

Bowing Down to the Blues

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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In an age of pristine and perfectly recorded CDs, Ryan Flaherty's debut album, *Dimestore Blues*, is the kind of thing that would sound best on crackling vinyl. The did-it-himself collection of 10 songs – seven originals and three covers – has a rough charm that (intentionally or not) recalls the scratchy, popping recordings of the blues masters from many decades ago. Part of that has to do with the intimate solo setting and relatively primitive recording style, but some of it also comes from Flaherty's earnest re-creations of old-style blues.

Flaherty, of Rock Island, uses his guitar, his voice, a harmonica, a lot of heart, and a clear love of folk blues in a casual 38 minutes of music. The record sounds a bit like sitting down with an old friend and playing some favorite songs, with nobody else around; *Dimestore Blues*, quite simply, sounds like something done for the musician rather than an audience, and therein lies a good bit of its appeal. Its laid-back, personal, back-porch feel makes it ideal background music. If it's not entirely successful on close listening, it's a promising debut.

Dimestore Blues starts with "Robert's Ghost," with Flaherty wailing over his slide guitar in a faithful tribute to the blues' history. "Ain't No Use" is next, and it's easily the album's best track – up-tempo, catchy, and multi-layered, with two straightforward vocal lines and a jangly slide. Flaherty's lyrics here – "using your heart as a shovel" – are offhandedly evocative, using metaphor without forcing or explaining it.

These two opening tracks are relatively brief, totaling a little more than four minutes, and the rest of the album would have benefited from some brevity. The longer tracks, such as "Broom" and "Wounded Hand," carry on for nearly five minutes apiece, and the songwriting framework can't quite carry the weight. "Wounded Hand" starts out delicately and builds slowly, but ultimately it has nowhere to go.

Vocally, Flaherty shows himself adept at a variety of styles, from a high-pitched whine on "Drop Dead Blues" to a distorted, gravelly Tom Waits-like bark on "Knots on a Dimlit Day." The vocal differentiation carries Flaherty through some of the less-inspired musical settings.

But he sometimes pinches his voice too much. On "Broom," he tries so hard to capture some grit in his vocals that he might soon pop some blood vessels. "Wounded Hand" is similarly affected, and Flaherty would be wise to adopt a natural singing style instead of trying to emulate

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some of his heroes.

On guitar and harmonic, Flaherty shows something beyond competence, but the record isn't about hot licks; the laid-back style makes it difficult to tell of what Flaherty is capable when he lets loose.

While Flaherty largely sticks to tried-and-true blues idioms, he also stumbles upon a style that he might be able to call his own. "Something Sweet" is almost ambient acoustic blues, with spare and gentle music lightly ambling between the dreamy singing. On a record that invokes classic blues, that track provides hints at a fresh territory Flaherty can mine.

Ryan Flaherty will perform as part of a CD-release party on Thursday, May 9, at 7 p.m. at Theo's Java Club in The District of Rock Island.