

MICHAEL LANDAU - *MLG LIVE*

Michael Landau has been a major force on the Los Angeles studio scene for 25 years: a musical chameleon playing on hundreds of albums by artists as diverse as Joni Mitchell, Rod Stewart, James Taylor, Neil Diamond, Julio Iglesias and Dolly Parton. In the jazz world, he's played with Joe Sample, Tom Scott and George Duke... even Miles Davis (Amandla, Columbia 1989).

But in all those years the guitarist has released only a handful of solo albums on small labels. Millions of people have heard him play, but precious few would actually know his name. Live, on the fusion-centric Tone Center label, finally gives Landau a release with broad distribution, and the result will likely surprise even those who think they know what he's about.

The real question, when a studio ace comes out of hiding and releases two hours of visceral live material, is this: who is Michael Landau when he's in total control of the situation? While his stylistic breadth elsewhere would suggest that this is only one part of the answer, Live posits him, amongst other things, as a powerful torchbearer for Jimi Hendrix. While the late Stevie Ray Vaughan was most often saddled with that accolade, Landau's broader language more accurately represents where Hendrix might be today, since the late guitar icon was clearly moving towards his own view of jazz in the final days before his tragic passing in 1970.

Landau's approach is unfettered, ranging from screaming feedback, swooping whammy bar bends and rapid-fire phrasing to warmer and more elegant voicings and lines where space becomes an equal partner. Even at his most energetic, there's a concept at work. Landau may play over the top at times, but he's never excessive. Culled from performances at LA's legendary Baked Potato club over a period of two years and with three different groups, Landau runs the gamut from in-the-gut blues ("Worried Life Blues) and power rock jams ("Underwear) to his own take on swing ("The Mighty SB) and free playing that's barely contained within a loose structure ("Ghouls and Goblins). He's also a surprisingly strong vocalist; half of the twelve largely self-penned tunes feature his sometimes gritty singing voice.

While Landau's playing is the glue that binds this music together, the two discs are stylistically divided: the first leans towards powerful blues/rock, the second more overt fusion. Landau's groups are as versatile as its leader, each represented on both discs across the widest possible range of material.

Like fellow axe-slingers Robben Ford and Larry Carlton, Landau is a player whose own personality manages to remain intact, regardless of the session. Live, however, is the clearest and most concentrated picture of him to date, and an album that's sure to please fans of both fusion and blues-oriented rock.

John Kelman (All About Jazz)