

THOMAS SCHLEIKEN

Beech Mountain Hill Blind Lemon Records
BLC-CD1201

TOM SHAKA

Delta Thunder Blind Lemon BLR-CD1202

DAVID EVANS

Live At Alte Post Blind Lemon BLR-CD1203

Blind Lemon is a new German label whose first three releases are all by acoustic blues players. The label is run by Thomas Schleiken whose own album kicks off the series. All three CDs feature some involvement from photographer-folklorist-sound-recorder-general-blues-nut Axel Kustner who in 1980 travelled around the USA recording the much-respected *Living Country Blues* series of (thirteen) albums. Schleiken's *Beech Mountain Hill* is a gentle album of nicely finger-picked guitar accompanying Schleiken's breathy, accented, vocal delivery on a set that leans heavily on gospel songs from the repertoires of Mississippi John Hurt and Rev Gary Davis. Schleiken performs this material, two guitar instrumental pieces, plus his own composition *Deepwater Horizon* (a song about the 2010 catastrophe), simply and effectively. He seems less assured on an outright blues like Robert Johnson's *From Four Until Late*, but this barely detracts from the album's overall charm.

Tom Shaka, an American now resident in Germany, has absolutely no hesitation in barnstorming his way through a varied choice of material. Kicking off with his instrumental *Tom's Barrelhouse Boogie*, which clearly announces this man knows which side of the guitar to play, he then launches into a real low-down blues that benefits from his gravelly voice and solid guitar picking. Next Shaka races through the old pop song *Babyface* then slows the tempo, picks up his mandolin, to let loose on John Lee 'Sonny Boy' Williamson's *Lemon Squeezer Blues*. For *Rambling On My Mind* Shaka plays some rack-harmonica and emulates delta bluesman Honeyboy Edwards' style of singing, which Shaka had plenty of opportunity to get familiar with, while accompanying Honeyboy on a half-dozen European tours between 2000 and 2008. Encouraged by Axel Kustner (who recorded all the tracks at various locations... including one at the graveside of Louisiana Red!) Shaka composed *Mighty Powerful Wisdom*, a personal tribute to Honeyboy. There's a tribute song to Louisiana Red too among the album's plentiful 20 tracks... mostly performed solo but with guests – harmonica player Keith Dunn and guitarists Ferdinand 'Mr Jelly Roll' Kramer and David Evans – spicing up the odd item. In particular, the deep delta style *M&O Blues* and *Young And Wild Blues*, duets with Evans on second guitar, help make *Delta Thunder* a humdinger of an album.

And David Evans has his own humdinger album with *Live At Alte Post*. Rather than try to list his achievements it's easier to say google David Evans to check out his CV. Immersed in so many musical aspects as an ethnomusicologist, academic, author, record producer, tour manager... Tennessee-based David Evans has also carved his own niche as a pristine performer of the blues. His first musical partner in the early '60s was Al Wilson (later with Canned Heat), and as guitar accompanist he's performed with such blues greats as Jesse Mae Hemhill, Hammie Nixon, Johnny Shines and Jack Owens. He's recorded with his own Last Chance Jug Band but mostly he's been honing his solo performance skills on countless gigs and tours both in the USA and in many countries across the world. It's this experience that pays dividends given the chance to record *Live At Alte Post* at this North German venue. Sounding relaxed yet

performing with a positive energy, Evans runs through his selection of classic country blues starting strongly with two songs from Blind Lemon Jefferson (why not, as the CD's on Blind Lemon Records?) before getting to grips with Tommy McClennan's *Highway 51*, Sonny Boy's *Good Morning Little Schoolgirl*, Robert Johnson's *Kind Hearted Woman Blues*, and a couple of Tommy Johnson's – the perennial *Big Road Blues* and the more obscure *Lonesome Home Blues*. Suitably for such a scholar of the blues, Evans also includes a couple of other less familiar titles, Ed Bell's *State Of Arkansas Blues* and William Bunch's (aka Peetie Wheatstraw) *Hard Workin' Man*. Throughout Evans's guitar playing is up to the challenge of the diversity of the material while his singing, which is never derivative, is equally committed. I've liked all the previous albums I have by David Evans – *Match Box Blues* (2002), *Shake That Thing* (2006), *Needy Times* (2007) (all on the Inside Sounds label). *Live at Alte Post* will make a good addition to the collection.

www.blindlemonrecords.de

Dave Peabody

TATCHO DROM

The Devil's Lentil Soup Gun Records gun-511-TD01

With both passion and attention to detail, London's Tatcho Drom draw on the vast music and dance traditions of the Central European Roma, allying their studies to influences from their own impressive jazz, rock, classical and academic backgrounds. The result is an exciting blend of proper fidelity, innovative arrangements and studiously rough virtuosic musicianship, led throughout by Guntara Gruen's violin but also including guitar, cello, accordion and alto sax.

The group's take on the dramatic dance from southern Romania, *Kermenska Rachenica*, is stifled and stretched almost to a breaking point, in a clear ritual where some matters, musical and otherwise, are never fully resolved. *Lalli Phabay / Kikko*, from Russia, takes this naturalism even further. While certainly feisty, there's also a vague menace in its low register and its shift from sultry atmospherics into a pacey full band workout and back again.

Elsewhere, Gruen's band swirl and flow fascinatingly around her, in obvious thrall to her fearless and commanding playing. This is perhaps best heard in *La Rosa Enflorece*, a Sephardic Ladino love song, which is appropriately shimmering and sweltering, a slow blooming drama replete with nightingale song that is strictly for the broken-hearted. Gruen showcases her classical perfection here,

Tatcho Drom



even as her vocals dramatise the heightened emotions of her characters. The whole band slips almost slyly from the sensual to the funereal, ultimately slinking into the darkness.

Gruen spent some fifteen years learning and transcribing some of Europe's oldest music, and her arrangements and playing seem to have an almost literal belief in the magic under discussion, in the rites being evoked, in the real thread of danger that exists at all times in these folk songs, despite the polished production. Lyrically, musically, impishly, the devil is ever present. He actually appears in original closer, *Bengeski Kani*, all threatening scrapings, before securing his windy downfall by eating rather too much of the lentil soup prepared in an earlier song. The personal tragedy for the protagonist, thrillingly trilled on his way, is a triumphant conclusion.

www.tatchodrom.com

John Pheby

DREAMER'S CIRCUS

A Little Symphony Go' Danish Folk Music
GO0913

The second release from Danish trio Dreamers' Circus finds them in ambitious, expansive form and employing a string quartet and a thirteen-piece brass section to bring Technicolor to their compositions. *A Little Symphony* might not be a completely apt name, but it does make very strong connections between Nordic folk music and contemporary classical. When the horns kick in, for instance, it stirs the heart in the same way hearing *Atom Heart Mother* for the first time did. There's a similar grandeur in the arrangements (by band member Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen) and the swell really does enhance the music; it's far more than effect, it's an important part of the piece.

The band members have different styles. Keyboard player Nikolj Busk favours more romantic flourishes that work well with the strings, while guitarist Ale Carr seems ground in a more contemporary Nordic folk style, although when he has his moment in the spotlight, he shows just how good an instrumentalist he is.

The band has performed with a symphony orchestra in Denmark, a mark of where the performers are heading with their music. And the fact is, they've created one of the most satisfying folk/classical fusions to date. It's largely unknown territory but having musicians versed in both disciplines gives a good start. Considering this is still early days, the possibilities are wonderful.

www.dreamerscircus.com

Chris Nickson