Norah Jones and The Little Willies - Little Willies (2006)

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1. Roly Poly - 2:33
2. I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive - 3:21
3. Love Me - 3:50
4. It's Not You It's Me - 2:43
5. Best of All Possible Worlds - 3:10
6. No Place To Fall - 4:00
7. Roll On - 3:06
8. Gotta Get Drunk - 2:27
9. Streets of Baltimore - 3:06
10. Easy As The Rain - 3:15
11. Tennessee Stud - 3:49
12. Night Life - 3:07
13. Lou Reed - 4:16

Lee Alexander - Bass Jim Campilongo - Guitar (Electric) Jon Dryden - Accordion, Organ Norah Jones - Piano, Vocals Richard Julian - Guitar, Vocals Dan Rieser - Drums

The Little Willies could be called a supergroup if they had more than one star in their lineup. Instead, the quintet is a group of five New York musicians -- highlighted by pianist/vocalist Norah Jones, but also featuring her regular bassist Lee Alexander, guitarist/vocalist Richard Julian, guitarist Jim Campilongo, and drummer Dan Rieser -- who originally came together to play a one-shot gig in 2003 at the Living Room, and soon came to play the venue regularly, which eventually led to an eponymous album released in March of 2006. It's a casual, appealing collection of country covers, spiked with four originals from various members of the band. It's so relaxed and low-key that it could be argued that The Little Willies wouldn't garner much attention if it weren't for that one star in its midst, Norah Jones, who became a superstar in part because her 2002 debut, Come Away with Me, recalled the mellow, burnished vibe of classic singer/songwriter albums from the '70s. A big part of that sound was built on country-rock and both of Jones' albums had an undercurrent of country, so the honky tonk and Western swing stylings of The Little Willies aren't a big stretch for her. In fact, their album has an intimate,
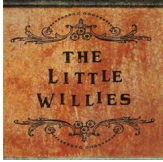
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Written by bluesever
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relaxed feel reminiscent of the nightclub aura of Come Away with Me, but that shouldn't suggest that Jones is the star here. If anything, The Little Willies are led by Richard Julian, an N.Y.C.-based singer/songwriter who has released four albums since 1997. He not only takes lead vocals on just as many songs as Jones, but he has a hand in three of the four originals (the Jones-sung "It's Not You It's Me," "Easy as the Rain," and "Lou Reed"; the other, "Roll On," was written by Alexander, though it's also sung by Jones), all of which fit well among such standards as "Roly Poly," "I'll Never Get Out of This World Alive," "Streets of Baltimore," "Tennessee Stud," and "Night Life." But to suggest that there is a leader to The Little Willies kind of misses the point -- this is a group that got together for a good time, and accordingly there's very little ego to be heard in the music itself. But where some jam sessions can veer toward the indulgent and insular, this is warm and friendly, unassuming and unpretentious, even when it gets a little jokey at the end with "Lou Reed." And while The Little Willies don't mess around with the arrangements of these familiar tunes at all -- "Roly Poly" begins just like Bob Wills' original, Elvis' "Love Me" gets backing vocals patterned after the Jordanaires (and the vocalists are punningly called the Ordinaires on the back cover) -- it doesn't matter, because the band is not only good, but there's a palpable sense of enjoyment in their performances that comes through even though the music is decidedly low-key. Yet that relaxed nature is the very thing that makes The Little Willies a gentle surprise -- maybe this isn't a major record, but it's thoroughly likeable record that doesn't lose its charm on repeated plays. ---Stephen Thomas Erlewine, Rovi

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