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phenomena

This compilation is a mixed bag of style and delivery, and mostly delivers quite satisfyingly. Blues fans will spot some pretty illustrious names based on a quick scan of the personnel, and it's hard not to argue that luminaries like Reverend Gary Davis and Brownie McGhee steal the show. The former in particular is all over this comp, and several of his performances are genuinely memorable. He is incomparable on "If I Had My Way," a great feature for his distinctive guitar style (as is the instrumental "I Didn't Want to Join the Band"). And his performances here cover a lot of emotional territory. He's fantastic and introspective on "Blues in E," followed up by the hollering "Crucifixion" and a 6-minute (mostly) spoken sermon. Later he delivers a wonderfully raw "Come Down and See Me Sometime" and a majestic falsetto performance on "Candy Man." Throughout, he's raw, direct, and unadorned, his intense vocals energizing "When the Moon Goes Down," "Jesus Met the Woman at the Well," "Steal Away and Pray," and "Let Us Walk Together." George Higgs also turns in several earthy, gravely performances. Best is "Who Told You Woman" (with this killer line: "I cook my food on a hot plate right here in my room. I burnt your picture yesterday, I burn your clothes up soon"), with its sweet dobro, but nearly as good are "Sweet Little Girl," "Honey Good Honey," and the swinging "I Wonder What I Mean to You." There's some understated stuff from Brownie McGhee on "Rainy Day" and McGhee sounds great alongside Sonny Terry on a somewhat laconic reading of "Baby Please Don't Go." There's further traditionalism from oldsters Louisiana Red and Lefty Dizz on "Going Train Blues," and from Red alone on the slide feature "Walk All Over Georgia," the infectious "Tell Me Who," and the grooving "Mayor Beame." Like much of the music on this collection, the arrangements are smart and the performances unvarnished. Less known to me were The Wooten Singers (who turn in a rousing "His Name is Jesus"), Malenky and Terry (the fun "One Woman Man"), and the almost country-ish singers Deneen McEachern and Jemima James. The latter has several strong moments, getting close to Emmylou Harris territory on "I Wish I'd Gone to Birmingham" and "I Got Him Now," among others. While I was never quite certain as to the logic of who got included on this comp, it's hard to knock the quality of the music. Recommended.

—Jason Bivins