

## sonic Boomers



### **The Robert Cray Band**

This Time

Vanguard Records

By Don Waller

That searing, cool as dry ice-blue guitar tone...those supple, soul-inflected vocals...all that s-p-a-c-e between the notes ... hey, it must be a new Robert Cray album. Only *This Time* -- Cray's first studio LP in five years -- he's packing a (mostly) new backing band alongside an all-new set of deep-soul ballads 'n' urbane blues (mostly penned by Cray his badse'f). And it all goes down smooove as sippin' whiskey...

But you knew that. Or maybe you didn't. Cray -- who honed his chops (and copped a certain amount of his signature guitar style) playing behind the late, great Albert Collins--first stepped out of the sideman shadows and into the solo spotlight way back in 1974, working the Northwest blues circuit out of Portland, Oregon. (You can glimpse him playing an uncredited bass as part of Otis Day & The Knights in the 1978 frat-rock film classic, *Animal House*.) Took him until 1980 to score a record deal with the indie Tomato label.

Cray stepped up to the majors (Mercury via indie Hightone) two years later, and he hasn't looked back since. He's won five Grammys, cut a fistful of modern blues standards -- "Phone Booth," "Don't Be Afraid Of The Dark," "Smoking Gun" and, best of all, "Right Next Door (Because Of Me)" -- racked up a platinum album with 1986's *Strong Persuader* (the first blues LP to reach the Top 20 since 1972!), and, going fret-to-fret with no less than Albert Collins and the similarly late, great Johnny Copeland, recorded the still-smokin', three-way, guitar-barfight *Showdown!* in 1985.

His last disc was a 2006 double-CD live set recorded at the Royal Albert Hall in London opening for his longtime pal/fellow admirer, Eric Clapton. But you knew that. Or maybe you didn't.

Cray kickstarts *This Time* with "Chicken In The Kitchen," a tongue-in-groove twist on a good ol' fashion food-sex metaphor that sports such smiling phrases as "*I do all the cookin' in our house ...you're eating out!*") and a sweet-tart, two-part guitar solo from the master of the Stratocaster. Superfine double-tracked exit solo, too.

Built on a gorgeous Curtis Mayfield-like guitar line, the new album's title track finds Cray in a suspicious mind and features his finest vocal, all beautifully controlled bent notes (or, if you prefer the technical term: melisma) and sudden flights to falsetto. Nifty piano fills from Jim Pugh (Cray's keyboardist since '89), whose handiwork (mostly on organ) provides the solid chordal beds that hold everything together throughout.

Same could be said about that cat-footed rhythm section: new drummer Tony Braunagel (whose credits include everyone from Bonnie Raitt and Taj Mahal to Keb Mo and B.B. King) and bassist Richard Cousins (whose last stint with Cray stretched from 1974 to 1991).

Cray's other compositions range from the rock 'n' soul fusion "[Trouble & Pain](#)" to the straight up, no chaser soul ballads "I Can't Fail" and "Forever Goodbye." On the last tune -- co-written with his wife, Sue Turner-Cray -- Cray channels Bobby "Blue" Bland and O.V. Wright trading hip late-night sets at some after-hours joint down around the crossroads of Dread Street and Lonely Avenue, and is stark, dark and on the mark.

While Pugh's own "Love 2009" essays issues of faith 'n' fidelity over a sparse, almost

Philly soul groove, the Pugh-Cousins co-write "[To Be True](#)" is a reggae-flavored plea for reconciliation. Cousins also co-wrote (with Swiss musician Hendrix Ackle) the album's closing track, "Truce," a love-wars, jazzy blues ballad a la Ray Charles or Percy Mayfield with a marvelously understated, almost conversational vocal.

Not to be outdone, trapsman Braunagel and guitarist/non-group member Johnnie Lee Schell toss "That's What Keeps Me Rockin'" into the mix. It's a jazzy shuffle that just might contain Cray's best solo -- dig how he starts by dropping to the bottom of the fretboard, then (eventually) builds to a barrage of barrel chords. (There's a whole lotta contenders. Drop the laser on the disc -- or, if you're old-school, the needle on the rekkid -- and voice your choice.)

This is all supremely tasteful, not-a-note-wasted, guitar-oriented blues 'n' soul that hearkens back to the halcyon daze of Stax, Hi, and Muscle Shoals. And, as you might expect from what is something like Cray's 17th studio LP, it's far more musical and more accomplished than most. Now hand me down that sippin' whiskey...

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