

"REAL BLUES" CD REVIEW

By: A. GRIGG

"Real Blues" CD Review of Dr. Slide: Slidin By (BluzPik) BR9511

by A. Grigg February 18, 2003

I'll be the first to admit that Blues critics deserve the less-than-flattering Blues Police label thanks to our oftentimes-closed minded and rigid perceptions of what-should-be-according-to-our-guidelines. It's born out of a sense-of-duty that could be construed as misguided, especially when we close doors to change and evolution. (Remember Mighty Joe Young's soul/Blues?) True, there are a lot of bad CDs and low caliber bands out there, but the market shall ultimately dictate who succeeds and who doesn't. Not us!

What we must always ask ourselves is: does the artist/band possess talent? Does the artist/band have the ability to communicate their message? (Do they even have a message?) and ultimately, is this an enjoyable experience?

I first talked to Dr. Slide a couple of weeks ago before I heard his music and I must say I was intrigued by this East German born guitarist/singer who had no shortage of energy and charisma. Outspoken and totally focused, Axel has a sense of purpose and drive lacking in many. A fascinating history added to the intrigue and anticipation. Here was a man who grew up under total oppression in the 1960s, 70s, 80s and right up to the fall of Russian Communism and The Berlin Wall. Is there much difference between an enslaved East German and a Black man/woman in the Deep South prior to the Kennedy era? Young Axel identified at once with the Black Blues artists who came to play the American Folk Blues Festival in East Berlin and a hero was found in Muddy Waters. Axel started playing at age six and by fifteen was playing East German clubs before being silenced by Security forces for telling too many truths in his music (proof that Blues can defeat fascism). After climbing the Berlin Wall, Axel became an in-demand performer in West Germany and eventually he fulfilled his dream by moving to the United States in the early 1990s. While I've often gotten into arguments regarding authenticity of Blues artists, I've never defined Blues solely on terms of racial guidelines. Environment/experience seems to be the ultimate determining factor (hence the rise of sterile Blues purveyed by young Blacks of middle class background) and what's interesting is Dr. Slide's acceptance by African American Blues artists who consider him to be a peer deserving of respect.

I was right in assuming that I would hear a sound I'd be totally unprepared for, but I also promised myself I wouldn't let difference be viewed as wrong or bad and once I'd played Slidin By all the way through, I realized that the man does possess both exceptional talent and a unique voice. I at once began to wonder how often Axel/Dr. Slide has to deal with prejudice of another kind. We White men are great at passing negative judgment and I realized the majority of critics won't see past his White skin and German accent.

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Dr. Slide

American Roots & Blues

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What about his songs and their eloquent and passionate messages? What about his exceptional guitar work? Dr. Slide manages to pull off what few artists could: he keeps his listener riveted for the length of the CD without the support of a band. It's just him and his guitar and his songs.

In his “I Wasn't Born Here,” he sings, “I wasn't born in Memphis, Tennessee...I was born in Potsdam, that's a small town in East Germany. Back then behind the Iron Curtain, life wasn't like it's supposed to be, all I could think of was to be free. But when I was looking at the Wall, all I could see was concrete...” None of us, except those who grew up Down South or spent time in prison can grasp the significant of these lyrics. “A Friend for Life” tells a poignant and painful tale of loss. To someone like Dr. Slide the Blues must truly seem like a magical train ride and his connection to this mystical music runs deep and life-long. I have a strong conviction Dr. Slide will become a very popular and successful international Blues Star and the fact that he is already gaining a following on the U.S. festival circuit gives credence to that prediction. If I have any criticisms, it would be that the song selection could contain some uptempo, goodtime boogies a la Carolina Slim or Brownie McGhee. But, that's a minor quibble—I'm sure Dr. Slide has much more in his live repertoire. Four bottles for a very unique and refreshing take on the Blues. Funny how we sometimes need to be reminded as to what the Blues should be all about.

