



Rob Stone
Back Around Here
Earwig Music Company
www.earwigmusic.com

Not being from Chicago, or up on the local blues scene there I discovered Rob Stone on the new Chris James/Patrick Rynn Earwig release *Gonna Boogie Anyway* and was suitably impressed. Patrick and Chris were part of Rob's band the C-Notes on his 2003 Earwig CD *Just My Luck* and both contribute to *Back Around Here* with Rynn playing bass throughout and James adding guitar to all; but tow of the dozen tracks. James and Rynn also have co-writing credits on the eight originals as well as producing the project. Other notable guests are drummers Sam Lay and Willie "Big Eyes" Smith, with pianist David Maxwell helping out as well. Rob's vocals are top drawer, smooth and emotive and he has harp chops to spare. On the Texas shuffle of the title track Rob's vocals remind me of one of my favorite vocalists, JW Jones. Rob brings some of his big toned muscular harp to John Lee "Sonny Boy" Williamson's immortal "Love You For Myself" with Chicago veteran Aaron Moore on piano and Big Eyes setting the meter. On the fast paced instrumental, "Dragon Killers" Rob shows his mettle on harp with Lay and Maxwell driving the beat. This CD is retro enough to please even the most avid traditionalist yet not slavishly copying anything and there is plenty going on to keep it fresh and vital. Rob Stone is the real deal and so is *Back Around Here* and I highly recommend this CD. Malcolm Kennedy



Joe Louis Walker's Blues Conspiracy
Live on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise
Stony Plain Records
www.stonyplainrecords.com

Playing professionally since he was 14, Joe Louis Walker is no overnight sensation. Over a long career, the nominations and awards have rolled in with Grammy and BMAs (his first was in 1988 for Contemporary Male Artist) including five more BMA nominations this year, second only to Buddy Guy's 45. Walker's *Between A Rock and the Blues* received the 2010 BMA Blues Album of the Year and with *Live on the Legendary Rhythm & Blues Cruise* Walker re-visits two previous projects from the 1990's: *Live at Slim's Vol. 1 & 2* and a guest artist project, *Great Guitars*. With *Live on the LRBC* Joe displays his talent and charisma as a live performer and also gives yet another porthole for us who' not been on a blues cruise. Unlike festivals where over several days you may see 20-30 different bands; but each playing typically once in their allotted time slot, on a cruise over the course of a week the bands play multiple times in different time slots and stages plus play in the pro-am jams. (See jam host Randy Oxford about this.) I will make special note of a few cuts, but you will want to get a copy of *Live on the LRBC* so you can hear for yourself. Walker and harmonica killer Jason Ricci breathe new life into the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's "Born in Chicago" penned by Nick Gravenites. On "You're Gonna Make Me Cry" Curtis and Mike Finnegan bring some serious soul vocals, and on "Eyes like a Cat," Deana Bogart, Keith Crossan and Tom Poole provide slick R&B horns while Tommy Castro gets slinky on the six string. Joe slows things down and bends some strings on "Sugar Mama" while Watermelon Slim provides accents, warbles, shrieks and moans on the blues harp. A must for blues fans and blues cruisers. - Malcolm Kennedy



Megan McCormick
Honest Words
Rykopress
www.rykopress.com

Upon first listen to the debut CD *Honest Words* from Megan McCormick you are immediately struck by her voice: so powerful, rich and clear, reminiscent of KD Lang and Patsy Cline. You keep listening and hear this amazing guitar, a mixture of Mark Knopfler and Steve Ray Vaughn. Then the words hit you with waves of torment, soul searching and melancholic, lamenting of life, love, loss and salvation. And when you realize it's all her, you get, like the first track says, a "Shiver." McCormick was born in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho and raised in Wasilla, Alaska and now based in Nashville after attending East Tennessee State University's acclaimed bluegrass program. She displays her schooled talents not only for vocals and guitar, but also mandolin, lap steel and bass-- proof that encouraging young women to pursue their musical aspirations is far from folly and electric guitar is not just a man's world. Megan's songwriting is what separates her most from the crop of young guitar slingers and divas. At 23, she paints a picture of-a life already full of the joy and pain often found in the writing of artists twice her age. After being brought up with a family of musicians who most certainly reared her on a diet of Bob Dylan, Nina Simone, and Joni Mitchell, she is fearless in revealing her musical breadth and emotional intensity. From the gritty blues of "Shiver" and "Drifting," to the rocking stomp of "Addiction," the classic torch song "Lonely Tonight," and the high lonesome sound of "Wasted", the landscape of lush textures brings out the best of each song. Kudos to Ryko Press for pairing McCormick with Grammy winning producer Dave O'Donnell and allowing them create and album that isn't formulaic or genre-specific, *Honest Words* is rooted in blues, country and jazz and full of "Honest Words." - Rick J Bowen



James Cotton
Giant
Alligator Records
www.alligator.com

James "Mr. Superharp" Cotton is celebrating his 75th birthday this year, but his latest CD, *Giant*, belies the fact that he's been performing since age nine under the tutelage of Rice Miller (Sonny Boy Williamson). *Giant* features a dozen cuts, and Slam Allen and Tom Holland share guitar duties, with Noel Neal and Kenny Neal, Jr., providing the foundation on bass and drums. James doesn't sing on this CD, leaving the vocals to his talented band. When he picks up the harp, though, get ready for a great ride. The uptempo "With the Quickness" is a real scorcher – and it's one of the three new and original songs of the dozen that's on this CD. Standards like "Sad, Sad Day," "How Blues Can You Get" and "Buried Alive in the Blues" get the expert Superharp treatment, and whenever I return to this CD, I play the songs written by Muddy Waters first. "Find Yourself Another Fool" and "Going Down Main Street" are standout cuts for me for the way James' tight ensemble wraps itself around his harp attack. *Giant* is dedicated to James Cotton's Alligator labelmate Koko Taylor. If any song rises to the top for me, it's "Blues for Koko." "Blues for Koko" offers classic, post-war Chicago blues lines that capture James' obvious affection and respect for the Queen of the Blues. Next Spring, James will be at Skagit Valley Community College on March 11th – make your plans now to experience a true giant of the blues! – Eric Steiner