

Barbara Blue – Memphis Blue: Sweet, Strong & Tight (2014)

Written by bluesever

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1 *Hands Off* 4:22 2 *No Time To Cry* 3:19 3 *Rudy's Blues* 2:42 4 *VooDoo Woman* 3:53
5 *Me & Jesus* 5:10 6 *Rolling Up On Me* 3:45 7 *Love Is After Me* 3:01 8 *Coat & Hat* 4:33
9 *Sweet, Strong & Tight* 3:32 10 *I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down* 3:25 11
SuperBlues 4:26 12 *Memphis Stomp* 3:25 13 *800 Mile Blues* 4:53 Barbara Blue - vocals
Lester Snell - piano (Wurlitzer) Rev Charles Hodges - Hammond B3 Leroy 'Flick' Hodges,
David Smith - bass Michael Tols on - guitar Steve Potts - drums The Royal Horns: - Lannie
McMillan - saxophone - Joe Spake - baritone saxophone - Marc Franklin - trumpet - Steve
Graham, Jason Yasinsky - trombone + Bobby Rush - harp Ronnie Earl - guitar Sonny
Barbato - accordion, piano Dedric Davis - trumpet Cody Dickinson - washboard Shontelle,
Sharisse Norman - backing vocals

Memphis' Barbara Blue has stayed close to home for this album which was recorded at Royal Studios, produced by Lawrence 'Boo' Mitchell and features songs mainly taken from Memphis writers past and present, with Barbara having a hand in five of the songs. As one might expect from the recording location, the album covers a wide range of styles including soul, rock and roll and country.

Demonstrating the variety of the music here Barbara starts with the jump style of Jay McShann's "Hands Off", a song covered by many female singers including Janiva Magness. The horns punctuate the song with some soulful blasts that root the song in Memphis and Bobby Rush's harp solo is the icing on this particular cake. "No Time To Cry" is an interesting song from Joe Sanders which fits Barbara well with its lyrics about making one's way in the music business, Ronnie Earl taking a poised solo in the middle.

"Rudy's Blues" is another strong song lyrically as Barbara tells us about one of the old-time Memphis characters: "Rudy had a three-handed woman, she kept giving him the blues; she was

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right-handed, left-handed and underhanded too.” Guest Dedric Davis adds some fine trumpet playing that also fits with the story of old Rudy. Accordion and shakers give a suitably swampy feel to “Voodoo Woman” before another change of style in the superb “Me And Jesus”. PW Cox’s song has a strong gospel and country feel with rolling piano and churchy organ and talks about belief and whether one needs to demonstrate one’s faith in public: “I talk to God at least once a day and I don’t need anyone to know” sings Barbara before concluding that “Me and Jesus are all right”.

Barbara co-wrote “Rolling Up On Me” which takes us right on to Beale Street with an insistent beat and some soulful guitar and organ rhythm interplay, Ronnie Earl again providing a beautiful solo section. For those of us who developed our musical interests in the 60’s no names are more evocative of Memphis than Hayes, Porter and Cropper and those three are the writers of the funky “Love Is After Me”, a classic piece of Memphis soul. Barbara’s vocals are well supported by the backing vocalists and the horns provide the punch we associate with the heyday of Stax to provide one of the highlight tracks here.

“Coat & Hat” again features the accordion and it’s a strong song (credited to T Plunk) lyrically though Barbara’s deep voice is less suited to this slow country song. The sub-title of the album, “Sweet, Strong And Tight” brings back the horns for a barnstorming tune written by Barbara on her own in which she explains what she can bring to a relationship and Bobby Rush plays the main solo.

Another classic Memphis artist was Ann Peebles and one of her best known songs is covered here. “I’m Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down” is a great song and it suits Barbara’s voice well in a very polished version with wonderful horns. Memphis singer Reba Russell is the writer of “SuperBlues” which brings Bobby Rush back on harp and “Memphis Stomp” is a co-write between Barbara, Lester Snell and Boo Mitchell which pays tribute to the late Willie Mitchell and appropriately has more fine horns.

To close the album “800 Mile Blues” really takes things back to basics on a quiet country blues with minimal instrumentation, just bass and guitar, a tune credited to Barbara and Ronnie Earl.

For this reviewer the highlights here are the tracks with the horns, but Barbara has done a good job in selecting material across styles and making most of them work well so that the album provides something for everyone to enjoy. ---John Mitchell, bluesblastmagazine.com

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