

Johnny Mastro & Mama's Boys - Never Trust The Living (2016)

Written by bluesever

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01. Snake Doctor (2:18) 02. Whiskey (3:41) 03. Judgement Day (6:37) 04. Monkey Man (3:21) 05. Don't Believe (2:50) 06. House of the Rising Sun (3:39) 07. Walking (3:22) 08. Never Trust the Living (3:11) 09. Bucksnot Annie (2:39) 10. Sad Night Owl (3:29) 11. Indrid Cold (3:30) Johnny Mastro (vocals, harp) Smokehouse (guitar) Dean Zucchero (bass) Rob Lee (drums)

They hole up on Frenchman, mainly at the Apple Barrel, with occasional forays into Mid City's heart of darkness. They hail from New York's East Village, and they interned at Los Angeles' famed Babe's and Ricky's Inn. So what city does this power trio with a +1 sound like? Chicago.

Specifically, Mastro and his boys sound like Chicago blues, authentic enough to turn a Freddie King standard into a Little Walter-style harp instrumental and yet delivered with the kind of volume, grit, and wonderful irreverence that finds them wandering into the backyards of alt-blues legends like Black Keys or the Jon Spencer Blues Explosion. They play it straighter than any postpunk blues rockers ever could, though, allowing just enough stylistic room for everything to breathe. It's jukey but totally unselfconscious about it, the kind of music that makes you feel somebody in the bar is maybe already getting laid.

Mastro's harp is the centerpiece of authenticity on their debut's nine solid originals; if his vocals didn't ditch that cartoony blackface white rockers mistake for credibility and go with his inner Jack White nerd, and Smokehouse Brown's guitar wasn't afraid to take some nearly pure-noise turns on tracks like "Judgement Day," you might be left with some pretty standard (albeit fiery) blues shuffles ("Walking" keeps threatening to become "Sweet Home Chicago" in the choruses).

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But then there's that rough and ready yet somewhat out-of-place rockabilly raveup "Bucksnot Annie" and an instrumental cover of "House of the Rising Sun" that bets you'll ID it on the Animals' famous chord arrangement alone. (They're right.) And speaking of "Judgement Day," its stomp proves so hard, its Canned Heat psych so hazy, that it flies right off the dirt road and into the swamp. Sweating hard where lesser bands merely strain, "Don't Trust the Living" is fascinatingly uncategorizable for a blues-rock release, cutting the line between the Chicago juke and the hipster club finer than it's been cut in years. ---Robert Fontenot, offbeat.com

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