

Thom Rotella Plays the Blues

“Out of the Blues” – Four Bar Music; © 2007 Thom Rotella (632127080322)
by Skoot Larson

For anyone unfamiliar with Thom’s work, he is equally gifted as a composer and guitarist. Dressed in his music-writing hat, he has created the soundtracks for television shows like “Sex and the City,” “Santa Barbara,” and more. Under his ‘virtuoso’ headgear, Thom is one of the top studio sidemen on his instrument when he’s not fronting the Thom Rotella 4-tet. Rotella has made appearances on programs like “The Tonight Show,” and “Tracy Ullman.”

Rotella’s 4-tet blends his six strings with a trio of like-minded musician, including bassist-extraordinaire Luther Hughes, drummer Roy McCurdy, and the piano of Liew Matthews (a man who is not only an amazing keyboardist in his own right, but has the ability to imitate the style of any other jazz great one could name!) though on four tracks of “Out of the Blues’,” Liew is replaced by the equally capable Rich Eames.

After only a few bars of music, it becomes apparent that “Out of the Blues” is largely a tribute to Thom’s hero, Wes Montgomery. Rotella’s easy, laid-back playing herein demonstrates abundantly that he has spent many hours listening to the “*magic thumb*,” and that Montgomery’s style is a major influence on Rotella’s playing.

The most interesting song on this disc is Rotella’s own “Shimmer.” This slow-tempo, meditative melody demonstrates the thoughtful unity between Rotella’s chosen sidemen. Rich Eames tends the keyboard on this selection, in his sonically deep and harmonically intriguing ballad style. The interplay of Hughes’ contrabass with each of the others emphasizes the haunting call of Rotella’s composition.

Rotella’s bossa nova contribution to the session, “All Ways,” is another memorable treat. The leader’s guitar feels very comfortable with the casual Brazilian beat and Rotella’s solo efforts on this track demonstrate his own unconstrained elegance. If only this track were longer! Matthews has only one short chorus here, and barely gets started before the track is over. Possibly Rotella could stretch-out on this idea for a future recording.

Seven of the ten tracks on this recording are Rotella originals, and most of those are swinging mid-tempo blues tunes. Rotella and the group show a fondness for the long fade to ending, adding a little more stretch-out time for any remaining ideas. These songs also provide a great vehicle for Rotella's Montgomery style 'octave-slide' riffs. Standards "My Foolish Heart," "The Way You Look Tonight," and "I Hear a Rhapsody" round out the offering.

Remarkable among Rotella's twelve-bar compositions is "The Dr. is In," a simple but eloquent blues waltz that will keep your feet moving long after the song has ended, sporting the kind of melody that stays in your head with a smile on its face.

If you are a Wes Montgomery fan, you'll love this CD, but then, anyone who just likes a bluesy and creative guitar will be just as taken with these ten tunes. Luther Hughes' bass weaves a captivating web behind it all. McCurdy keep a solid rhythm that keeps the 4-tet's expressions and impression driving forward.

"Out of the Blues" is Thom Rotella's eighth album as a leader. Once you've heard it, you'll want it in your own collection. "Out of the Blues" is definitely a first class, five-star jazz recording.

More information about Thom and the band can be found at www.thomrotella.com. "Out of the Blues" can be purchased from Thom's website or at www.cdbaby.com.