

JAMES COTTON: Cotton Mouth Man
Alligator ALCD 4954 (48:56)

Cotton Mouth Man/ Midnight Train/ Mississippi Mud/ He Was There/ Something For Me/ Wrapped Around My Heart/ Saint On Sunday/ Hard Sometimes/ Young Bold Women/ Bird Nest On The Ground/ Wasn't My Time To Go/ Blues is Good For You/ Bonnie Blue

Harp ace James Cotton's new Alligator release finds him in the company of a slew of vocalists – Darrell Nulisch, Gregg Allman, Keb Mo, Warren Haynes, Ruthie Foster, and Delbert McClinton. Cotton, who suffered from throat cancer several years ago, manages one vocal outing himself. Members of Cotton's regular backing band – Jerry Porter (drums), Noel Neal (bass), and Tom Holland (guitar) are present on several songs, however the core backing band are Tom Hambridge (drums – he also produced), Rob McNelley (guitar), Chuck Leavell (keyboards), and Glenn Worf (bass).



With Cotton blowing ferociously, 'Cotton Mouth Man' kicks off, with Nulisch on vocals and Joe Bonamassa guesting on guitar. Next up, Gregg Allman is the featured vocalist on 'Midnight Train'. Cotton is in full on Sonny Terry mode, Allman's vocal is a tad lightweight though. 'Mississippi Mud' (vocal Keb Mo) is a reflective look at a life, from ploughing and planting to playing the blues with Muddy Waters.

'He Was There' is another biographical number, charting Cotton's life from driving a truck, moving to Chicago, playing the Fillmore and Carnegie Hall, tied to a tough Muddy Waters groove with a robust vocal from Nulisch – great cut! Warren Haynes sings on 'Something For Me'; if you don't know who he is (I didn't) he is the founder of the band Gov't Mule (no – I don't know who they are either!); not crazy about his vocals I have to say. Ruthie Foster is the featured singer on 'Wrapped Around My Heart', a mid-tempo blues with a superb vocal treatment from the lady, Cotton's blues harp is big toned and powerful, he shows absolutely no sign of slowing down despite being in his late seventies. One of my favourite singers, Delbert McClinton is at the mike for 'Hard Sometimes'; 'Young Bold Women' features Hammond B3 on a New Orleans groove.

'Bird Nest On The Ground' was originally recorded by Muddy, Nulisch is the featured singer here, but once more it's that harp that catches the ear, Cotton is really incendiary on this disc. With a big, fat upright bass intro, 'Wasn't My Time To Go' is taken at a strolling tempo, Keb Mo is vocalist of choice and also plays guitar, Cotton mirrors Jimmy Reed. 'Blues Is Good For You' states: 'the doctor done told me playing the blues is good for you, he said "keep on blowing til' you are a hundred and two"' – I won't argue with that sentiment – Nulisch is vocalist and Cotton delivers another gut bustin' performance. The final song, 'Bonnie Blue' (the plantation where Cotton was born) is a feature for Cotton on vocals and acoustic harp backed by Colin Linden on resonator guitar. Due to his throat ailment, Cotton's vocal is naturally a tad hoarse, but it's a lovely number and a fitting end to a really fine set.

The New York Daily News states that Cotton is 'the greatest living blues harmonica player', I have to say on the evidence of this set you won't get an argument from me, he is absolutely on fire throughout. The material is strong too, and if the vocals from Allman and Haynes are not to my taste that's just a personal thing. Blues harp fans will have to get this one without a doubt.

Phil Wight