

JOHN & SYLVIA EMBRY: Troubles

Delmark 832 (65:39)

Wonder Why/ Troubles/ Lie To Me/ I'm Hurtin'/ I Found A Love – Rainbow/ Going To New York/ Mustang Sally/ Gonna Find My Baby*/ Early Time Blues*/ Razor Sharp*/ Keep Your Hands Off Her*/ Blues This Morning*/ After Work/ Worry Worry/ 62nd St. Luau/ I Love The Woman/ Johnny's Bounce (* = *previously unissued*)

This is a long-overdue reissue of the original ten-track vinyl album, 'After Work', recorded January 1979 and February 1980 and released on the Razor imprint. This CD release has five extra tracks not issued on the original LP. The final two numbers, 'I Love The Woman' and 'Johnny's Bounce', were issued on a Razor 45 (Razor R5101).



John Embry plays the tough lead guitar, Sylvia Embry is on bass and vocals, Riler 'Iceman' Robinson is also on guitar, and Woody Williams plays drums and occasional vocals. There is a rotating cast of bass players and drummers on the live cuts (recorded at the Bold One Lounge in Chicago).

If you are a devotee of the music of Lefty Dizz, J.B. Hutto, Magic Slim, or Hound Dog Taylor, in short the rowdy, late '70s Chicago electric bar blues, allied to gospel-tinged vocals, you really do need to hear this release. Arkansas-born Queen Sylvia Embry was originally a gospel singer who settled in Chicago in the 1960s. She was bass player/vocalist with Lefty Dizz And The Shock Treatment who were the Blue Monday band at the Checkerboard Lounge, and garnered a following at Kingston Mines on the North Side, playing some of the toughest blues to be heard in Chicago. She married John Embry, however they had divorced but were still on good terms when this album was recorded.

John's tough guitar playing is showcased; both his lead breaks and his fills are a master class in blistering Chicago style electric blues. Whether it's a slow blues, a churning shuffle or a hard-charging up-tempo number, his sinuous guitar playing is the perfect foil to 'The Queen's' vocals.

Looking at the LP tracks first, the original 'Wonder Why' kicks off, that is one tough blues to open a set with; a full throated vocal from Sylvia and a guitar solo from John that could blister paint at thirty yards. 'Troubles' follows, it's a menacing slow blues allied to razor sharp guitar. Brook Benton's original 'Lie To Me' is given a pacier, bluesier treatment than the original, and it works!

It's soul time with the medley of Wilson Pickett's 'I Found A Love' and the great Gene Chandler's 'Rainbow', drummer Woody Williams duets with Sylvia on this medley and on a funky take of 'Mustang Sally'. Three tracks were recorded live on Chicago's Southside: 'After Work' is an instrumental feature for John, Riler Robinson is the featured vocalist on B.B. King's 'Worry Worry', and '62nd Street Luau' is another instrumental. (A 'luau' is a Hawaiian feast – I had to look it up!).

The balance of this release comprises the Freddie King composition 'I Love The Woman' and 'Johnny's Bounce' (culled from a Razor label 45 – Thomas Landis plays bass and Ollie Moore is the drummer on these sides), John Embry is featured on vocals on the former; it shows him to be a more than capable singer, who deserved a vocal shot on the original LP, and the latter is an instrumental in the Freddie King/Magic Sam mould.

Unissued (and presumably also from the LP sessions), 'Gonna Find My Baby' is a robust, mid-tempo blues with a gospel inflected vocal treatment from Sylvia, 'Early Time Blues' is a variant on 'Rooster Blues', and the instrumental 'Razor Sharp' definitely looks to Magic Sam for its point of reference. 'Keep Your Hands Off Her' was, according to the notes, 'the first song of the session . . . vocal levels had not been set, however we felt the musical values outweighed this', John duets with Sylvia on this number, credited to Roosevelt Sykes. 'Blues This Morning' has some of the toughest guitar playing to be heard, with a big declamatory vocal from The Queen, why this number remained in the can is difficult to comprehend.

John and Sylvia Embry are sadly no longer with us, however this Delmark reissue should spotlight one of the finest albums ever to come out of Chicago. This set is a real revelation, if I wasn't currently about as much use as a one-legged man in an arse kicking contest, I would be footing myself up the backside for not snapping it up when it came out originally on vinyl. A five star performance, get it asap, you will not be disappointed I guarantee.

Phil Wight