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Backtrack Blues Band - *Way Back Home*

www.backtrackbluesband.com

Harpo Records

10 songs - 47 minutes

Way Back Home is Tampa Bay-based Backtrack Blues Band's fifth release and it is a tasty slice of straight-ahead, modern electric blues. Comprising six tracks written by singer/harp player, Sonny Charles, together with four classic covers, *Way Back Home* stands with one foot planted in the Chicago

blues of Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield, the other in the Texas blues of the early Fabulous Thunderbirds or Anson Funderburgh and the Rockets featuring Sam Myers. If you like your blues with biting lead guitar and soaked in great harp playing, you will like *Way Back Home*.

The Backtrack Blues Band (named after the great Little Walter instrumental) formed in 1980 and their 35 years' worth of shared stages and shared experiences is evident in the sense of togetherness and camaraderie that permeates this very enjoyable release. Charles's harp and Kid Royal's guitar harmonise melodies on "Help Me Just This Time" and "Heavily Built Woman", while they dance around each other's fills without ever getting the way on tracks like the opening shuffle of "Goin' To Eleuthera" and the fade out to "Shoot My Rooster".

Charles is a top class harp player, obviously influenced by Little Walter and the second Sonny Boy Williamson but also drawing on modern day masters (there is much of the muscular power of Kim Wilson in his playing). At times his vocals can sound a little affected (viz "Baby Please Don't Go") but he has a distinctive timbre and he really brings it home on tracks like the Texas shuffle of "Rich Man Blues".

Royal is a fine lead guitarist, playing solos and fills that flow with an almost inevitable certainty, sounding like a cross between Freddie King and early Kid Bingham, with a hint of Albert Collins (in "Checkin' On My Baby").

The band is not afraid to let Charles and Royal stretch out with their solos, giving the album a sense of having been recorded live, especially when they both take multi-chorus solos on the same song. It is a tribute to both players however and to the rhythm section that underpins them that neither outstays their welcome at any time.

Indeed, while Charles and Royal may take the headlines with their solos, the quality of every band is dependent on the rhythm section and the Backtrack Blues Band also score highly here. The rhythm guitar of Little Johnny Walter, the bass of Jeff "Stick" Davis and the drums of Joe Bencomo combine to lay down a series of smart yet

unfussy foundations to each song. There is no flashy over-playing here just grooves that work for each track. Bencomo plays in a manner redolent of the great Mike Buck, even playing “Nobody But You” pretty straight, omitting the memorable drum rolls that Fred Below added to Little Walter’s original.

On the subject of “Nobody But You”, a minor reservation with *Way Back Home* is the choice of the four cover songs. “Checkin’ On My Baby”, “Nobody But You”, “Your Funeral, My Trial”, and “Baby Please Don’t Go” (curiously credited to Thin Lizzy’s Phil Lynott as writer) are very well-known songs that have all been covered multiple times. While they are no doubt crowd-pleasers in a live scenario, it really isn’t that difficult to find many, many other great blues songs to cover that are slightly less well-known.

Overall however, *Way Back Home* is a fine collection of songs, expertly played and recorded, and featuring guest appearances from Victor Wainwright on piano (with particularly piquant contributions to “Help Me Just This Time”, Heavy Built Woman) and Latonya Oliver and Dana Merriwether on background vocals. This is a very impressive, very enjoyable release.

Reviewer Rhys Williams lives in Cambridge, England, where he plays blues guitar when not holding down a day job as a technology lawyer or running around after his children. He is married to an American, and speaks the language fluently, if with an accent.