

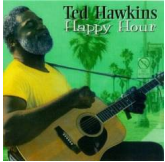
## Ted Hawkins □ – Happy Hour (1986)

Written by bluesever

Thursday, 04 January 2018 15:12 -

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*1 Bad Dog 2:28 2 Happy Hour 3:39 3 Don't Make Me Explain It 2:36 4 The Constitution 2:44 5 My Last Goodbye 3:29 6 You Pushed My Head Away 4:58 7 Revenge Of Scorpio 2:44 8 California Song 4:05 9 Cold & Bitter Tears 2:38 10 Gypsy Woman 3:22 11 Ain't That Pretty 2:56 12 One Hundred Miles 3:02* Bass – Dennis Walker (tracks: 2, 5, 8)  
Drums – Johnny Greer (tracks: 2, 5, 8) Guitar – Augie Brown (tracks: 2, 5, 8), Night Train Clemons (tracks: 10, 6) Lead Guitar – Dale Wilson (tracks: 2, 5, 8) Lead Vocals, Guitar – Ted Hawkins Vocals – Elizabeth Hawkins (tracks: 3, 5, 8)

Guitarist/vocalist Ted Hawkins' second Rounder record enhanced his reputation. *Happy Hour* features Hawkins' memorable compositions, plus a wonderful version of Curtis Mayfield's "Gypsy Woman." Hawkins' vocals were even more gritty and striking, as was his acoustic guitar backing and chording. He teamed with his wife Elizabeth on "Don't Make Me Explain It," "My Last Goodbye," and "California Song," and with guitarist Night Train Clemons on "Gypsy Woman" and "You Pushed My Head Away." Hawkins blended soul and urban blues stylings with country and rural blues inflections and rhythms, making another first-rate release. ---Ron Wynn, AllMusic Review

I can still remember feeling shocked during my first play of Ted Hawkins's debut album, *Watch Your Step*, in 1982. It was the dawning of the electro-pop era, and Hawkins stood out like some hairy, primordial beast stranded at noon in midtown Manhattan. I don't mean that Hawkins merely seemed an anachronism. It was more like he was an embarrassing reminder of qualities lost or forgotten in the passage of time. It had been years since I had heard someone sing songs that cut so quickly and deeply. Hawkins's music, to paraphrase Little Anthony, hurt so good.

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Watch Your Step did win critical praise, ending up on Rolling Stone's best-album list, but then Hawkins disappeared. It was as if he had emerged simply to prove what an artist could do with a sweet rasp of a voice and an open-tuned guitar. Now Hawkins is back with a new album of confessional gems called Happy Hour. He has just completed his first concert tour in England, sometimes playing with Billy Bragg. Hawkins also landed two records on the U.K. indies chart and set the British press groping for comparisons that raised names like Robert Johnson, Hank Williams, and Sam Cooke. Not bad for a 50-year-old man whose hard life of wandering, eking out a living legally and illegally, and occasional incarceration might have otherwise peaked with his regular gig busking at Venice Beach.

The title track, one of the album's only two covers, could not have been better chosen. In his gentle voice and gravelly timbre, Hawkins introduces us to the world that he is always out of sorts in. It's the world of happy hour. Folks are mingling, laughing, chatting, flirting, and cheating. In fact, Ted's woman is cheating on him. The song swings in a relaxed groove as Hawkins sings of his betrayal in a voice not bitter, but rather weary and resigned in a way that says life is an unavoidably painful condition. Hawkins bears down and lets some anger surface when he sings "two drinks for the price of one." After all, that's not the deal he's getting. Like his own songs, "Happy Hour" never collapses into self-pitying clichés and it doesn't resolve the pain or complexity of the situation and it doesn't have an ending. Welcome to Ted's world.

