

# REVIEWS

## Blue Lightning

1ST STRIKE

[www.bluelightningblues.com](http://www.bluelightningblues.com)



"This is the record I've always wanted to make," Mad Dog Friedman explains about his collaboration with Louisiana Sam Gillis, better known as the duo Blue Lightning. Several things make this a one-of-a-kind recording more so than just a harmonica-guitar affair. Not only is it 15 tracks of pure country blues with time-honored selections from Robert Johnson, Mississippi Fred McDowell, Lightnin' Hopkins and Big Joe Williams but it also features nine authentic originals written in that idiom.

Other than this recording and Guy Davis and Fabrizio Poggio's 2017 Grammy nominated *Sonny & Brownie's Last Train*, country blues is rarely recorded anymore. It demands airtight interaction by its participants while the arrangements resemble a tightly woven fabric where each musician constantly crisscrosses under, around and over the other.

And instead of straight 12 bar solos dominated by a single soloist, country blues features lots of lickety-split fill-ins and call-and-response riffs while the other leads the melody. That's something that Friedman and Gillis do naturally, leveraging their uncanny but telepathic interplay.

Ironically, they had only known each other for a couple of months when they started this project in the spring of 2017. They had just finished a successful run of the Colorado Blues Society's International Blues Competition, going all the way to the finals in the solo-duo category.

Two-thirds of these tracks are live recordings with five tracks being studio cuts recorded live. The selections are sequenced

seamlessly together and the occasional spoken intro provides better insight into the duos' talents. On "Harmonica Cadillac," Friedman recounts a story how it's really the harmonica, not the guitar, that attracted the school girls and then unleashes a hellacious tear. On "Hear Me Crying," he explains the poor man's copyright: send a recording to yourself via registered mail, thereby automatically copyrighting it. He did just that in the 70s and it would be decades later when Friedman would revisit that forgotten slow, moaning composition and re-record it.

Though the dynamic duo have performed these songs multiple times, they've never been played the same way twice, indicating there's always something new being invented. Like a lot of great musical moments, this project represented a short passage of time that may not ever be replicated. Gillis will be furthering his solo career so one off shows will probably happen less. "It may be a backburner gig for him," Friedman summarizes. "But for me, it'll always be going home."

- DAN WILLING

*"...pure country blues  
with time-honored  
selections from  
Robert Johnson,  
Mississippi Fred  
McDowell..."*