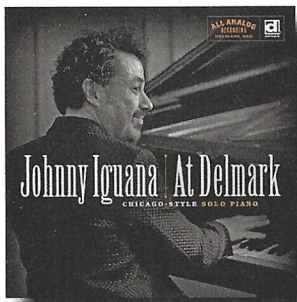


JOHNNY IGUANA
At Delmark
Delmark Records



This album features Johnny Iguana (Brian Berkowitz), one of a few modern players fluent in the Chicago blues piano traditions, having been in the bands for Junior Wells and Otis Rush. His 2020 Delmark release, *Johnny Iguana's Chicago Spectacular!*, was his homage to many of the great Chicago players. He also has been the leader of the Claudettes, a group known for their quirky blend of blues, rock, and other musical genres.

This time the approach was different. Iguana went into Delmark's Riverside studio in Chicago, where a 1917 Steinway B grand piano was waiting. The recording was done on an '80s Sony MCI 2-inch analog tape machine, providing extra layers of realistic sound. Over the three sessions, Iguana let his imagination flow on a dozen solo instrumental piano excursions done in one take, no overdubs or other alterations.

Little Brother Montgomery's "Bass Key Boogie" gets things off to a rousing start as Iguana's left hand lays down a solid foundation while his right hand holds your attention as it dances across the keyboard. Next up is a brief but powerful rendition of Neil Young's "Heart Of Gold," with some hints of the blues influences Iguana discovered in the song's structure.

Taking "Messin' With The Kid," for a joyride, Iguana transforms the blues classic into a tribute to the New Orleans piano tradition of Professor Longhair and Dr. John before throwing in a bit Cannonball Adderley's "Jive Samba" for good measure. Another classic, Magic Sam's "You Belong To Me," takes on some dark overtones that dissipate once the pianist launched into his cleverly crafted runs.

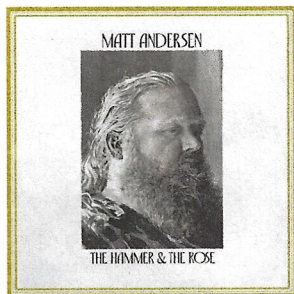
Other highlights are the infectious romps that Iguana conjures up on Chuck Berry's "You Can Never Tell" and Jay McShann's "Roll 'Em," his nimble fingers creating sparkling embellishments over the hypnotic rhythms.

One of Iguana's originals, "For Dancers Only," is a free-form musical voyage with numerous tempo changes while "Stormy Night" comes across as a tribute to the New Orleans piano legend James Booker. "Tripping In A French Ambulance" is an intricate piano rumination, followed by the slower paced improvisations on "One More, For The Cleaning Crew." His dramatic presentation on "Welcome Distractions" flows from percussive chords to quieter, gentle passages and back without missing a beat.

If you have never heard Johnny Iguana, listening to this fine album will undoubtedly convince you to become a fan. There is plenty to enjoy, and at times, challenge anyone with more than a passing interest in Chicago blues piano.

– Mark Thompson

MATT ANDERSEN
The Hammer And The Rose
All Eyes Media



One of the many delights of Matt Andersen's music is its variety and unexpectedness. Since winning the 2010 International Blues Challenge in the Solo/Duo category, the northeastern Canadian musician has released albums ranging from raunchy, raucous rock to introspective acoustic gems, with a pared-down band, a band with horn section, or as solo outputs. Constant is his deft guitar artistry, songwriting skill, and voice.

His newest album emphasizes the latter. Lap steel guitarist Christine Bougie, acoustic guitarist Afie Jurvanen, and bassist Kyle Cunjak are the string instrument cohorts present, in tandem with Aaron Comeau on keyboards. Those anticipating more enjoyment of Andersen's guitar mastery will have to be content with the steady and soulful playing of the ensemble. Those also awaiting a traditional, Chicago, West Coast, New Orleans, or other sub-genre feast of blues will have to settle for ten songs firmly in a balladist tradition.

Well, "settle" isn't really the right word. The album is a delight to savor, from its inception with the title tune, a presentation of the conflict between hammer (head, cognition) and rose (heart, emotion). There are two upbeat tracks; the first, "Wayaheadayha," is a 12-bar blues with one of Andersen's most powerful vocals, and "The Cobbler (Good For My Sole)" is a mostly instrumental number with an infectious lilt. "Countin' Quarters," with haunting steel guitar, is a pensive tune about financial and other insecurity.

The remainder of the tracks are ballads of friendship or love: "Stay Home With You," "Hold On To Me," "Tonight Belongs To You," and "Magnolia" mine the terrain of amour. All are sublime and are distinguished by Andersen's singing. The man has a voice made in heaven. His singing sounds effortless, yet it is pitch-perfect, has wide range, and is suffused with emotion. The only other contemporary blues vocalists whose emotive capability is comparable in my opinion are Ruthie Foster, Janiva Magness, and Curtis Salgado.

The set closes on a stirring, heartwarming note with "Always Be Your Son," a song for Matt Andersen's father. Dad has indisputable reason to be very proud.

– Dan Stevens