

Electrified Blues

Matt Kramer, *Pacific Sun*

The most impressive aspect of our late winter/early springtime squalls this year has been their power. We've thrilled to the unusual: booming rolls of thunder and dazzling zaps of lightning. This week's forecast calls for more of the same. But this time around, on an April Fool's Friday night, the electrical storm will perform indoors. The isolated cloudburst hails at Rancho Nicasio, where the Mighty Mike Schermer Band celebrates the release of its second CD, *Next Set*.

If you're a fan of "electrified" blues or you frequent Marin music venues, Mike Schermer and his Fender Telecaster are most likely no strangers to you. He's played for and with many well-known and respected artists, including Maria Muldaur, Charlie Musselwhite and Tracy Nelson. In 1998, Schermer served as musical director for Angela Strehli on *Deja Blue*, which garnered a California Music Award (BAMMIE) for Best Contemporary Blues Release. Not that award nominations are the be-all and end-all of the performing arts world, but the fact illustrates my point: The man knows what he's doing. So much so that at the 1997 Bay Area Blues Showcase awards ceremony, Strehli's band (under Schermer's direction) served as the house band, backing up the Gospel Hummingbirds, Booker T., Joe Louis Walker, Bonnie Raitt and quite a few others.

Providing support for so many other musicians reaps what it sows. It pays off with interest on *Next Set*, where Mighty Mike and his band get some help from those they have previously supported. Both Muldaur and Strehli hop aboard for a while, as does Shana Morrison. It's a delight to have the musical luminaries shining brightly on some of the tracks, but this bluesy band is quite capable of delivering the goods on its own (as it did five years ago on Mighty Mike's debut disc, *First Set*).

Schermer, bassist and co-writer Steve Ehrmann, and drummer June Core have played together at least since 1989, forming a Santa Cruz band called The Soul Drivers. Local legend has it that these fellows stole a few shows from much better known artists, and were asked to provide back-up for others. Anybody who can coax a quote like, "Boy, you played your ass off," from blues bass biggie Willie Dixon has got to be plugged into something powerful. The boys in the band have weathered 16 years since their Soul Drivers days, and the blues still surge strongly from their songs.

The dozen tracks of *Next Set* include 10 original tunes and two covers: Earl King's "It All Went Down the Drain" and the good ol' heartbreaker, "Rain Down Tears" by Henry Glover. The disc kicks off fast and furious with an original tune, "Got My Love On," and takes a turn for R&B with "My Big Sister's Radio." The latter espouses the pleasures of stolen moments with a borrowed radio, and all the magic music that issued forth from its tiny, tinny speaker. I won't pretend that Schermer's breaking ground into uncharted lyrical territory, but there's a whole lot of heart in evidence on this studio set. Warm vocals and harmonies from Sista Monica Parker (a.k.a. The Sista) and Tammi Brown back a full band that features Austin DeLone on keys and plenty of sassy saxophone from Terry Hanck and Johnnie Bamont. Schermer has successfully avoided the dreaded sophomore slump by crafting an emotionally charged and bluesy second effort.

And while it does blast the blues most impressively, I hesitate to label *Next Set* solely a blues recording. It's true that you can hear many shades of Schermer's main guitar influence, Albert Collins, coming through loud and clear. But that blaring electric blues is blended with soulful spoonfuls of Motown and older R&B. Schermer's sound has been steeped in the thankfully resurrected Howard Tate, and once in a while a bit of young Ray Charles hollers through, too. From the energetic onset of "Got My Love On" to the loping wind-down on "Setting Sun," there's plenty on this disc to please everyone. Mighty Mike Schermer, through his gifted guitar playing and his artful arrangements, has channeled complementing and contrasting elements into a stormy session that should gain even more power at a live performance. He'll celebrate onstage with a CD release concert Friday at Rancho Nicasio. The next night he is scheduled to help out Shana Morrison and Maria Muldaur at the Santa Rosa outpost of the Last Day Saloon.

BY MATT KRAMER

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