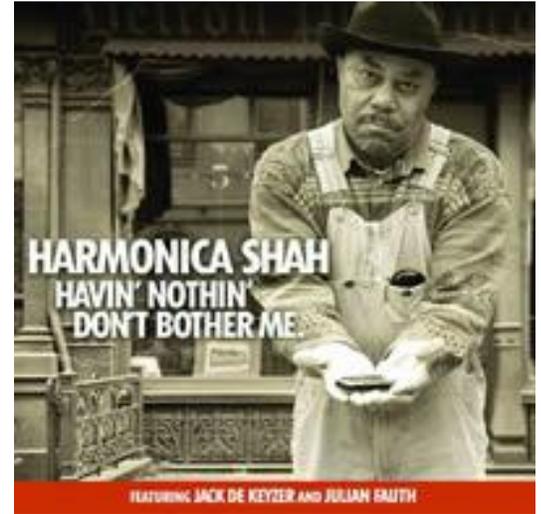


HARMONICA SHAH: HAVIN' NOTHIN' DON'T BOTHER ME

Electro-Fi Records 3436 (65:31)

**All My Kids Is Ugly/ Shake It Mama/ Short Haired Woman/
I'm Going To Miss You Like The Devil/ Her Eyes Turn Green
As Grass/ Havin' Nothin' Don't Bother Me/ Worried Life
Blues/ Honey, I Ran Out Of Lies/ Undercover Millionaire/
Blind Man Crying In The Middle Of Detroit/ Doctor Baker's
Blues / Death Bell Tollin'**

Wow! Hand me down my walking cane, I'm staggered. Check the calendar; is it 2013 or Chicago 1955? What a fantastic album. This is authentic, hard-core blues of the first degree, no compromise to modernity; the digital clock has been stopped. Shah is based in Detroit but if played blindfold, you'd think this was blues from the heyday of Chess. The music is so real, recorded live in the studio with minimum overdubs using just an acoustic piano, hollow bodied electric guitar, harmonica and drums. Just the way Muddy and Co used to make 'em. Shah's vocals have the deep intonation and cadence of Champion Jack Dupree and his harp style echoes Walter Horton, Snooky Prior and Junior Wells but mainly the deep rich tones of Little Walter. There is a wide open acoustic piano sound that's a pleasure to hear, played by Julian Fauth, who also sings with Shah on a couple of songs. Jack De Keyzer's guitar playing is a master-class of Chicago blues. He has Muddy's slide sound down pat while Jimmy Rogers' style of picking and chording lives again. Supporting all this and driving the music on is the drummer man they call Bucky Berger. Fine, fine drumming, completely clear of bombast and totally sympathetic to the feel of the music.



Shah writes most of his own songs but the album kicks off with 'All My Kids Is Ugly', a great song written by white bluesman Dale Robertson (and I thought Dale Robertson was a Wells Fargo agent!). The song has fine ensemble playing and telling lyrics, 'All my kids is ugly and it's all because of you/ I don't pay that no mind no more 'cos the mailman is ugly too'. The other two songs not written by Shah are the Lightnin' Hopkins composition, 'Short Haired Woman', that also includes the great line 'I don't want no woman whose hair is shorter than mine' and 'Worried Life Blues'. On both these cuts, Shah and pianist Julian Fauth trade vocals most effectively. 'Worried Life Blues' is played acoustically and without drums, a delicate, emotive and moving performance.

Shah's own songs sometimes lack rhyme but never reason. These are believable songs, truthful stories of man/woman relationships, some sounding very personal. Like the bluesmen of old, he borrows themes, melodies and lyrics from other songs but always makes them his very own. For instance, 'I'm Going To Miss You Like The Devil' is similar in structure to John Lee Williamson's 'Dealing With the Devil' while 'Havin' Nothin' Don't Bother Me' uses the lilting 'Rock Me Baby' riff throughout. The band can rock it up too as on 'Blind Man Crying In The Middle Of Detroit', which adopts the 'Rolling And Tumbling' theme and 'Shake It Mama'; a fast 'mojo' shuffle also built on a 'roll and tumble' frame.

'Her Eyes Turn Green As Grass' is a beaut, a mid-paced blues full of Muddy-like guitar, the bass strings vibrating in contrast with the high whining slide on the thin strings. The song has a classic structure with Shah's Little Walter phrasing nigh on perfect. 'Honey, I Ran Out Of Lies' is just as good, a rolling shuffle with flowing piano and guitar topped by some high-end harp. 'Undercover Millionaire' is a fast boogie instrumental with harp, piano, and guitar all taking turns in the spotlight, a tour-de-force of ensemble playing. The final two tracks on the disc ring the changes somewhat. 'Doctor Baker's Blues' has a tango beat featuring percussion with an oil drum sound and Santana-like electric guitar, but Shah's wailing harp and vocals hold it all together. 'Death Bell Tollin'' is an intimate story of bereavement, told in a long, slow-paced blues, and delicate instrumentation from all involved.

Harmonica Shah is a star in my book and worthy of the attention of all old school blues fans. Take a listen, you won't be disappointed.

Fred Rothwell