

Mike Zito - Blue Room (1998/2018)

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Piątek, 30 Listopad 2018 12:01 -

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*1. Hollywood 2. Pull the Trigger 3. It's All Good 4. Gravy Jam 5. Lovering 6. Shoes Blues
7. Ways About You 8. Soundcheck 9. Lightning Bug 10. Rocket Man*

Blues Music Award-winner Mike Zito is celebrating the 20th anniversary of his debut album, *Blue Room* with a reissue through his current label, Ruf Records.

In the late 90s, Mike Zito was eager to graduate from being a successful blues/rock cover band leader to a songwriter and performer of original material. With only \$1,000 to cover costs, he went into a basement recording studio outside of his native St. Louis. During a marathon session with bassist Doug Byrkit and drummer Brian Zielie, they recorded 10 tracks in a day. Only the vocals were overdubbed. The result was an album chocked full of raw energy, which clearly announced Zito's arrival on the blues-rock landscape.

Blue Room opens with the furiously funky "Hollywood," where the musical virtuosity of all three band members is intentionally thrown in our faces. (Remember, this was a young man trying to prove he was a rock star.) The song's narrative follows a 27-year-old Zito as he saunters down the seedy streets of LA, pointing out unseemly characters and their questionable behavior along the way. His voice is rough because the band had gigged the night before recording, but he powers through, fueled by attitude and beer. Zito holds nothing back on his first recorded guitar solo; likewise, the rhythm section's performance is equally frenetic and deliciously over the top, demanding our attention.

The unhurried blues/rock power riff intro to "Pull the Trigger" slows the pace of the album, but not the intensity. Again, a discernibly strained Mike Zito makes his vocal performance happen

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through sheer will, as he pleads with his woman, “Lord, now don’t you point that thing at me/I know I done you wrong/But baby, have some sympathy.” The gun shot at the end of the song leads us to believe that he may not have successfully pled his case.

“It’s All Good” is a funk/rock masterpiece that dive bombs its way in on a screaming guitar lick. From there, the band kicks it hard. Byrkit and Zielie pump out wicked grooves, as they alternately blend elements of Led Zeppelin and James Brown.

With all of that funky goodness going on, it’s no surprise that there was enough of that groove left over to record the instrumental which follows, called “Gravy Jam.” The riff leaves plenty of holes for Zielie to show off his superior drumming chops and Byrkit’s slap-bass solo is a jaw-dropper. Throughout, Zito toggles back and forth effortlessly between tight rhythms and blistering leads.

“Soundcheck,” another instrumental, delivers exactly what the title suggests. We can imagine hearing the band playing this slow blues-rocker while warming up before a gig. The fade out ending is reminiscent of something we’d hear on the Jimi Hendrix Experience’s Electric Ladyland album.

Other songs on Blue Room foreshadow the compositional breadth that Zito fans would come to hear from him in later years. “Shoes Blues” shows him in his finest roadhouse form, as he introduces his rowdy guitar solos by exclaiming, “Here’s the blues!” On “Ways About You” Zito seamlessly melds reggae, jazz and rock. “Lightening Bug” is built on his tight, soulful rhythm guitar skills.

Zito ends the album with a beautiful reworking of Elton John and Bernie Taupin’s “Rocket Man.” His relaxed vocals are soulful and impassioned and the atmospheric guitar, bass and drums are exquisite. The back half of the song is dramatic and urgent, as Zito accents hard on power chords before driving it home with scorching lead guitar.

From his success as a solo artist, through his time with the Royal Southern Brotherhood and on to winning a Blues Music Award earlier this year, Mike Zito has accomplished a lot over the past two decades. Blue Room proves that he had the chops and the bravado to conquer the blues-rock scene from the moment he arrived, and his debut album is definitely worth revisiting.

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---Martine Ehrenclou, rockandbluesmuse.com

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