clapton—I Still Do

EPC Enterprises

Clapton dropped hints that this might be his last significant work. Shortly after the album came out last Spring, he revealed that nerve damage was making it difficult for him to play the guitar. Also consider that the final song is "I'll Be Seeing You". He's never been known for fast and flashy playing, but the guitar work here is dense and intense and the song selection leans heavily on traditional Blues sources, performed in Clapton's patented laid back manner.