Harrison Kennedy - Shame The Devil (2011)

01. Cats In The Window (2:58) 02. Trouble (4:26) 03. Hound And Rabbit (4:39) 04. Shame The Devil (3:47) 05. That's Just Stupid (4:39) 06. How Long (3:20) 07. Musta Bin The Devil (3:21) 08. Hard Time Blues (3:14) 09. Snakes Lie (3:09) 10. Music To My Ears (3:04) 11. Fo' Day Train (4:52) 12. Stay (2:54) 13. Shake Em Free (4:12) 14. You Don't Know Me (3:18)
Harrison Kennedy - Vocals, guitar, slide guitar, harmonica, banjo, mandolin, percussion Keith 'Happy' Lindsay - Keyboards, accordian, percussion Alec Fraser - Bass Matt King - Electric guitar

A couple of earlier solo projects by Harrison Kennedy which I have, marked him out as a decent vocalist and player with good writing skills. With blues as a base those songs nibbled away at the strict definition in interesting and entertaining ways. They are part of a career that started in Chairmen of the Board and progressed chameleon-like with ease through a number of genres: blues, soul, funk, folk and jazz.

His own gifts have again produced neatly concise story songs: ‘Shame The Devil’ has a baker’s dozen of original songs and a cover of the Ray Charles’ hit, ‘You Don’t Know Me’. Ironically it’s an apposite title that may caution the casual browser. Happily in every sense of the definition, this is a blues album using standard instrumentation (guitar, harp, bass, and drums) and arrangements. For example ‘Trouble’ is just voice, guitar and harp in down and dirty style; it comes after a finely observed piece on how a policeman in a doughnut shop can find temporary refuge from the daily grind. ‘Nappy’ Lindsay’s accordion drives ‘Hound And Rabbit’, which is a cross between Sonny and Brownie and Clifton Chenier, and the sense of a man chasing his woman at speed is kept going with banjo and spoons.

The way to ‘Shame The Devil’ is to tell the truth, there’s an atmosphere of uneasy truce for the song conjured by swirling B3 and harp fills – if you’re a fan of True Blood you’ll get the sound

picture they create. Harrison sings with graceful agony and frustration on ‘That’s Just Stupid’ with the wisdom of being a certain age and the unfathomable deeds around him – only Curtis Mayfield could do it as effectively as this. The liner notes mention Memphis Minnie in connection with ‘How Long’, the arrangement has audible roots in that era and Kennedy keens through it precisely with his falsetto. The Devil is the focus for your daily tribulations – or not – in ‘Musta Bin The Devil’; here organ and banjo reminded me of Otis Taylor’s banjo project (this time with really forceful singing too).

‘Hard Times Blues’ is one of those songs not tied to a specific era, making it as valid in 2012 as 1932. ‘Snakes Lie’ has the harp mixed a tad too far back whereas ‘Music To My Ears’ does the same to the vocals. Two fine songs in need of a tweak on the console to really bring out what each one is saying. The well-worn tale of a man leaving his woman behind to find work is told again on ‘Fo Day Train’ and Harrison performs both male and female parts on the wry ‘Stay’. I just noticed the first-named track has the only electric guitar solo on the album, its neat tidy and to the point proving that extended virtuoso performances do not good blues make. B3 and harp again combine on ‘Stay’ and the accordion and ‘Stranger Here’ motif on ‘Shake ‘Em Free’ rounds off a remarkably good set of self-penned pieces.

Ray Charles is one of Kennedy’s favourite artists so he has a version of ‘You Don’t Know Me’ tucked in at track number 14. It breaks the mood a bit; perhaps that was the intention. It gets an urbane approach not unlike Nat King Cole atop solo keyboards leaving the album on a down note.

In an environment obsessed with image and reality television, I found ‘Shame the Devil’ an unexpected gem, restoring my faith in the relevance of simply written, keenly observed, well-played songs from a man now at the top of his game. --- BLUES & RHYTHM, BRITAIN'S TOP BLUES MAG!, harrisonkennedy.ca

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