

John Clifton
"Let Yourself Go"
Rip Cat Records

By Peter "Blewzzman" Lauro © October 2015

It doesn't matter how many times these west coast record companies go to the well that produces this "So cool, So Cal" sound because this well is obviously never running dry. The latest sharp looking, sharp sounding entity coming out of that pool is Rip Cat Records recording artist, John Clifton. In addition to being a part of the west coast blues scene since the eighties, John - a singer, songwriter, harpist, guitarist and producer - has also played all over the world as a member of the MoFo Party Band.

On "Let Yourself Go" - which I believe is his first solo release - John Clifton, on the vocals and harmonica, is joined by quite an impressive group of musicians that include: Rusty Zinn, Bob Welsh, Roger Perry, Kid Ramos, Bill Clifton and label boss Scott Abeyta on guitar; Mike Turturro, Jake Finney and Matt Moulton on bass; Marty Dotson and John Shafer on drums; Bartek Szopinski and Bob Welsh on piano and organ; Mike Miller, Ed Burke, Mystique Steward, Alex Ayala, Debbi Ruud and Roger Perry on background vocals; and Mystique Steward, David "Big D" Fields, John Shafer and Peter Wolf on bongos, congas, tambourine and hand claps.

My normal routine when I do these reviews is to listen to the disc a few times and figure out which songs I enjoyed the most then say something about those songs. Having said that, the ultimate compliment I can give "Let Yourself Go" is to say that was easier said than done. From the start to the finish, these thirteen tracks are all worthy of praise. Since that's the case, I think I'll go with a handful of the seven originals.

The first of those is a song named for a place that's dear to many of us blues folk, it's an instrumental called "Beer Joint". This house rocker starts off with John and Bartek fiercely dueling it out on the harp and piano before giving way to Scott and Bill who then take over on an equally fierce guitar duel. Naturally, Mike and Marty are fueling these duels with their own frantic rhythm pace. Damn, all I did was listen and I even need a rest.

The questions this song asks made me actually question the way I think about them. It goes like this... 'If you see your brother walking down the street, asking you for something to eat, "Would You Understand", would you lend a helping hand or would you just let him be? If you see your brother and he's down on his luck, asking you if you could spare a buck, would you understand, would you lend a helping hand or would you just pass him up? Have you ever heard a hungry baby cry, while his momma's out getting high, would you understand, would you lend a helping hand or would you just pass on by?' These words; the rest of the songs compelling lyrics; the intense, heartfelt vocals and background vocals; the awakening harp leads; and the profound & edgy rhythm and percussion all caused me to do some soul searching. As I often say when songs move me like this one did, this is song of the year material.

Similar to listening to one of those audio books, this song is like listening to audio geography. Put a map on the wall in a room full of blues enthusiast's and they'll all point to the state of California when "Anytime Is Cool" comes on. This is classic west coast blues at it's best.

It's "Garbage Day" baby, woman I've just got to put you out. Put you out like a dog in the morning, put you out like the trash at night.' Whoa! With an opening line like that you'd be right to guess that this one is good old, low down, raunchy blues and the more low down and raunchier the better I like it. With the band playing scorching blues behind him, John takes this one and runs with it. Over it's five plus minutes, he's either belting the hell out of it vocally or blowin' the hell out of it on harp.

Another of the tracks penned by John is "Every Time You Come Around". This is the kind of stuff us baby boomer blues buffs - well this one, anyway - could listen to all day long. It's right out of the fifties and although it contains musical instrumentation, I could probably name a few dozen street corner a cappella groups the background singers reminded me of. Hearing him singing this one, I know John knows just what I'm talking about. Musically, Rusty and Bob are masterful on the smooth guitar work; and Bartek's piano playing is telling me he may have experienced the era as well as I did. I can't even begin to fathom a guess as to the number of times I replayed this one.

Of the approximately fifty reviews a year I do, I occasionally hear a few that I say "short of giving you your money back I guarantee you are going to love this CD" - this is one of them.