

BLUESBLAST

MAGAZINE



The Ragpicker String Band

Yellow Dog Records

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Combining the talents of three long-time purveyors of acoustic blues, the Ragpicker String Band delivers a treasure-trove of originals and covers that hark back to a by-gone era, yet sound totally modern in their expert hands. Rich DelGrosso plays a variety of mandolins and the dobro while another familiar name, Mary Flower, showcases her award-winning finger-picking on guitar and lap slide. The third member, Martin Grosswendt, may be a new name for blues fans but he is a multi-instrumentalist who has become an expert on pre-war blues styles, a teacher of considerable renown, and a musician with wide-ranging interests. All three are accomplished singers, giving the band plenty of flexibility in the vocal arena.

DelGrosso's mandolin opens "Honey Babe," then the trio harmonizes beautifully before each member adds a subtle solo segment. Flower takes the lead on Lil Johnson's "Minor Blues," a forlorn description of lost love punctuated by Grosswendt on fiddle. Producer Mark "Kaz" Kazanoff joins the two guitarists on backing vocals for "Google Blues," a hilarious tale of the perils of trying to start a relationship in the modern age. DelGrosso's understated vocal enhances the song's humorous aspects before Grosswendt lays down a sinuous bottleneck slide solo. Next up is fascinating rendition of the Thelonious Monk jazz classic, "Blue Monk". The instrumentalists take a laid-back approach to their improvising on the melody on one of the disc's many high points. "Motel Towel" is metaphor for the inevitable results of involvement with a woman with a "love 'em & leave 'em" mentality. Once again the dark tones of DelGrosso's voice are exactly what the song needs.

Grosswendt takes the lead on two Sleepy John Estes tunes. His rich voice sounds mighty fine on “Clean Up At Home” and he switches to the mandolin with DelGrosso playing the mandola, a stringed instrument that is tuned lower than the mandolin. They keep the same line-up on the classic “Milk Cow Blues,” both instruments dancing around Flower’s intricate guitar lines. “Black Mattie” comes to life through DelGrosso’s deep voice and bright mandola notes over Grosswendt’s sweet slide playing. Fiddle, guitar and mandolin in addition to more outstanding harmonizing recreate the legacy of the Mississippi Sheiks on “Lonely One In This Town”. Flower’s artistry is on full display on the traditional, “Trimmed And Burning,” her vocal ringing out over the lone guitar with her partners supplying the backing vocals.

The sprightly pace of Flower’s original “Baby Where You Been” is a treat as is DelGrosso’s dobro playing while Grosswendt handles the mandolin. “By Your Side” is DelGrosso’s loving declaration over exquisite interplay between mandola, lap steel, and guitar. His mandolin propels the arrangement of his other original, “Street Doctor Blues,” highlighted one more time by Flower on lap steel. Her contemplative instrumental, “Bruno’s Dream,” gives the group one last opportunity for musical merry-making.

Nominated for a *Blues Music Award* for Acoustic Album of the year, the Ragpicker String Band is a joyous celebration of the acoustic blues tradition. DelGrosso, Flower, and Grosswendt are the perfect antidote for screaming vocals and overbearing instrumental solos. Their relaxed approach can’t hide the layers of complexity that enliven each track on this outstanding recording. Definitely one that you don’t want to miss!

Reviewer Mark Thompson lives in Florida, where he is enjoying life without snow. He is a member of the Board of Directors for the Suncoast Blues Society and the past president of the Crossroads Blues Society of Northern Illinois. Music has been a huge part of his life for the past fifty years – just ask his wife!.