

Rustic Piano a Day at Heart Land Hill

By

Donovan Johnson

Written by

Steve Sheppard

Sometimes, just when you think you have heard everything something comes along to shake your musical tree, and this is exactly what happened the moment I started to review this amazing new release by **Donovan Johnson**, which features *Michael DeLuca* on Drums, *George Laughery* and *Kevin Martinez* on Guitar, *Ed Archibald* on Sax, *Eric Bikales* on Flute and *Josie Quick* on fiddle.

Rustic Piano starts with an opener that any rock band would walk on stage to, it has power, intensity and a presence of description. The slow build, bursts into a segment of piano that is performed with such passion; quite simply the best start to an album I have heard for years on the opener **Wild Blue Yonder**.

Think stage act and then enjoy the moment as the band lays down a vibrant rustic little number called **Heart Land Hill**, the piano drives a lively narrative in a rag time styled rock n roll themed jazzy ethic, one that is simply impossible not to tap your toes too.

With **Early to Rise**, we're moving into a more melodic structured piece that still has a wonderful flow to it. Johnson on piano reigns supreme and at times reminds me a little of that *Elton John* classic *Roy Rogers*. The jazz break at just over the 2 minute mark on flute is a totally addictive segment in a totally addictive composition.

Any track that has a *Star Trek* reference gets my attention, but this one has nothing to do with star ships and warp speed. This is one of the most memorable pieces of piano I have heard from Donovan in quite some time, the tempo is slow and thoughtful; one can visualize wide open plains and Buffalo roaming in an August

sunset. Johnson has created a ballad of great quality here and one that will resonate in my heart for eons, as he reaches **The Final Frontier**.

I used to love listening to the sounds of the trains in the early morning when I lived in the states; however this is one train that would move a lot faster through the heartlands, this is Johnson in full flow on **Boxcar Bust**. Now if I ever got to see this band in concert, this is one track I would be calling out for, performed with power and a whole lot fun.

Backwoods Wedding carries on that fun rag time theme, with a little added fiddle in for good measure as well. Johnson has once more created a composition filled full of the energy of fun and laughter, a sun kissed moment of musical marital bliss.

Now for those of you who wondered where I stayed whilst I was in the US, this track should explain all, it's called **Oklahoma 1935**; however it was 2005 for me. The land of two seasons, summer and winter is laid bare upon our musical table and here within lies a mournful composition that hovers like the early morning sun that floats of the creeks of the Midwest. I found this piece deeply emotive and very moving. Of course I have a connection to the area, but I must congratulate the artist on his creativity and arrangement upon this stunning song.

I had to stop for a few minutes after the last track, a little emotion blew in through my window that I had to process, the last thing I remember when I left Oklahoma was the tequila sunrise in the sky, but now the artist has other plans for me and it's time to lighten the mood as we sit upon **The Porch Rocker**. **Donovan Johnson's** creation has the perfect sense of swing for that moment of sunset on the porch, as we watch the night go down to a light and jazzy styled arrangement.

I have one question for you, are you ready to rumble? If the answer to that was yes, then let's get down to this lively dance styled moment of reverie called **Salebarn Rumble**. The perfect party number here, I once heard, would you believe, *Keith Emerson* perform a piece like this, that went down well too, here the artist uses the same energy and speed and intensity, to bring us another high octane offering.

It's time to flip the top down, turn up the stereo and take a road trip down the **Backroads of Nebraska**. This is the perfect driving piece, a track of multi instrumentation class and hilarity; I mean how much fun can you have on one album?

Johnson gives his all in one moment of musical madness that would even surpass *Jerry Lee Lewis*, quite incredibly brilliant stuff.

We now change gear completely as we come across a gentle song called **Ashokan Farewell**; this waltz manifests a little Celtic ethic and one can ease back and enjoy the peace that it brings, the perfect arrangement to end an evening with.

We are very deep within the weave of the album now and come across an offering called **Losin' Time**. Once more we're on the dance floor with this one. Johnson's skills really set him up perfectly here for another moment to swing and move. For some reason this slightly reminds me of an up-tempo version of *Blueberry Hill*, which of course can't be a bad thing can it?

As we draw near to the end of our evening, it's time for another opportunity for a slow dance with the track, **In a Whisper**. The added backing vocals here add a layer to the overall composition, but I must stop this desire to fall into *Jim Reeves* mode. It's also good to hear Donovan's using his vocals on this track, now excuse me while, I turn the juke box way down low.

Once more we shift gear as we come across the penultimate piece off the release called **Class Reunion**. Here you will find a nice mixture of brass and piano. This narration is simply classy and touches the hem of blues and happens to be another favourite track off the album.

Well after that wonderful evening of entertainment, let's round off the evening with **The Star Spangled Banner**. I'm always interested to see how artists sign off when they use an anthem, especially one as well-known as this one. I have to say this is a very creative and gentle version; Johnson uses all his skills when performing this stylish ending to what has been an incredibly fun album.

Rustic Piano is really worth a listen, please open the heart and the mind and dive in deep, you're going to be happy you did, the production quality, the standard of performance and the energy and intent with which this project has been created is sublime, its vibrant and exciting, but contained within several gems that really deserve multiple listens and a lot of respect. **Donovan Johnson** has placed his heart on his sleeve and gone for it, and thus should be very proud of his efforts on this latest release, go on, give it a go, you know you want to.