






Roadhouse Album Review: Barbara Blue is a soulful presence on “From the Shoals”

 January 25, 2023  Jim White  Leave a comment

Barbara Blue (<https://barbarablue.com/>) – “From the Shoals” – Big Blue Records (Jan. 27 release)

Barbara Blue opens her latest album in typical Barbara Blue fashion — with powerful vocals wrapped up in the tightly crafted music of her backers. She’s not known as the reigning queen of Beale Street for no reason.

Although she’s been reigning on Memphis for about 25 years at Silky O’Sullivan’s on Beale, where, Sullivan says, “Barbara Blue can make a glass eye cry.”

Blue spent ten years before that working Pittsburgh clubs on a regular basis, where I’m pleased to say I enjoyed these powerful pipes myself. And before that, she kickstarted her professional career in Phoenix as a solo artist.

For this album, her thirteenth, she adds a little programming twist by focusing the first two tracks on *where* she’s recording — the legendary **Nutthouse Recording Studio** (<https://thenutthouse.com/>) in **Muscle Shoals** (<https://www.udiscovermusic.com/in-depth-features/muscle-shoals-studio-history/>).



“The Shoals” is the funky opener, a tribute to the “powerful magic” of the soulful music that’s been flowing from the Shoals for decades. “Nutthouse Blues” follows, a soulful tribute to the recording studio where **Jimmy Nutt** (<https://thenutthouse.com/staff>) now holds the controls. Will McFarlane contributes wicked guitar riffs, and Clayton Ivey pumps tough organ into the mix. And we can’t ignore Bernard “Pretty” Purdie on drums.

Both cuts, of course, feature Blue’s fabulous tsunami of a Voice, rolling over the music. And the Voice never lets up. “Tell Mama” is next, written by Clarence Carter and made famous by Etta James. Blue breathes new life into the classic song.

Then comes the torchy ballad “Steal Away” (the Jimmy Hughes version), as Blue turns on the soul. “Severed” is another soul-drenched plea for “more healing;” then “Curse of Beauty,” a stirring piece with anthem-like chorus. (I should point out here that “Tell Mama” and “Steal Away” are the only two covers in this set — the rest are Blue originals, with her Croatian songwriting partner Davor “Hutch” Hačić (whom she met at 2019’s IBC in Memphis).

“Lost Young Love” is about just that — lost young love. “Slide Man” is a throwback to some classic slide, and some equally classic salacious double-entendre blues. “Too Far” is another gentle ballad, stirred deeply by with a sensuous vocal. “Nothing Lasts Forever” picks up the pace, and adds a little funk to the message “get it while you

can." "I Never Stopped Loving You" is another powerfully warm ballad with its roots in her hometown of Pittsburgh.

The album closes with two haunting tracks: "Song of the River," a lyrical ode to a "mystical music river of song," and "Trail of Tears," a rhythmic track with a tearful Native American theme.

All these styles and this vocal passion represent Barbara Blue at her best. Her dynamic voice and command of a lyric make her a musical presence to be seen and heard. If you've never experienced her, check out this fine album. Even if you have, check it out anyway. Barbara Blue is what a masterful singer sounds like.

Just in case you're not aware, here are just a few of her achievements:

In 2015 Barbara Blue was honored with a Brass note on The Beale Street Walk of Fame. She received the 2011 Emissary of Memphis Music Award. Both the Hard Rock Cafe Memphis, TN (2014) and Pittsburgh, PA (2010) honored her with a Memorabilia Case. She received a 2007 BMA Nomination for Best Contemporary Female Blues Artist. She was nominated for 2019 Independent Blues Music Award "Traditional Female Artist of the Year" and best Traditional CD (2018's "Fish In Dirty H2O"), and was a 2019 BMA Nominee for "Female Soul Blues Artist Of The Year".

Track List

- 1 The Shoals 3:20
- 2 Nutthouse Blues 7:10
- 3 Tell Mama 3:22
- 4 Steal Away 4:04
- 5 Severed 5:13
- 6 Curse of Beauty 4:43
- 7 Lost Young Love 4:40
- 8 Slide Man 3:15
- 9 Too Far 7:41
- 10 Nothing Last Forever 3:09
- 11 Never Stopped Loving You 5:12
- 12 Song Of The River 6:42
- 13 Trail Of Tears 6:25