

Guitar Red

Lightnin' In A Bottle

Living Blues Magazine, December 15, 2008



Lightnin' In A Bottle is an apt title for a disc that represents the debut of both a label and an artist. Backspace is the Atlanta-based venture of Ben Rowell, who set out to launch an alt-rock label but was so taken with the music of 44-year-old Decatur street singer Billy Christian Walls, a.k.a. Guitar Red, that he couldn't resist the chance to record him first.

Standing the stereotyped migration pattern on its head, Red moved to Georgia from New Jersey with his family back in 1975. He's worked with funk and hip-hop groups, but has battled hard times personal demons while ending up a familiar sight busking in downtown Decatur. Red's musical approach, as one might expect of a man who plays for tips on street corners, is rough, rowdy, and extroverted—his guitar work, for the most part, consists of propulsive rhythmic strumming, and his vocals sound like a rougher, raspier Jimmy Reed punctuated by whoops, hollers, and scatting. A more contemplative side, with hints of greater sophistication in his chording and single-note bursts, shows through on Chain Gang Blues and Out Of My Mind, while I Believe has more of a pop or soul influence, recalling a more elemental Ted Hawkins, and Song About A Jimi Hendrix Song closes the set on a downbeat note. Red really pulls out all the stops on the opening Box Car No. 9 and the clavinet-backed title track, though, and Lips Poked Out, Ain't Got Nobody But Myself, Three Legged Dog Blues, and Decatur Boy Blues are also uptempo attention grabbers.

While this set may not be for some of the musical sophisticates out there, listeners who prefer their blues at the grassroots level will think that indeed they have caught lightning in a bottle when they hear Guitar Red.