

Mad Dog Blues

Family Reunion 2020

Independent Review by Dan Willging

Mark 'Mad Dog' Friedman has always had a burning passion for acoustic country blues, but it wasn't until a few pivotal events that Mad Dog Blues (MDB) came together in 2017 with mandolinist Jeff Becker and acoustic bassist Clark Chanslor. The group really gelled in October '18 with the addition of Sean Bennight (acoustic guitar/mandolin). MDB grew once more when acoustic guitarist Big Willy Palmer joined its ranks completing the sextet for this recording.

As evidenced by this ambitious double-disc spanning 24 tracks, there's an unmistakable brotherhood that's more than just being the Mad Dog show. Every member sang and wrote/co-wrote at least one tune, with Mad Dog having the lion's share with 14. Except for Chanslor, who sang only background vocals, everyone else had a shot at lead vocals.

Disc one is imagined in the string band era of country blues, though, admittedly, MDB stretches the concept to fit its own strengths and personality. Splendid mandolin and guitar flatpicking are prevalent throughout, with many songs featuring call-and-response between instruments—most notably between guitarists Bennight and guest Doug Moldawsky.

Other highlights include Mad Dog's passionate vocal performance on the drifty "My Will is Gone" and Bennight's humorous blues-rag "Hangman." Here, the protagonist pleads to be hanged anywhere except in Kansas (the crime scene), even if it's just across the state line.

As with the country blues, 12-bar blues isn't the norm, but "Good Morning Blues" is the best example of that chord progression. Hokum, the rarer but humorous, innuendo-laden idiom, is represented here with "Delivery Man" and "Take a Little Time."



As part of country blues' expansive territory, genre fusions are par for the course. "It's a Sunny Day" and "Sitting Alone" feel spry and folky enough to fit into the 60s folk-rock movement, just as Gus Cannon's "Walk Right In" did for The Rooftop Singers in 1962. "Powerful Love" could easily contend in the Americana arena.

Disc Two follows MGB's acoustic format, more or less, with a few surprises sprinkled in. Guest Hammond B3 organist Bruce Delaplain adds a touching layer of sentiment to the tuneful "Going to Be Together;" Jenn Cleary, a longtime Mad Dog musical partner, sings her original "Behind the Song."

The feathery instrumental "Thank You Baby" not only changes the pace but is, perhaps, the most breathtakingly beautiful composition of all.

Each disc boasts a delightful extended jam with "Blazz Jam" (disc two) getting the nod over "Shine" due to its cosmic, Dead-like ambiance and interleaving parts floating in and out. Interestingly, Mad Dog opens the tune by playing, of all things, a Native American flute.

There's a ton to absorb here with 24 tracks, the core sextet, and five guests, but there is usually something to be discovered with every listen. In short, ego-less music from a tight-knit group who plays like an extended family.