

# Living Blues

It shouldn't be surprising news anymore that the blues, contrary to stereotype, has always conveyed a hopeful, even liberatory energy, even if it's often been cloaked in hard-bitten irony. Gospel, of course, arises from a tradition codified by enslaved people who infused clandestine messages of worldly deliverance into their sacred singing. It makes sense then, that at least some blues artists have made peace—albeit sometimes uneasily—between their “sinful” music and the religious teachings with which most of them were raised.

This two-disc compilation gives us blues musicians and singers, both well known and obscure, from multiple eras. Most work in what's usually called a “traditional” or “folk” (i.e., primarily acoustic) style. One, Rev. Gary Davis, provides examples of this dual musical identity as a worldly (often rakish) troubadour and a soldier of the Lord. The others, though, come through only with either secular or sacred material—belying the compilation's stated purpose, perhaps, but not diminishing the set's musical quality.

Some of the offerings will be familiar to many LB readers. Rev. Davis' Candy Man and If I Had My Way are standards, as is Baby Please Don't Go (rendered here by Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee). Louisiana Red is featured on four tracks, one of which pairs him with a remarkably restrained and downhome-sounding Lefty Dizz. However, a lot of what's here will probably come as a surprise. Whether folk singer Jemima James qualifies as a “blues” artist may be questionable, but her hard-bitten timbre and tough lyric realism justify her inclusion. George Higgs, who died in 2013, was a North Carolina-born acoustic guitarist/harpist with an easy-flowing, dexterous style on both instruments, an understated but expressive vocal delivery and lyric style that evoked southern folk-blues traditions.

The Philadelphia-based Wooten Singers offer only one song, His Name is Jesus, but it's melodically rich, vocally powerful and deeply uplifting. Deneen McEachern, another who contributes only one (secular) song, has a resonant alto voice, and she accompanies herself capably with church-flavored piano chording.

This, by necessity, is merely a random sampling of a first-rate, if somewhat eccentric, compilation that aficionados of traditional blues and spiritual music should find satisfying.

—David Whiteis