

BAR BAND AMERICANUS: THE BEST OF CHARLIE PICKETT AND - Charlie Pickett (*Bloodshot Records*)

Avid readers of the better rock fanzines in the '80s may remember the name Charlie Pickett & The Eggs, whose career trajectory made like-minded contemporaries the Dream Syndicate and The Gun Club appear as superstars by comparison.



A vehicle for the Stones obsessions and slide licks of square-shouldered Miami construction worker Pickett, the Eggs were seemingly a name only at first - their first two singles were Pickett with ring-ins - before a definitive line-up came together and was eventually recorded on the name-making "Live At the Button" LP and reputation-defining "Cowboy Junkie Au-go-go" 12" EP. The title of the later was truth in advertising, and while deliances with heroin chic might pass if you've got the pull of a Richards, Reed or even a Thunders, on a hand-to-mouth underground level it was bound to cause trouble. The Eggs didn't last, leaving Pickett to release two killer 'solo' albums (the second of which featured a partially reconstituted Eggs under the name the MC3 - Miami City 3 maybe?) later in the decade.

The Pickett-less Eggs became the also-great Psycho Daisies, before two of their number succumbed to heroin-related deaths in the '90s. Charlie retired his Southern Lou Reed drawl as the decade drew to a close, sitting in with the Daisies every now and then as he studied law and eventually passed his bar exam. These days he's Miami's #1 blueswailing barrister (and Salton leads an umpteenth line-up of the Daisies).

This faultless collection of Pickett's recording career, fittingly on a label that's done much to redefine American roots music over the past decade, is long overdue and will offer much revelation even to a longtime Pickett fan. The consistency and quality of what's on offer here is astounding. Perhaps best known for his covers - the Flamin' Groovies' "Slow Death" and "Shake Some Action" were two Pickett signature tunes (you could say the likes of Charlie & the Eggs served a similar role to the Groovies a decade earlier) and his biggest "hit", the raunchy, smart and funny "If This Is Love (Can I Get My Money Back)" was actually written by his 60's garage-band leading cousin Mark Markham - the combined strength of the originals here makes a case for Charlie as one of the great songwriters of the era.

"In the Wilderness", with Charlie's slide flashing in an out of righthand-man Johnny Salton's barbed lead - is a stone classic; as spooky and desolate as its subject matter. "American Travel Lust", "A. On Horseback" and "Phantom Train" (the Cramps' "Drug Train" peopled by dead American writers maybe?) evoke a similarly poetic view of America, it's frontier history and literature. The infamously painful "I Hope You Liked It A Lot" will stop you cold with its bluntness and rake you with its feedback.

"All Love Gone" is like the Gun Club's "House On Highland Ave" without the evil intent (Jim Duckworth plays lead on both). "Overtown" is more like first album Gun Club, and is one of couple co-written by Salton and bassplayer Dave Froshnider, and sung by Frosh. Excitingly, the one new recording, the low-key but electrified blues "Penny Instead", is one of the best things here - an exciting promise of more to come.

While Miami is hardly known as a rock'n'roll town, the wonderfully and fittingly titled (by Charlie himself) "Bar Band Americanus" captures enough of the heat and danger of the place to make a distinctive mark on rock'n'roll's beautiful corpse. (One wonders if the fact that the Gun Club named their second album after the town had any bearing on these guys...) Check out Charlie Pickett, and explore his world at the fantastic trashfever.com website. - **David Laing**



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