

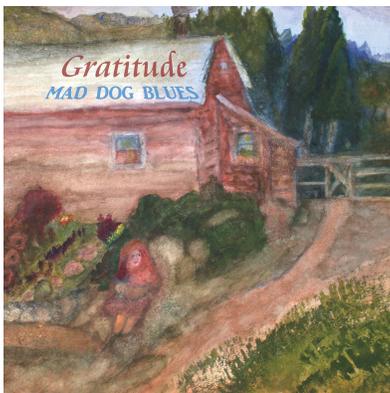
Mad Dog Blues

Gratitude (Click to listen)

by Dan Willging

www.coloradocountryblues.com

Listening to a new Mad Dog Blues (MDB) release is never an instant immersion. Give it a few iterations, and appreciation for this unique contemporary blues quintet slowly seeps through the most hardened cranium to cast its spell. With *Gratitude*, MDB's second studio album and fifth full-length release, the group's evolution continues with an even tighter, practically telepathic interplay between guitarists Sean Bennight and Mark Kaczorowski, mandolinist Jeff Becker and harmonica artist Mad Dog. On "Mojo Queen," the group reaches a transcendental apex that feels like the Grateful Dead jamming away but with a bluesy, jukin' harmonica. "Hear Me Crying" starts with Mad Dog wheezing back and forth on the harmonica's low notes, then Kaczorowski follows with a stinging slide while Clark Chanslor keeps it together with a thumping bass throb. Soon, Mad Dog comes in with an ethereal, eerie passage that briefly transports you somewhere beyond reality.



Indeed, the playing is impressive. Given his chops, Mad Dog is underrated as a blues harmonica player while Bennight is a beast with his nimble fingers sprinting up and down the neck. Becker's mandolin playing is spry and sparkles with precision and buoyancy.

Like MDB's previous releases, the group continues its song cycle with four of the five members contributing at least one tune, making the contrasting songwriting styles diverse and noteworthy. Bennight's songs have a mystical aura swirling about; Becker's "Water in the Well" feels like something from a sixties folk troubadour with such hopeful but cautionary lines as "We all need to live & love & trust /and hope it don't all turn to dust." Similarly, Kaczorowski's "The Great Unknown" has an element of protest with its biting hook, "Tell those preachers and the Joneses there's no discount on my soul."

Mad Dog's longtime collaborator Jenn Cleary guests with her "Peace in Our World," where she emphatically asks why can't there be peace. Mad Dog underscores her plea with a few tranquil fills from his indigenous flute.

Based on the CD jacket's credits, Mad Dog appears to be the group's most prolific writer, yet only the title track makes its debut here. Some, like "Well Babe," "Hear Me Crying," and "Pass My Hat," are longtime staples going back as far as 40 years. Furthermore, a half-dozen of these tunes were featured on the live, digital-only *Pinned Down by the Rain* released in January 2022. Yet, their studio counterparts are hardly replicas of their live incarnations but substantially reworked to sound amazingly fresh. *Pinned Down by the Rain* is where everything was road-tested; *Gratitude* is where they came to fruition.