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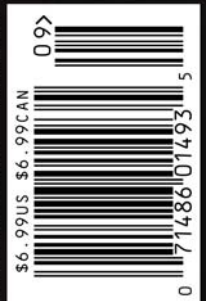
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The Realization of Ambition

Billy Branch & The Sons Of Blues, *Roots And Branches: The Songs Of Little Walter* (Alligator 4992; 58:22 ★★★★★) Within his element as a committed Chicago blues harmonica player, Branch has almost no rival. He's set the gold standard for studio homages to grandmaster Little Walter with the likes of "Son Of Juke" (on his 1984 Red Beans album *Where's My Money?*) and "Who" (on the 1990 Alligator summit meeting *Harp Attack!*). Now, almost a half century since first getting noticed in Windy City clubs, he's crafted a full-bore tribute album: His commanding controlled harmonica invigorates "Mellow Down Easy" and 14 more staples with newness of spirit, spry personality and emotional persuasiveness. Though not as stirring, Branch's vocals capably mine the vagaries of hard blues. The latest edition of his Sons Of Blues band shows its fidelity to Walter in a modern way, reseeding old furrows.

Ordering info: alligator.com

Zac Harmon, *Mississippi BarBQ* (Catfood 028; 48:52 ★★★½) Once a producer for the O'Jays and other bands, Harmon has been touted as the "hottest new blues act" for about 15 years now. Six albums haven't backed up the hype, but finally, his seventh matches his ambition. Harmon's found the right producer to address a blend of blues, soul and r&b in Jim Gaines, and connected with one of the best organic bands anywhere, The Rays, in Texas. The native Mississippian has also found an outstanding writing partner in Bob Trenchard. Harmon's singing is smooth, attractive and rarely cloying, while there's a jaunty confidence to his guitar soloing. But the Zac Harmon Band, on four tracks, doesn't proffer the refreshing soulfulness that The Rays do.

Ordering info: catfoodrecords.com

Fruteland Jackson, *Good As Your Last Dollar* (Electro-Fi 3457; 49:24 ★★★½) Jackson, a Chicagoan, has recorded sporadically during the past three decades, working as a musician and educator. His sixth album—and first for Electro-Fi in a dozen years—is welcome: It's a clear window on the musical worldview he shaped from mentorships with original Delta luminaries like Honeyboy Edwards. Relying on his throaty, pierced-to-the-soul singing and his heartfelt acoustic guitar work, Jackson approaches Johnny Shines' "Two Steps To Hell" and Robert Johnson's "Love In Vain" with a crisp clarity of plangent expression. Mississippi-born Jackson's passion seems truest to these two classics and to the bonus field holler, "Blues 2.0." Nine more tracks are less riveting. Occasional helpmates include pianist Julian Fauth and harmonica player-singer Harrison Kennedy.

Ordering info: electrofi.com



Whitey Johnson, *More Days Like This* (Blue Corn 1910; 43:05 ★★★½) Gary Nicholson, a Texan living in Nashville, has an excellent reputation for his songwriting. Far less known is that he's an easygoing, but unsentimental, vocalist and a guitarist with blues tendencies who goes by the nom de blooze Whitey Johnson. Tunes of his that were recorded by Buddy Guy, Arthur Alexander, and Taj Mahal and Keb' Mo' shine for his self-confidence and genuineness. Guitarist Colin Linden and the other sidemen here perform at a high level of craft.

Ordering info: bluecornmusic.com

J.B. Hutto & His Hawks, *Things Are So Slow* (Space 701; 26:34 ★★★★★) This 10-inch record from Japan has eight songs that slide guitarist Hutto cut for Chance in 1954, five years after arriving in Chicago from Georgia. On his very first recordings, the 27-year-old bandleader dispensed plenty of raucous slide-guitar excitement while under the spell of Elmore James; "Dim Lights" mirrors "Dust My Broom." Hutto's voice passes muster, hinting at timbres revealed years later. Harmonica player George Mayweather, in thrall to Little Walter, fared pretty well, even though his technical gears lock up on a previously unissued instrumental, "Mouth Harp Mambo." Mandatory listening for Chicago blues fans.

Ordering info: amazon.com

Heather Newman, *Rise From The Flames* (VizzTone 002; 55:09 ★★★½) Newman, a singer-bassist in her twenties, makes emphatically sure her band is poised for a national breakout, like fellow Kansas City residents Trampled Under Foot. On her second release, she hurls her voice into a set of 13 lightly interesting originals about the ending of a romance and the emergence of self. But Newman's mannered seriousness drags things down, and her blues-rock band's efforts at suspense are overdone. Taking an ironic approach to lyrics would have helped. Better songs, too. **DB**

Ordering info: vizztone.com



Alexa Tarantino *Winds Of Change*

POSI-TONE 8197

★★★★½

The benefit of Alexa Tarantino having spent years in the trenches, serving as a sideperson for a variety of ensembles and building a reputation as a pliable and thoughtful saxophonist, is that when it was time to put together *Winds Of Change*, her leader debut, she had a huge cast of players to choose from to join her.

She chose wisely.

Pianist Christian Sands, bassist Joe Martin and drummer Rudy Royston throw themselves fearlessly into each song here, giving the leader a perfect foundation to build upon. With their help, Tarantino dusts off some of her oldest compositions, including the Kenny Wheeler-inspired "Square One" (apparently the first piece she ever wrote), which gently sputters and hums as the saxophonist takes a carefully measured solo turn, and "Wisp After Wisp," an ode to her grandmother that the band helps steer away from its melancholic source material into brighter, modal territory.

The troupe also inspired Tarantino to write material showcasing the assembled players, as well as her various instruments of choice. On the swinging "Face Value," that spotlight gets turned on trombonist Nick Finzer, who responds to the bandleader's solo with a run that wittily employs discordant tones and the splashy honk of his horn. Tarantino switches to flute briefly for a rendition of Antonio Carlos Jobim's "Zingaro," leaning into the romantic elements of the melody and the instrument's floating timbre. Throughout *Winds Of Change*, though, Tarantino keeps her playing open to enable her compatriots to rise to the fore. For someone whose name and image dominate the album's cover, Tarantino offers up a selfless work. —Robert Ham

Winds Of Change: Wisp After Wisp; Face Value; Seesaw; Breeze; Zingaro; Square One; Calm; Undercurrent; Ready Or Not; Without. (54:08)

Personnel: Alexa Tarantino, alto saxophone, soprano saxophone, flute; Nick Finzer, trombone; Christian Sands, piano; Joe Martin, bass; Rudy Royston, drums.

Ordering info: posi-tone.com