

Low Society - Sanctified (2017)

Written by bluesever

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01. *Angel From Montgomery* 02. *Raccoon Song* 03. *The Freeze* 04. *Sanctified* 05. *River Of Tears* 06. *Nina* 07. *Drowning Blues* 08. *New York City Boy #3* 09. *Here Comes The Flood* 10. *I'd Rather Be Blind* Miss Mandy Lemons - Vocals Sturgis Nikides - Guitars, Vocals Jacky Verstraeten - Bass Rick Steff - Organ, Piano, Accordion Herman Green - Saxophones, Vocals Bart De Bruecker - Drums

Low Society's 2014 release *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (2014, Ice House Records) was a revelation to me. I had long ago grown jaded believing that vibrant, genre-expanding blues and Americana had passed into extinction. Then I heard "Need Your Love," my ears stiffened and I sniffed the air... hmm, something special here. I previously described this most perfect of compositions as,

"a most brilliant eutectoid of Texas Blues and pre-Weimar cabaret, with [Mandy] Lemons a Southern Fried Marlene Dietrich strung out on absinthe and gris-gris and [Sturgis] Nikides a demented Django plucking his nuclear strings."

After having given the band's first recording, *High Time* (2011, Rezonate Records), a thorough listening, what I was hearing in that "pre-Weimar cabaret" was actually a creative interpolation of Eastern Europe and parts further into this most American of musics. Several exchanges with guitarist Sturgis Nikides revealed that he and his family were of "Byzantine extraction," revealing the source of this rich vein of regional harmony passing through his most compelling compositions.

This Byzantine thread may be heard most potently passing through the introduction of High

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Time's slow burning "Texas Goodnight," passing through Good Woman's "Need Your Love," arriving in the present Sanctified's "The Freeze." In a separate William-Faulkner-stream-of-consciousness exchange, Nikides spoke of another influence in these songs, that of a young Jimmy Page playing "White Summer" on the Yardbirds Live Yardbirds, featuring Jimmy Page (Epic, 1971). This was a soundboard recording of dubious pedigree, recorded at the Anderson Theatre in New York City on March 30, 1968, revealed a fully realized gem in the Eastern Indian and Arabic influenced "White Summer."

Well known in serious musical crowds, this performance featured a 24-year old Page already fully formed. In "White Summer" one can hear the echoes of what would become the classic sound of Led Zeppelin (Led Zeppelin IV (Atlantic, 1971); Houses of the Holy (Swan Song, 1973); and Physical Graffiti (Swan Song, 1975)). Of "White Summer," Nikides reveals:

"THIS is what initially set me off, as a very eager 12-year old (1970). ["White Summer] [c]aught my fancy, and I've been working variations of it ever since. Page used a DADGAD tuning. I modified it -DADACD. This is where "Black Pelican" (from High Time) and now "Nina" came from, in that tuning, directly referencing "White Summer..." Yardbirds Live at the Anderson Theater [an alternate title of the recording referenced above] was the album. Still gives me goosebumps."

That is how music is supposed to make you feel.

And it did me, when I queued up the present Low Society recording, Sanctified. Nikides the producer is an excellent producer, having programmed excellent opening songs for each of the band's recordings and Sanctified is no exception. This disc opens with a searing treatment of John Prine's "Angel from Montgomery." But, if you, gentle listener, are expecting some Kilz-coated Bonnie Raitt knock-off, then you will be presently surprised to hear the powerhouse within the band, Mandy Lemons (Nikides), and how she transforms the song. While Nikides (the guitarist) appeals to the intelligent pathos, Lemons reaches right down and grabs the listener by her/his lady-or man-parts, giving them a healthy torque. Yes, now she has your proper attention.

Nikides wills the introduction of Prine's song out of thin air, preparing a proper surrounding for Lemons' sensitive and muscular vocals. Lemons imbues the lyrics with an emotional urgency tempered with experience that never lost its hope. When the pair roll into the chorus, that is when the real goosebumps occur. As Lemons reveals her naked desire and memory, Nikides perfectly propels her with surging slide riffs peppered with open-string diamonds reverberating.

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My previous summation of Mandy Lemons was one of beautifully unhinged abandon. And as powerfully attractive as that is, it is not fair. The high-wire aspect of any performance or expression is the ability to push that performance or expression to the brink of bedlam and keeping there without falling prey to the bedlam. In this, Lemons has no peer. Nikides and Lemons are textbook synergy, making something eclipsing the sum of their separate parts. That is the stuff "Angel from Montgomery" is made of.

One of the major charms of this recording is its honest organicity woven into its harmonically and melodically sophisticated core. "The Freeze" boasts a soundtrack panorama built on a hypnotic two-chord vamp over which Lemons describes an emotive stasis of frigid proportions. Beneath this angst, Nikides' precise slide guitar keeps the fertile sound fresh. A country mile away is the title piece, a Texas Two-step sermon composed on the grave of Elmore James, Lemons declaring to all to, ... "take it easy." Nikides' slide guitar style is studiously informed and honed to the point that it is all his. His knowledge and technical ability is on the plain with Sonny Landreth's. This is further illustrated on "River of Tears," where Nikides' slide work is integrated into a 1950s-era ballad sound reminiscent of Santo and Johnny.

The aforementioned "Nina" is the disc's spiritual center point, bearing the fragrance of Page's "White Summer," but transmogrifying into something more, something bigger. Nikides lays electric slide guitar over his deft acoustic guitar foundation creating a dream-like state for Lemons to rage into the darkness. Sonically stunning, Nikides' slide guitar at once recalls Ry Cooder's contribution to "Sister Morphine" and Jimmy Page's rumination on the "Gallows Pole." Lemons ends the song with the echo of Nina Simone... "Mississippi Goddamn." At the other end of the organic spectrum is the New Orleans infused "Here Comes the Flood" a sweaty and humid shuffle straight out of Cosimo Matassa's NOLA studio.

The disc closes with Etta James' "I'd Rather Be Blind," a solid vehicle for Lemons, who draws every bit of ache from the lyrics, suspending them over Nikides's certain slide guitar playing. The pair tie a perfect ribbon around these 10 finely crafted songs with this old song. It is a beautiful package of Americana. ---C. Michael Bailey, allaboutjazz.com

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