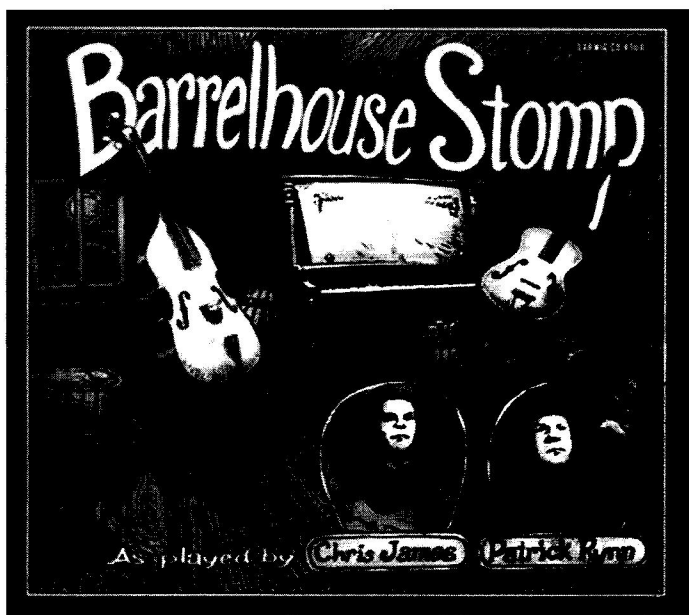


Chris James and Patrick Rynn: *Barrelhouse Stomp*

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Real blues music is, in certain quarters, as vital as ever, persevering alongside “evolved” forms that are unrelated except for (sometimes) a shared 12 bar structure. One such stronghold is San Diego, the home base of **Chris James** and **Patrick Rynn**. The duo’s new album, *Barrelhouse Stomp*, drawn from 2009 and 2011 sessions in the company of all-star contributors **Willie Smith** and **Willie Hayes** (drums), **Eddie Shaw** (tenor saxophone), **Jody Williams** (guitar), and **David Maxwell**, **Henry Gray**, and **Aaron Moore** (piano), is a marvel of fresh traditionalism.



James & Rynn, with **Rob Stone**, write much of their material. “Goodbye, Later For You” shares a tempo and melody line, and an assertive vocal delivery, with such Muddy Waters recordings as “I Live The Life I Love,” and swaggers even more aggressively. “Just Another Kick In The Teeth,” a funky grind punctuated by blasts from a sax trio (**Norbert W. Johnson**, **Johnny Viau**, and Shaw), steps into the ‘60s. The solo spots put Shaw, Williams, and bassist Rynn front and center. The instrumental “Messin’ With White Lightnin’,” with its wild, scratchy rhythm guitar and busy bass line, is a perfect Bo Diddley pastiche. **David Maxwell** takes a terrific piano solo, his heavy attack giving the notes a weighty emphasis, but the star is Williams (MVP, of course, of Diddley’s “Who Do You Love”), whose lead guitar lines are a canny mixture of biting single notes and stormy flurries, tangled bends and slippery double-stops. James’s own guitar solo takes the song out, extending some of Williams’s

themes with furious abandon.

Where “Before It’s Too Late” unfolds easily, paced by Moore’s piano, “A Fact Is A Fact” blasts off like a newly-uncovered Broomdusters tune, rocking with fevered, Elmore James-inspired slide work and replete with hard-riffing horns. “It Can Always Be Worse” is a driving, mid-tempo shuffle built on a modified, Magic Sam-style West Side groove and melody line, with James’s first recorded harmonica work—really solid unamplified playing—leading the charge. Despite the loose, bleary feel of the rumba-style “Last Call Woogie,” the band executes stops as crisp as a gin and tonic. James and the great Louisiana piano man Henry Gray, best known for his work with Howlin’ Wolf, are the featured soloists.

Peppered throughout the album is a handful of fine covers. Big Bill’s “I Feel So Good” arrives early in the set, with the balance clustered near the album’s end. James and Rynn turn Robert Nighthawk’s rollicking “Take It Easy” into a tribute to Pinetop Perkins, with David Maxwell hammering home chorus upon chorus of flying 88s. The group strikes a beautiful lope as James improvises at length on the theme of Elmore’s instrumental “Bobby’s Rock.” Always a confident vocalist refreshingly free of mannerisms, James convincingly hollers out Little Brother Montgomery’s “Vicksburg Blues” (a song that lets Williams reprise the guitar part he played on its near relative, Howlin’ Wolf’s “Forty Four”), and outdoes himself on the infectious rocking take on Junior Parker’s “I’m Gonna Stop Foolin’ Myself,” where Williams’s playing is even tougher than on “Lightnin’.” Viau’s honking tenor solo and a powerful groove maintain the tune’s uptown R&B feel.

Listeners familiar with the guitar and bass tandem’s history will know not only their two previous, highly acclaimed albums of ‘50s-inspired blues, but their recordings with harp man Stone’s C-Notes, their appearances on a number of releases produced by Phoenix harmonica ace and blues impresario Bob Corritore, and projects with Sam Lay, Dennis Binder, and Jody Williams, all demonstrating a deep respect for blues as the music ought to be played. *Barrelhouse Stomp* is a superb addition to their body of work.

TOM HYSLOP