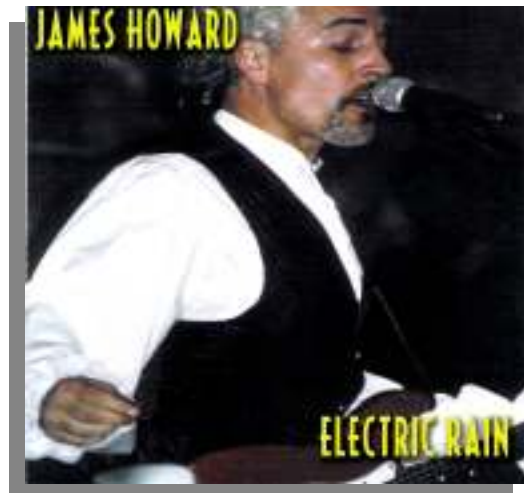


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**CD Review**

By Tony Hicks

*James Howard's  
Guitar  
is one to watch*



Somehow, guitar-driven R&B is one of the last “sounds” to survive endless scores of well-meaning but fairly clueless clones. Good intentions don’t get everyone off the hook, but fortunately, James Howard doesn’t need that excuse.

Howard just released “Electric Rain” on his own label, laughing Man Records. He’s an eclectic mix of Clapton and Hendrix with a tad of heavy metal just to throw you off kilter (which isn’t that surprising after discovering he used to play with late Metallica bass player Cliff Burton at house parties).

I realize the music world needs more R&B-influenced guitar players rehashing Clapton and Hendrix (hereafter referred to as C & H) about as much as California needs a monsoon. Still, Howard’s music is really difficult to ignore. Howard follows C & H in that the vocals come second to some seriously soaring guitar-playing. That’s more a statement about his guitar than anything else, because his vocals are strong.

They actually work well in tandem, as if the guitar pushes the vocals through the same musical conduit. It’s a source of energy not many singers can tap.

But what’s talent without someplace to put it? Howard’s songs are heavy into C & H and Stevie Ray Vaughn-style riffs, but occasionally stray into the psychedelic of hard rock. “Sweet Charlie” is an effective contrast to all the blues and boogie, with a garage-rock riff jackhammering behind a floating melody.

“If it nails me in the gut, that’s what I go by”, says Howard, 34, who admits that his formula isn’t new by any means. But he can’t help it. “It’s more of an organic thing, as opposed to playing what the public wants to buy, which is what I used to do. It just didn’t work.”