

Kenny Wayne Shepherd - How I Go (2011)

Written by bluesever

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1. *Never Lookin' Back* 2. *Come On Over* 3. *Yer Blues* 4. *Show Me The Way Back Home*
5. *Cold* 6. *Oh, Pretty Woman* 7. *Anywhere The Wind Blows* 8. *Dark Side Of Love* 9. *Heat Of The Sun*
10. *Round And Round* 11. *The Wire* 12. *Who's Gonna Catch You Now* 13. *Backwater Blues*
14. *Strut* 15. *Butterfly* 16. *Cryin' Shame* 17. *Baby The Rain Must Fall*
Kenny Wayne Shepherd (vocals, guitar); Noah Hunt (vocals); Riley Osbourne (Hammond b-3 organ, keyboards); Chris Layton (drums).

Great guitarists are plentiful in the modern rock world, from blues through to country via metal and more. Typically, they're members of a band, their contributions constituents of a broad mix that encompasses several elements, ensuring that no individual persistently dominates. When these guitarists fly solo, though, results can be awfully dull. Slash is awesome surrounded by other talents, but woeful when filling the spotlight himself; Joe Bonamassa is undoubtedly gifted, but frequently tedious outside of collaborative projects. (Please, let's not even start with the whole G3 thing.) Kenny Wayne Shepherd is a similar artist, albeit one yet to present his skills in a non-headlining capacity – he's only ever released material under his own name. *How I Go*, his sixth LP, predictably veers from expressive fret-work which entrances to passages of instances of indulgent tripe liable to leave the listener utterly unmoved.

At this point in his career, Shepherd has nothing to prove regarding his ability – the man knows his way around his instrument like few others, and despite not being able to read a note has made it this far with both critical and commercial success attained. All of his previous long-players have topped the US blues chart, and made minor dents on the Billboard 200. So he's changing his approach somewhat on *How I Go*, a collection that's conservative where past collections revolved around prolonged showboating. Flashes of nimble-fingered dexterity are clearly evident, opener *Never Lookin' Back* slipping into self-gratifying squeals around the two-minute mark and his otherwise gritty cover of *Oh, Pretty Woman* soured somewhat by rather too much fret-fiddling; but on the whole this is a case of songs first, showing off later.

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Admittedly a number of these songs aren't Shepherd's – but his covers are delivered with passion to spare, and they sit neatly enough beside originals which are predominantly tuned to modern pop-country crossover frequencies. One exception is Come On Over, a fairly great rocker that would sound just as sweet in the catalogue of Foo Fighters or Pearl Jam; another, Who's Gonna Catch You Now?, is a big-voiced ballad which could easily transfer to any contemporary pop style and retain its heart whatever the level of Auto-Tune applied. His cover of Bessie Smith's Backwater Blues is a treat, too, its ivory-tinkled intro giving way to some excellent six-string howling.

So while not everything here will click with audiences unfamiliar with blues-cum-country fare, despite this artist's stateside achievements, How I Go is a decent introduction to an artist whose admiration of the likes of BB King and Honeyboy Edwards is steadily producing a comparable catalogue of authentically dusty barroom stompers and unlikely stadium rockers. It's a set that benefits from its maker's restraint – more of the same next time and he'll move closer to the pantheon occupied by Clapton et al. ---Mike Diver, BBC Review

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