

Erin Harpe And The Delta Swingers - Big Road (2017)

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1 Kokomo 5:34 2 Lonely Leavin' Town 5:55 3 Big Road 4:13 4 Frankie 3:43 5 Shake Your Hips 8:23 6 Casey Jones 3:59 7 Voodoo Blues 3:38 8 Stop & Listen 3:03 9 Guilty 2:25 10 Gimme That (Somethin' Special) 6:37 Erin Harpe - vocals, guitars, percussion, washboard Jim Countryman - bass, ukulele Kendall Divoll - drums Matt "Charles" Prozialek - harmonica Michael Casavant - accordion, organ

Erin Harpe grew up with the Washington D.C. acoustic blues scene, and her latest VizzTone album with the Delta Swingers, *Big Road*, is a raucous collection of electrified delta blues that evolved from her youthful interests. This Boston-based band gigs constantly, and they took time out after this year's International Blues Challenge to lay down some tracks. This disc was cut live in the studio, with just a few overdubs, so they could preserve their stage energy for eternity. The results are very good and they made it to the semi-finals of the IBC, so it was a pretty good month for the band!

Harpe is a guitarist and vocalist who was raised in a musical family, as her father is visual artist and guitarist Neil Harpe. It is apparent that the apple did not fall far from the tree: Erin has her own distinctive style with authentic vocals and a marvelous guitar technique, including very good finger-picking. This has not gone unnoticed, and she was asked to put together an excellent DVD lesson for Stan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, *Women of the Country Blues Guitar*.

The disc starts out with Mississippi Fred McDowell's "Kokomo," and the band turns this hill-country classis into an electrified chunk of delta-inspired rock. Harpe's voice is hearty with plenty of character, and her slide guitar work is very respectable. The backline of Countryman and Divoll keep things moving, while Prozialek's harmonica provides a sweet counterpoint to the guitar leads. This is followed up by a beautiful original, "Lonely Leavin' Town," which has a

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more stripped down and laid back feel, which allows the harmonica a little more room in the mix. Casavant sets the mood on this one with his organ and there is a marvelous groove to this tune, plus a melody that stays in the mind long after the song has ended.

The other Harpe-penned tunes are well written, too. "Voodoo Blues" is an upbeat piece of rockabilly with a New Orleans feel, and it features squeezebox from Casavant, a classic blues bass line from Countryman and plenty of honking harp from Prozialek. His harmonica tone carries over to "Stop & Listen," a fast boogie that is led by Divoll's snare. Erin carries both the rhythm and lead guitar parts, and her vocals are phrased perfectly so that they become like another one of the instruments, which is a an alluring effect. The last of the originals is "Gimme That," a song that Erin first recorded with Countryman in her old band, Lovewhip, and this semi-psychedelic fusion jam proves to be a fascinating and fun coda.

The covers are a neat collection of songs from the delta and elsewhere, and one of the standouts is the title track. Tommy Johnson's "Big Road" has the same spirit as the original, but this time it is delivered with reworked lyrics and a country blues feel. Another winner is Mississippi John Hurt's 1928 classic, "Frankie," which is stripped back to acoustic guitar and harmonica, allowing the listener to hear Erin sing the tragic story of two lovers. Erin also does a soulful acoustic take of Randy Newman's "Guilty," which was first recorded by Bonny Raitt in 1973, and the simplicity of this track is a lovely contrast to the high energy that Harpe exhibits for the rest of the album.

Big Road from Erin Harpe and the Delta Swingers is a very cool piece of work, and if you are a fan of modern electric roots and blues, you will find a lot to enjoy here. The band has successfully avoided the "sophomore slump," and if you want to see them in person they have a lot of shows to choose from in the Northeast before the end of the year. Give their new album a listen and try to make it out to one of their gigs – it will definitely be a blast! ---Rex Bartholomew, bluesblastmagazine.com

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