

CHRIS SMITHER ♣ STILL ON THE LEVEE

A 50 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

ABOUT THE RECORD

Chris Smither has the soul of a poet, the supple fingers of a guitar god and the voice of a sage. On the occasion of 50 years of songwriting and performing, his newest recording, *STILL ON THE LEVEE*, provides a sweeping showcase of Chris Smither's music - from his very earliest songs to his most recent.

It may be his sixteenth album, but Smither sounds timeless; utterly confident and unafraid, filled with humility, humor, a knowledge of what inevitably lies ahead, yet refusing to succumb to darkness. Here he reconnects with his New Orleans roots, recording at The Music Shed where guests like Allen Toussaint could stop by with longtime right-hand-man David Goodrich at the helm. Other visitors adding their talents to the twenty five tracks include Loudon Wainwright III, Kris Delmhorst, New England's Rusty Belle, and members of renowned rock band Morphine. Some family join in, with sister Catherine Norr adding a backing vocal and daughter Robin contributing fiddle.

Bonnie Raitt, who made her reworking of Smither's "Love You Like A Man" a staple of her repertoire, has famously called Chris Smither "my Eric Clapton," and one listen to *STILL ON THE LEVEE* makes her meaning abundantly clear. Aside from his effortless, rippling guitar ("one-third John Hurt, one-third Lightnin' Hopkins and one-third me") every bit as distinctive as Richard Thompson's British-folk derived axework, Smither's particular genius has been to reimagine the acoustic blues as a vehicle for rich, philosophically complex lyrics.

It is true from the first track, "Devil Got Your Man," which Smither wrote when he first started playing out five decades back, to the last on this two-disc set. While the world was out chasing glamour and flash in the second half of the twentieth century, Chris Smither settled into his groove, mining a vein of American music he has made purely his own.

Not that it was an easy path. The road is littered with those, like friend and '70's labelmate Townes Van Zandt, or inspirations like Tim Hardin or Tim Buckley, who found it simply too much to bear. Smither himself went through a spate of hard times, battling personal demons and essentially quitting the business and becoming a carpenter in the late 70's.

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But, by the mid-80's, he had clawed his way out of the abyss and reentered the game. And the payoff has been great. Today, Smither is known to the cognoscenti as a true musician's musician, one whose recordings receive uniform accolades, whose triple-threat prowess is spoken of in hushed tones.

Each disc on *STILL ON THE LEVEE* ends with "Leave The Light On," a quietly extraordinary piece with accompaniment provided by Rusty Belle, whose drummer Zak Trojano, has recorded and toured with Smither and Goodrich in recent years. Perfectly playing to his strengths, each version is an exquisite example of Chris Smither's contradictory mastery; the calm, almost happy acceptance of one's own mortality and the vicissitudes of life.

The version on disc one is vintage Smither; a lilting, almost jaunty take powered by his acoustic guitar. The second more clearly highlights the devastating power so often hiding just beneath the bur-nished surface of Smither's songs. The band sets up a slow smoky electric groove, and in an aching duet with Kate Lorenz, Smither sings, in his distinctive, honeyed growl:

*I may live to be a hundred, I was born in '44
31 to go, but I ain't keepin' score
I've been left for dead before, but I still fight on
Don't wait up, leave the light on
I'll be home soon*

The effect is extraordinary; strength compounds strength, and leaves the listener feeling touched by grace, or an almost otherworldly wisdom.

A book of Chris' songs will also be released titled *Chris Smither Lyrics 1966-2012* complete with lyrics to his entire song catalog along with some selected photographs from his career.

Later this year, Signature will release *LINK OF CHAIN*, a disc of Smither material interpreted by a who's who of musicians, including Josh Ritter, Bonnie Raitt, Tim O'Brien and many more. If *STILL ON THE LEVEE* serves as any preview, hearing others' interpretations should prove equally exhilarating as witnessing Smither's own take on his back pages.

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