

Raven ☐ – Back To Ohio Blues (1975)

Written by bluesever

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A1 Can't You See 5:03 A2 Raven Mad Jam 8:10 A3 Don't You Feel 4:51 B1 War With My Soul 3:25 B2 Back To Ohio Blues 13:12 Raven - performer Recorded in 1975 at Owl Studios, Columbus Ohio.

After he finished his damaged-biker Back to Ohio Blues LP in 1975, the man known as Raven gave away most of the few hundred copies that were pressed. The little-heard album was both of its time and timeless. Today, after it's reached a wider audience, mostly via word of mouth and the internet, it seems to hold an ethereal psychic influence over all the great lo-fi stoner music that's emanated during the past 30 years from Raven's hometown of Columbus, Ohio. ---discogs.com

The “Back to Ohio Blues” LP by Raven (that’s one man’s pseudonym, not a band name) might be the ultimate non-commercial 70s American rock record, unintentionally putting the most ardent anarchist punk bands to shame. Why? Raven never sold a single copy of the original LP—though he’s making up for it by this ~\$20 reissue! “Back to Ohio Blues” was purely a vanity pressing, meant for friends, comrades, and maybe former cellmates. I imagine most of the original copies have smack/crank/blow/weed residue ground into the grooves and/or were tossed to the curb when the biker who owned the LP skipped town. I’m not sure Raven could’ve sold many at the time, though, because this burnt-out, histrionic, bluesy hard rock strikes me as a Led Zeppelin fan’s bad dream, like if Zep were lobotomized (if only), left with only the most rudimentary shell of its former self—fucking, drugging, the blues, and nary an extended metaphor to be found. That said, Raven’s backing band, with Raven singing and wylin’ out on the 6-string, managed to produce a convincing and competent stripped-down sound, especially considering the LP recording was the only time the band played together.

I have already noted my aversion to the blues injected into hard rock, and the LP's 13-minute title track is an extended, slow blues number with the improvised lyrical lament of a drugged-out white loonie. The best part is Raven's ravin', which can't possibly be construed as singing. The other four tracks are superior in my opinion—ranging from less than three and a half minutes to just over eight—more direct and riffier. "Can't You See" is a slow, grinding tale of woe, sung by a guy whose heart has not just been broken but was ripped from his chest and hurled under the wheels of a passing semi. Still, the rampant guitar soloing shows that there might still be some life left in him. This song has two mismatched vocal tracks and the guitars pan continuously, heightening the feeling of drunkenness, the stupor that would surely follow a hard-luck cat like Raven finding his girlfriend in the sack with another guy. The upbeat "Raven Mad Jam" is the highlight of the record, with its angry, punky interpretation of James Brown. Rather than repeating coded phrases like "sock it to me," Raven dispenses with the artifice and says things like "You gotta get fucked" and "You gotta get high" over and over, atop a driving rhythm. After an extended drum solo, a totally different, acoustic tune ensues, with slightly more staid lyrics like "Let's go and get it on." The three parts of the song could be likened to the series of craving a fix, getting that fix, and basking in the high that results. Next up, "Don't You Feel It," is a mellower psych track, with what seems like a west-coast influence. The lyrics reflect the gloomy atmosphere of the mid 70s, after the promise of the 60s had evaporated and economic and political torpor had set in. Raven's disaffected, anxious singing contributes to that feeling. Finally, "War With Your Souls," the shortest track, which shares a side with the longest, synthesizes all of Raven's concerns—drugs, sex, and depression—describing how he suffers but struggles on. The tune is probably the most straight-forward hard rock tune on the album, but it is still a long distance from the overproduced stadium rock of the era. Had rock of the 70s all been as honest and simple as Raven's LP, as close to the imagination and lives of the average listener, we may never have needed the punk revolution. Thankfully, Raven was unique.

This record, from 1975, could be considered a progenitor to the unique admixture of forward-looking sound and retrograde, gutter lyrical subject-matter associated with rocknroll from Ohio. Raven doesn't approach the cerebral proto-punk of a band like Pere Ubu in any way; rather, the darkness, nihilism, and desperation of Electric Eels or even H-100s, as well as the fuck-you-I'm-gonna-do-it-my-way independence of Vertical Slit or Mike Rep, are apparent here. (Mike Rep wrote the liner notes to this reissue; although they're enthusiastic, writing basement guitar riffs is clearly his forte.) The context of Mike Rep's "Rocket to Nowhere" and "Mama Was a Schitzo," both cream-of-the-crop skeletal early punk songs recorded circa 1975, comes into focus listening to Raven. This record doesn't diminish the shit-fi achievement of Raven's Columbus compatriot, but rather, when listening to them side-by-side, affinities emerge that make punk rock's musical rupture less stark than we often consider it to be. Ohio from 1975 to 1978, when "Rocket To Nowhere" was released, was a long way from Kings Road or even The Bowery, but knowing that the Velvets played in Ohio often and Iggy & co. began only three and a half hours away, I would like to think that Johnny Ramone or Johnny Rotten would have heard a sound in both Raven and Mike Rep and the Quotas that made sense to them and their

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respective interpretations of what would be named punk rock.

This official reissue has excellent sound quality, mastered from the original tapes. The jacket, signed and numbered out of 800, is not an exact reproduction of the original, but it works. Original copies of the LP are impossible to find, but the 90s reissue on Rockadelic shows up for sale from time to time for between \$50 and \$100 or more. That reissue had a weird purple, flowery cover that contradicted the darkness contained on the grooves. Now that this reissue has come out, no one need seek the Rockadelic pressing. ---shit-fi.com

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