

# A REVIEW

## ALL THE WAY

### MAD DOG BLUES

[www.coloradocountryblues.com](http://www.coloradocountryblues.com)

After months of wrestling with my demons on how to interpret Mad Dog Blues' eclectic eighth recording, *All The Way*, I was finally struck with a lightning bolt of epiphany: Mad Dog Blues (MDB) is an exceptionally talented quintet who plays country blues but also wanders in other genres.

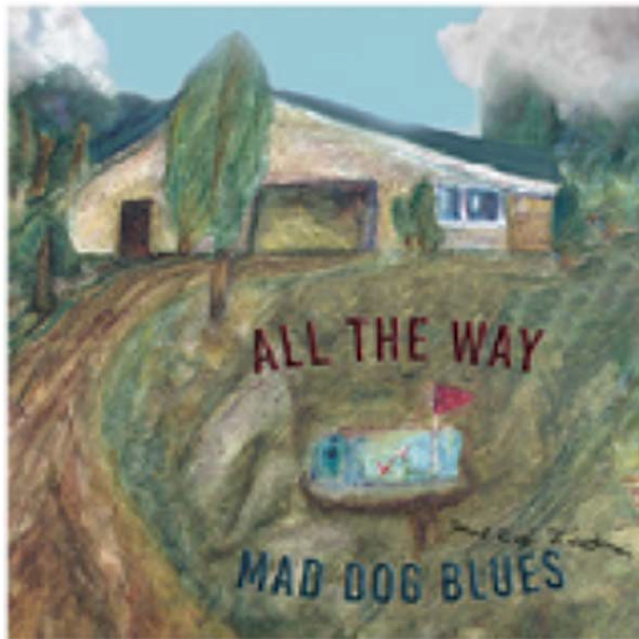
The group is fortunate to have two splendid guitar flatpickers, Sean Bennight and Mark Kaczorowski; a mandolinist, Jeff Becker; a bassist, Clark Chanslor and the ringleader,

Mad Dog Friedman, who has no shortage of expression playing the harmonica, either with power or finesse. The group's chemistry is so tight that its jamming has to be telepathic.

It's also a band of songwriters with four members, Mad Dog, Bennight, Kaczorowski, and Becker, contributing at least two originals each. Sum it all up, a baker's dozen of these 15 tracks are band originals.

A few, like Bennight's "Love Scared the Devil" and Kaczorowski's "Just Like Mama Said," are poignantly beautiful and reminiscent of the folk-rock that pervaded progressive FM Radio in the 70s. Friedman's "Moaning of the Spruce" features cellist El Rice for a slight orchestral new-age flavor. "Making Whoopee," crooned by Becker and sensuously purred by Jenn Cleary, adds a lighthearted element of jazz. Interestingly, the moral-based song is almost a century old, first popularized by vocalist/ actor/ comedian Eddie Cantor in 1928. So, you see, Mad Dog Blues can run eclectic and are hardly the romping shuffle kings of blues.

Yet, blues does live here. On the opening "Dime Store Women" Mad Dog practically peels his lips off, tearing it up on harp. Bennight and Kaczorowski jam out effortlessly and trade nimble-fingered runs. Becker's mandolin-led instrumentals "Bug in the Basement / Bruno's Toad" resemble a country blues hoedown, the melodies you'd imagine played at house dances in rural areas long ago.



The next two tracks are practically worth the price of admission alone. "Feeling Phil Wiggins" pays homage to the blues harmonica player who passed away in May 2024. Wiggins was famous for his long-running partnership with guitarist John Cephas as the internationally known duo Cephas and Wiggins. For this track, Mad Dog ingeniously loaded up on harmonica players, himself, Josh Elioieff, and 2024 IBC Champion Joe Waters (while on tour here) for a torrid,

mind-altering three harmonica attack. It's something that has rarely been recorded before, but Wiggins did just that in 1982 by recording "Blues Harp Blues By Three" with Billy Branch and Carey Bell in a session under Bell's name.

After that track was laid down, Waters improvised the entrancing "Roadside Joe" on solo jaw harp, also quite unusual. Ironically, Waters only began playing jaw harp in January and did quite well with it. It was one of the reasons why he won this year's IBC Finals in the solo/duo division in Memphis.

"Never Again" is the most socially conscious, inspired by the Palestinian militant group Hamas' attack on Israel last year on October 7, 2023. Besides its anti-hate subject matter, it gets delightfully spacey with Mad Dog's delay effects, Becker's mandolin solo, and Bennight's trippy passages that transport you to the ether.

The album closes with two versions of "Stealin' Stealin'," the first associated with Gus Cannon of Cannon's Jug Stompers. In the Cannon version, Mad Dog Blues and El Rice sing lead and are joined by the rest, including guests. The second rendition is Mad Dog's kazoo-driven concoction of the same melody. Indeed, it's wacky but a fun way to close the proceedings.

With Mad Dog Blues, you never quite know what you're going to get, but guaranteed, it'll be interesting.

- DAN WILLGING