I don't want to make too much of the Robert Johnson or Hank Williams references, since living artists rarely benefit from comparisons to dead ones, especially when the deceased are also myths. But Hawkins does seem a similarly troubled soul, uneasy with his place on earth, and uncommonly able to touch a nerve with a song. Like Williams and Johnson, Hawkins's best songs carry an emotional wallop that comes not from any emotional extravagance, but from artistic control wedded to a sense of ineluctable emotional truth. Hawkins also reminds that the blues, country, and soul forms he so naturally integrates aren't an accumulation of mannerisms or a lexicon of riffs and phrases. They are just modes of creative expression distinguished by their simplicity, not the artist's.

The name most often associated with Hawkins is Sam Cooke. Beyond the fact that Hawkins does sound like a rough-voiced Cooke, he can impart the same kind of bittersweet quality to a song. Hawkins, who was born in Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1936, first heard Cooke when he was 19, and admits that Cooke moved him like no other singer before or since. Hawkins didn't get a chance to record until 1971, when he came to the attention of blues enthusiast Bruce Bromberg while singing on the streets of Los Angeles. Bromberg took Hawkins into the studio, recording a batch of demos and one single using Phillip Walker's band for backup. Hawkins then disappeared (eventually, he was back in prison) and Bromberg collected the demos and singles

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on 1982's Watch Your Step.

Bromberg and Dennis Walker, the same Hightone Records team that produces Robert Cray, produced Happy Hour. Though Hawkins is backed by a spare electric combo on three cuts, the sound of the record is basically Hawkins and his acoustic guitar with occasional guitar support from Night Train Clemons and harmonies from his wife, Elizabeth. The directness, candidness, and grace of Happy Hour, like its predecessor, seem wonderfully at odds with everything in contemporary pop and rock (folk, too). Perhaps that's why Hawkins's songs have a life of their own. The best chase you down.

At times, Hawkins's originals seem like country songs, full as they are of domestic turmoil and infidelity. But only the best country songs have the autobiographical verve of Hawkins's writing or achieve the lifelike blend of palpable hurt and self-deprecating humor heard in a song like "Bad Dog." Here, Ted is back from prison and moved in with his woman, who keeps one hostile canine in her yard. It doesn't really bother Ted that the dog barks and snaps at everyone and even bites Ted when he offers it some ribs. What bothers Ted is that there is one suspicious man that the dog greets with neither bark nor snap, but instead a wagging tail. In Hawkins's music, his fears of cuckoldry are an occasion for tragedy and comedy (sort of like Shakespeare).

Hawkins uses humor to deal with the despairing and embarrassing scenarios that crop up in his songs. In the album's only straight blues (and a raunchy one at that), "You Pushed My Head Away," Hawkins suffers the ignominy of sexual rejection while working in (how should I put this?) "the lap of luxury." Hawkins begs his heartless partner for a chance to learn to please her: "Do you want me to smack it like this? / Is it good when I lick it like that? / Don't hurt my feelings just because Leroy's got it down pat." Hawkins grows madder and madder and finally shouts, "Baby, that sucker had to learn, too." As the song ends, he washes away his anger with a peal of laughter.

As painful as Hawkins's material can be, there is something comforting about songs that don't shy away from the confused tangle of hurts, hopes, recriminations, and expectations that can make a relationship with the opposite sex seem like a wrestling match with an octopus. In "Don't Make Me Explain It," Hawkins admits that he isn't even sure about his own feelings and needs. Fortunately, Hawkins is blessed with one of those realer-than-life streetwise voices that run from a gruff bass to a sweetly strained falsetto and can color love and hate and pain into a rainbow of emotions not so easily categorized.

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Unlike pop and rock music, which can make all right with the world for at least three minutes, Hawkins's music is less a miracle cure than a balm. In "Cold and Bitter Tears," an exquisitely sad tale of a man abandoned by his wife, Hawkins never suggests that this is the end of the world. And in the optimistic "California Song," carried so buoyantly by a calypso rhythm, Hawkins never suggests everything will be all right in the promised land. No, Hawkins's art is to make songs about his life sound like the naked truth we all carry, on the high road and the low road. ---Joe Sasfy, chicagoreader.com

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