

A Different Kind of Easy Listening

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 05 December 2000 18:00

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The second album from Shane Johnson's Blue Train, *Big Legged Women*, starts off with a song that exists primarily as a framework for hot-licks blues. The words and vocals serve primarily as a break from the fiery work of the guitarist who lends his name to the band. You might be right to accuse them of being superfluous, and it wouldn't be the first time that a talented guitarist recruited backing stiffers merely to keep the beat.

But the guitar-god feel disappears with the third track, "I've Been There, Too," and it doesn't show its face again until just before the album closes. The delicate ballad draws a bit from "Little Wing" and shows that the band has more to offer than Shane Johnson and three anonymous players, a reality that gets some serious reinforcement throughout the album's 11 tracks. (That would be the standard 10 tunes plus the obligatory throw-away unlisted number.)

Bassist and singer John Resch, drummer Scott Willman, and harpist Detroit Larry Davison accomplish the difficult goal of being part of a band and keeping up with a ferocious player. On its face, that's a testament to the band, but it's also a compliment to the 25-year-old string-bender Johnson. The blues are especially prone to showboating guitarists, but Johnson cedes the limelight with refreshing regularity. (Resch actually gets more solo writing credits than Johnson, two to one.)

Shane Johnson's Blue Train barreled onto the Quad Cities music scene in 1998 and in less than three years has established itself as one of the area's premier bands.

Some impending lineup changes will likely alter the group's chemistry and sound, however. Resch and Davison, the elders of the band, will be leaving at the end of the year to allow the group to tour full-time. "I don't want to hold Shane and Scott back," Resch said. "I wrestle with it every day because I know how good this band is."

Resch said Johnson and Willman have found a new bassist but are still searching for a lead singer, and possibly a sax player. He added that he expects a new lineup will sound substantially different. "It'll change it a lot," he said. The Train will probably continue to chug along, but each member adds something important to the current incarnation. Resch keeps things upbeat, often funky on bass, and sometimes gives his understated vocals a rockabilly feel. (A howler he's not.) Davison's confident but never-too-flashy harmonica is often strong

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enough to upstage Johnson's six string, while Willman keeps things interesting with his rhythm choices.

The album opens with "With You Tonight," and Johnson provides some impressively escalating riffs, one building on another. "New Girl" follows, a straight-ahead blues number that's remarkable only for its strong execution. But a lot of the material on Big Legged Women comes as a bit of a pleasant surprise.

"All That Jazz" is a strong changeup, a snappy little jazz-blues (or blues-jazz, for fans of Spinal Tap) hybrid that sounds like it comes from a lounge-lizard guitar-bass-drums jazz trio with harmonica accents. The tune is earnest – which is to say, it's not done as a joke – and it's surprisingly successful. This is one blues outfit that can actually stretch without looking silly.

The title track, recorded live, is a taut, infectious, and smart acoustic-blues number, a near-perfect band effort with Johnson doing some nice work on the slide, Davison playing off Johnson's hook, Resch giving a hiccup-y imitation of the blues masters, and Willman effectively providing the least percussion necessary.

The band isn't weighted down by heady concerns – as one might expect from a record with a title like Big Legged Women – and as a result the record is light as air. The downside is that it doesn't much stick to the ribs or in the memory.

That's a compliment as much as a complaint, though. Not all music needs to change the world, and Shane Johnson's Blue Train has given the Quad Cities its own brand of easy listening: in no way related to elevator music but as soothing and well-made as one could ever want.

Shane Johnson's Blue Train will be playing The Bullpen on December 9, the Blue Zoo Christmas Benefit at the RiverCenter on December 16, RIBCO on December 22, Vera's in Gooselake, Iowa, on December 23, the Blackthorn Pub on December 29, and O'Meara's Pub on December 30.