Robert Cray - 30 Most Slow Blues (2017)

01. Smoking Gun 02. You Move Me 03. I'm a Good Man 04. Twenty 05. Fantasized 06. I Was Warned 07. My Problem 08. Divided Heart 09. Labor of Love 10. One More Kiss 11. Right Next Door 12. 12 Year Old Boy 13. Back Door Slam 14. Bouncin' Back 15. Hold On 16. Sitting on Top of the World 17. A Whole Lotta Pride 18. Angel of Mercy 19. One in the Middle 20. Sleeping in the Ground 21. The Things You Do to Me 22. What Would You Say 23. A Picture of a Broken Heart 24. Nice as a Fool Can Be 25. You're Everything 26. Watch Me Baby 27. Collins Instrumental Jam 28. Time Makes Two 29. The Score 30. Poor Johnny

Tin-eared critics have frequently damned him as a yuppie blues wannabe whose slickly soulful offerings bear scant resemblance to the real down-home item. In reality, Robert Cray is one of a precious few young blues-based artists with the talent and vision to successfully usher the idiom into the 21st century without resorting either to slavish imitation or simply playing rock while passing it off as blues. Just as importantly, his immensely popular records helped immeasurably in jump-starting the contemporary blues boom that still holds sway to this day. Blessed with a soulful voice that sometimes recalls '60s great O.V. Wright and a concise lead guitar approach that never wastes notes, Cray's rise to international fame was indeed a heartwarming one. For a guy whose 1980 debut album for Tomato, Who's Been Talkin', proved an instant cutout, his ascendancy was amazingly swift -- in 1986 his breakthrough Strong Persuader album for Mercury (containing "Smoking Gun") won him a Grammy and shot his asking price for a night's work skyward.

Cray was born on August 1, 1953 in Columbus, Georgia. An Army brat who grew up all over the country before his folks settled in Tacoma, Washington in 1968, Cray listened intently to soul and rock before becoming immersed in the blues (in particular, the icy Telecaster of Albert Collins, who played at Cray's high school graduation). Cray formed his first band with longtime bassist Richard Cousins in 1974 . They soon hooked up with Collins as his backup unit before breaking out on their own. The cinematic set caught a brief glimpse of Cray (even if they weren't

aware of it) when he anonymously played the bassist of the frat party band Otis Day & the Knights in National Lampoon's Animal House. Cray's Tomato set, also featuring the harp of Curtis Salgado, was an excellent beginning, but it was the guitarist's 1983 set for HighTone, Bad Influence, that really showed just how full of talent Cray was. Another HighTone set, False Accusations, preceded the emergence of the Grammy-winning 1985 guitar summit meeting album Showdown! for Alligator, which found the relative newcomer more than holding his own alongside Collins and Texan Johnny Copeland. Strong Persuader earned two Grammys in two years and made Cray a familiar face even on video-driven MTV.

Unlike many of his peers, Cray continued to experiment within his two presiding genres, blues and soul, on sets for Mercury such as Midnight Stroll in 1990, I Was Warned in 1992, and Shame + a Sin in 1993. After switching to Rykodisc in the late '90s, Cray released Take Your Shoes Off in 1999 and Shoulda Been Home in 2001, proving that the "bluenatics" (as he amusedly labels his purist detractors) have nothing to fear and plenty to anticipate from this innovative, laudably accessible guitarist. Touring regularly with the likes of Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan, Cray stayed active in the studio as well, signing with Sanctuary Records and releasing Time Will Tell in 2003, Twenty in 2005, a pair of live albums, Live from Across the Pond in 2006 and Live at the BBC in 2008, and This Time, which was issued by Vanguard Records a year later.

Cray released his third live album in four years, Cookin' in Mobile, in 2010. The material featured on the album was taken from a single performance at the Saenger Theatre in Mobile, Alabama in February of that year. The Kevin Shirley-produced Nothin But Love, a solid outing featuring narrative songs that circled around the trials and tribulations of love, appeared in 2012. Nearly two years later, he announced the details of In My Soul, his 17th album with the Robert Cray Band. Released in the spring of 2014, In My Soul saw Cray reuniting with producer Steve Jordan, who had previously helmed Take Your Shoes Off, and settling into a deep, soulful groove. In My Soul topped Billboard's blues chart, and on its supporting tour Cray gave a celebratory 40th anniversary concert that was recorded and released in 2015 as 4 Nights and 40 Years Live. In 2016, he worked once again with producer Jordan on an album recorded with the Hi Rhythm Section in the label's old studio in Memphis. Aptly titled Robert Cray & Hi Rhythm, the album appeared in April 2017. ---Bill Dahl, allmusic.com

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