

# DELTA SNAKE- INTERNATIONAL BLUES BEAT

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## CD Review By Craig Ruskey

There are some guys who seem to hold all the cards when it comes to playing guitar. James Howard is one who surely knows his guitar well, and he plays with lots of fire. However, what's here that will hold the interest of dyed-in-the-wool Blues fans isn't all that much. All things considered, it comes in at less than 50% Blues.

It opens up with a smoking Texas-styled shuffle that will certainly raise comparisons to the late Stevie Ray Vaughn, and that's not bad company to be in. The title track "Electric Rain" has all the earmarks of one who has studied guitar, and decided not to draw the line at styles. It smolders along at a "Look At Little Sister" pace, has the wha wha pedal guitar overlays, and a rhythm section that drives ahead with lots of power. James Howard's guitar solo is potent and filled with creativity, and the work of Willy Riser and Mike Vanderhule on bass and drums is like clockwork, and Dave Matthews Hammond B-3 helps things along with some great swells and fills.

"Chicken Lips" is another killer guitar workout for Howard, although with a different band backing him. This time around, Paul Feia gets the call for bass, David Brownell fills the duties behind the drum kit, and Tony Lufrano handles keyboards. What Howard can do with a guitar is remarkable in a word. "Lips" is a Travis-guitar instrumental that drills along at breakneck speed, and doesn't let up once the crew is out of the gate. For those of you unversed in where I'm coming from here; if you know the work of the late Danny Gatton, or his predecessor, the late Roy Buchanan, you'll know what I mean. Howard's sound here is ripe with reverb and spilling, fluid guitar.

"A Girl Like You" isn't blues, but it's certainly got that as it's foundation. Funked-up rock 'n' roll may better describe this; and the tone Mr. Howard gets is Albert King filtered through Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughn. The tone is crisp and stinging and touched with the right amount of distortion, and the solo, again, is loaded with creative slips and slurs.



"House of the Rising Sun" is taken as a guitar instrumental, and works incredibly well. A slow burner, it gives Howard a chance to stretch out for a little over five minutes, and play some Blues. He does that in spots that are restrained and passionate, and others that are go-for-throat pyrotechnics that will have veteran guitar players wondering where the licks are coming from.

Unfortunately, that's about all there is for Blues fans. The rest of what's here isn't going to be pigeonholed by anyone. It's got influences that range from Cream, The Beatles, and Mason Williams, and more. "Drown Her Sorrow" will call to mind what Clapton was doing in his short-lived Cream years, but also brings the creativity of the Beatles to mind with the vocal harmonies. "Mayan Mystery" is an instrumental that was recorded 'live' in Alameda, CA in 1997, along with "Chicken Lips". Howard's guitar here is sweet and brilliant, and laced with Spanish overtones and a fluid approach that is chilling.

A guitar player with a ton of tricks up his sleeve, James Howard surely knows his way around the fretboard of his instruments. When he sets out to do so, he can play Blues, and he does it well. His voice is strong and he's ably backed by some stellar workmen who add lots to the CD. I'd have preferred a disc that was 70% Blues, and less on the leanings he tends to be drawn to, but that's no knock. He knows his craft and has put forth a strong effort, that while short on straight Blues content, is certainly deep in the well when it comes to guitar wizardry and creativity.