

Ben Harper And Charlie Musselwhite – No Mercy In This Land (2018)

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1 *When I Go* 2 *Bad Habits* 3 *Love And Trust* 4 *The Bottle Wins Again* 5 *Found The One* 6 *When Love Is Not Enough* 7 *Trust You To Dig My Grave* 8 *No Mercy In This Land* 9 *Movin' On* 10 *Nothing At All* Drums, Percussion – Jimmy Paxson Electric Bass, Bass [Upright Bass] – Jesse Ingalls Harmonica – Charlie Musselwhite Lead Guitar – Jason Mozersky Organ [B3] – Jesse Ingalls (tracks: 8) Piano – Ben Harper (tracks: B5), Jesse Ingalls (tracks: 5, 6) Slide Guitar, Acoustic Guitar, Electric Guitar, Vocals – Ben Harper Vocals – Charlie Musselwhite (tracks: 8)

After Ben Harper and Charlie Musselwhite won the Best Blues Album Grammy for 2013's wonderful *Get Up!*, fans knew it was only a question of time before they worked together again. In the interim, the only outing from Harper was another duo offering, the gorgeous folk-inflected *Childhood Home* with his mother Ellen Harper. Musselwhite, a serious road dog, issued the raw, scorching *Juke Joint Chapel on Henrietta* the year before and was also nominated for a Grammy. *Get Up!* was followed by the wild and wooly live set *I Ain't Lyin'* in 2015. He assembled a new band and gigged all over the world, also finding time to participate in a documentary about Clarksdale, Mississippi.

No Mercy in This Land follows on the heels of its predecessor by using mostly the same formula: Harper wrote or co-wrote the entire album and sings lead with Musselwhite lending his growling Delta-cum-Chicago harmonica in support. Opener "When I Go" commences with wordless gospel-blues moaning before the wrangling electric guitar and harp meet in the foreground. It's raw, swampy, and lonesome. Further, when Harper gets to the final line of the refrain: "...I'll take you with me when I go...." it's borderline sinister. "Bad Habit" borrows heavily from Preston Foster's "I Got My Mojo Workin' à la Muddy Waters" version (as do a lot of blues songs) with a smoking Little Walter-esque harp solo by Musselwhite. The great bluesman duets with Harper on the title track, as the guitarist plays an acoustic slide under his deep blue harmonica, with tom-tom and kick drums keeping time. Another standout is the raucous single "The Bottle Wins Again," with the lead guitar vamp and harmonica playing in unison as Harper

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wails the lyric. The brief, shuffling, cut-time groover "Found the One" walks the loopy line where vintage R&B and Chicago blues meet roots rock. Musselwhite's distorted solo is resonant and unruly. While "When Love Is Not Enough," with its lilting piano, upright bassline, and brushed snares under acoustic and electric guitars is a nod at Southern soul, it's mostly a vehicle for Harper's sweet, ragged singing. It's answered by the Piedmont-style acoustic blues "Trust You to Dig My Grave," with Harper on acoustic 12-string guitar. The pair push the pedal to the metal with "Movin' On," a snarling, rowdy, swaggering, barroom blues before closing with the anti-climactic, all-too-languid ballad "Nothing at All" which, frankly, feels out of place here. Musselwhite's deep blues solo is the only thing that links it to the rest of the album's contents. Ultimately, No Mercy in This Land is solid if not (quite) as strong as Get Up! That said, it is more diverse, immediate, and instinctive, making it a worthy listen, and provides further evidence that this pair should work together more often. ---Thom Jurek, AllMusic Review

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