

## Joe Louis Walker – Hellfire (2012)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Hellfire* (4:48) 02. *I Won't Do That* (5:01) 03. *Ride All Night* (4:24) 04. *I'm On To You* (3:30) 05. *What's It Worth* (6:17) 06. *Soldier For Jesus* (5:50) 07. *I Know Why* (5:13) 08. *Too Drunk To Drive Drunk* (3:57) 09. *Black Girls* (5:23) 10. *Don't Cry* (5:00) 11. *Movin' On* (4:35)

Joe Louis Walker - Composer, Guitar, Harmonica, Slide Guitar, Vocals Max Abrams - Saxophone Roy Agee - Trombone John D'Amato - Guitar Tom Hambridge - Drums, Mixing, Percussion, Producer The Jordanares - Vocals (Background) Tommy Macdonald - Bass Rob McNelley - Guitar (Electric) Wendy Moten - Vocals (Background) Matt White - Trumpet Reese Wynans - Hammond B3, Piano

There's no question that Joe Louis Walker deserves all the attention he should receive with his first Alligator release. Through sheer persistence and hard work, Walker has as much if not more cred, talent, and journeyman status than any other blues player of his generation. In addition, he's been releasing albums since 1986, making this one -- somewhere around his 25th -- an impressive achievement in itself. Entering his early sixties, Walker clearly decided that upping the energy, volume, and rock elements was a conduit for the commercial acceptance that has heretofore eluded him. So he joined with veteran producer/drummer Tom Hambridge, whose work with Buddy Guy proves that he knows his way around hot guitarists aiming to increase their marketplace visibility. The result is an often relentlessly busy recording that frequently feels forced, strained, and pushed to the edge, not necessarily in a good way. As Walker should know at this stage in his career, intensity in the blues world doesn't equate with playing and singing louder than the other guy. It has more to do with dynamics and subtleties in the vocals and performance. Both are, if not entirely lost, often absent on this well meaning but somewhat misguided album, which seldom mines the natural soul/blues/gospel groove Walker is capable of. The opening title track kicks off with crisp church-inspired beats, organ, and fine-tuned lyrics about good and evil, but loses the plot with Walker, who shouts more than sings, and displays a fret-slashing, wah-wah-enhanced, Hendrix-drenched guitar solo that's overwrought and undercooked. Walker is talented enough not to scream or fret-shred to make his point, something that Hambridge doesn't seem to grasp as everything is ramped up to 10 on the majority of these eleven songs, seven of which were penned or co-written by Walker. The guitarist's religious roots are covered on "Soldier for Jesus," and he even heads into more

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polished R&B territory for the "love-will-keep-you-alive ballad" "I Know Why," the album's most tranquil track also nearly derailed by Walker's smooth vocals that devolve into vein-popping utterances as the song progresses. That approach is more appropriate for the following Bob Seger-styled "Too Drunk to Drive Drunk," a simplistic yet energetic rocker likely crafted for concert singalongs by intoxicated crowds. Much better is "Don't Cry," a slick funkier of the Johnny "Guitar" Watson variety that rides a slinky groove with backing soul singing providing the spiritual relevance. Elsewhere, on "What It's Worth," Walker's sharp, lyrical observations about success begin with a throbbing heartbeat of bass but quickly escalate into another volcanic explosion of notes that loses the stripped-down grit they started with. On "Black Girls," he praises the titular females for adding soul to music, then negates his words with a somewhat soul-less slide workout that, along with the backing vocals, makes the tune cluttered and too long. A closing cover of Hank Snow's "I'm Moving On" shows how comfortably Walker adapts the country standard to a blues/gospel format without losing the original's straightforward yet effective concepts. Walker and Hambridge are seasoned pros, and with fellow road warrior Reese Wynans (Stevie Ray Vaughan) along on keyboards, everything is expertly played. But the album tries too hard to make its points, generally misplacing Walker's organic, rootsy appeal and obvious talents in the process. While it might indeed open him up to a larger audience, it does so at the expense of what makes Joe Louis Walker one of the finest living blues musicians. --- Hal Horowitz, allmusic.com

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