

MICHAEL LANDAU - *MLG LIVE*

Guitarist Michael Landau has appeared on countless recordings. In addition to being a studio legend, he's fronted several great bands over the years (such as Burning Water, and the Raging Honkies). He rarely releases "solo" albums however, so when he does it's something to take note of. His latest album, "The Michael Landau Group Live" (Tone Center) is a mixture of vocal and instrumental tunes, and provides an excellent showcase for the variety of styles Landau likes to explore. The 2-disc set is arranged with the blues and heavier stuff up front on disc 1, with the jazzier pieces on disc 2. The songs were all recorded live at The Baked Potato in North Hollywood CA between 2004 and 2006. The other players appearing on the album are Jimmy Johnson and Chris Roy - bass; Toss Panos, Gary Novak, and Ronald Bruner Jr - drums; the always great Scott Kinsey - keys; and Chuck Kavooras - slide guitar (one track). This album is very similar in concept to Landau's last live album, "Live 2000", released in 2001. That album was also a collection of vocal and instrumental pieces, all recorded live at The Baked Potato. Each album has its strengths, but overall this new release is a more cohesive set of music.

The opening track is a blistering version of "Worried Life Blues". Landau always sounds great in these hard blues settings, and he doesn't disappoint here. His solo is a mixture of wicked blues licks, and Landau's trademark herky-jerky phrasing. Another performance that really stands out is "Born in the Rain", which also appeared on the "Live 2000" album. Here Landau plays a real trippy solo with lots of horror movie-sounding tremolo picked motifs. Very intense performance.

Disc 2 is where we hear Landau's jazzier writing and playing. "The Mighty SB" is practically a straight-ahead tune, with Landau reeling in his wild-bluesy side in favor of a more introspective, flowing approach. The vocal ballad "Widow" is another disc 2 highlight. In general, the writing on these jazz tunes is very hip and sophisticated. It's a side of Landau we don't see too often. Great stuff.

Two of my personal favorite Landau vocal tunes are included in this release as well - "Good Friend" (originally recorded on Landau's "The Star Spangled Banner" album), and "Underwear" (originally recorded on the Raging Honkies album "Boner"). "Good Friend" is pretty faithful to the original, though it's stretched out and includes a nice keyboard solo from Kinsey. "Underwear", on the other hand, is played with a totally different groove than the original studio version. Here it's done with a laid back half-time feel, whereas the studio version had a fast, driving groove. Another Raging Honkies song, "Why U Lie", received the same dialed-down treatment (with less effective results) on the "Live 2000" album.

If you're not familiar with Michael Landau, and you want to see what all the fuss is about, this is the album to get. It really shows off all the facets of his musicianship. Great playing and writing, awesome guitar tones, and his vocals are very strong. The "Live 2000" album is very worthwhile as well, but I think Landau has topped that live collection with this one.

Rich Murray