

MICHAEL LANDAU - *MLG LIVE*

This 2-disc CD package was recorded live between 2004 and 2006 at a small Los Angeles area venue and features the guitar and vocal work of Michael Landau, a well known L.A.-based session player whose recording credits stretch from Miles Davis to Michael Jackson. A quick discography search produces 742 album credits, including previous solo outings, and I'd wager that number's not exhaustive.

Seasoned publicists know their trade. The Landau discs arrive unannounced with a CD I want to review. The publicist figures curiosity will force me to give a listen to figure out why it was sent. Doesn't matter. The album cover is hook enough: I know who Michael Landau is; I'm a sucker for just about anything recorded live; it's a Shrapnel/Tone Center release; and, it sports a Parental Advisory label.

Under the cover I find a final hook in the Spartan liner notes. It was recorded at a club with which I'm very familiar - The Baked Potato. In fact, I'm more familiar with the venue than I am with Landau's previous solo work (which includes both live and studio records), though my nights at the Baked Potato were many years and miles ago.

In goes Disc 1 and I expect some cozy-to-boisterous Baked Potato jazz.

I don't read the track listing.

In a heartbeat, Landau's rendition of Big Maceo Merryweather's "Worried Life Blues" takes me back to the East St. Louis of 1971.

It's 1 a.m. Bars on the Missouri side of the river close and a score of club musicians pack up and cross Eads bridge to hit the after-hours joints on the East side. After four sets of "Maggie May" and "Proud Mary" covers we're primed to hear and play some real music with and for our peers. We park beneath an overpass, grab cases, and trudge through snow and slush toward our idea of music nirvana. There's a big bouncer at the door, but if you're packing an instrument, doesn't matter that you're underage or white. Welcome to Club 21.

The protocol is simple. Find a seat and listen. If you want to sit in, take your instrument out, warm your hands and wait for a call from the bandstand. If you're a guitar player and get the nod, you step up on the small stage, plug your guitar into the Super Reverb and follow the bass player and drummer. There's no song negotiating. If your ears are still frozen you watch the bass player's left hand to get the key. Could be jazz, R&B, blues, or any mix thereof. Doesn't matter. All you want to do is play. Shake the cover band crap out of your system.

The modern day Baked Potato serves a similar function for L.A.-based musicians (and many travel throughs). It's a tiny, (understatement) club where you can unwind (or wind up) and comfortably expose yourself to peers. Play.

Landau's delivery on "Worried Life Blues", sounds like he got the nod, stepped up, plugged in, and played.

The feel of Disc 1 is established and it ain't small-club cozy-jazz.

Don't listen to tracks two ("The Sun") and three ("A Peaceful Ride") and tell me you didn't recognize Band of Gypsys. By halfway into "A Peaceful Ride", flashbacks to the late '60s and early '70s are unavoidable and when Landau sings of "axis of evil" and "it's all going too fast, we're never gonna last" in a Hendrix-like drone, the parallels between then and now are clear and Landau's delivery make them musically and socially relevant.

Track four, "Underwear" is a quirky tune, at least as far as lyrics go ("you're about to lose me, but you don't seem to care, I've seen it in your underwear, but you don't return my call") with some fittingly quirky modulations (your ears are still ringing with shades of Hendrix, so they might seem Hendrix-ish, but either way they fit the piece). There's a studio version of "Underwear" on the Raging Honkies (Michael Landau, vocals and guitar, Teddy Landau, bass, and Abe Laboriel, Jr., drums) late '90s album Boner

"6/8 Blues", track five, is a pleasant instrumental interlude that on first listen was reminiscent (to my ears) of Stevie Ray Vaughan's "Riviera Paradise" and "Lenny" with a dash of Ry Cooder. However, having subsequently listened to a good deal more of Landau's prior solo recordings, I'd now say it's simply reminiscent of Landau.

The only way I can describe "Born in the Rain", track six and the Disc 1 closer, is Fillmore-psychedelic-southern-blues-rock. If this song didn't give Landau some after-hours catharsis, nothing would. But that's one of the joys of Michael Landau music. Couple excellent musicianship with years of exposure to a wide variety of styles and you're bound to end up with some spicy jambalaya. "Born in the Rain" also appears on Landau's Live 2000 album.

The six tracks on Disc 2 are a different animal - a different experience for both Landau and listener.

Disc 2 opens with "The Mighty SB", which takes me back to the jazz-oriented Baked Potato of my memories. It's 10 minutes of contemporary straight-ahead electric guitar jazz with fusion-tinged tone.

The next track, "Ghouls and Goblins" is similar in development and exploration, but with unpredictable detours and an expanded interplay between soft and hard, between tension and relaxation.

"Widow" is bittersweet and tender, befitting the subject. Scott Kinsey weighs in with a superb keyboard solo.

Track four, "Johnny Swing", is a 15 minute potpourri of styles and influences with more excellent keyboard input from Kinsey.

"Good Friend", which appeared on Landau's Star Spangled Banner album, is a comfortable stroll and with Kinsey weighing in again serves as something of a coda to the two preceding pieces.

The final track, "Untitled" reads like an electric reverie, though a couple of exclamation marks during the final few seconds will jar you awake.

The Michael Landon Group Live presents a musician's musician after hours before friends and peers. Landau's not on the tiny Baked Potato stage to impress, sell records or earn a paycheck. He's simply there to play.

Personnel

Michael Landau - guitar/vocals

Jimmy Johnson - bass

Chris Roy - bass

Toss Panos - drums

Gary Novak - drums

Ronald Bruner, Jr. - drums

Scott Kinsey - keyboards

Chuck Kavooras - slide guitar

Tom Watson (Modern Guitars)