

MULTIMEDIA REVIEWS

Tail Dragger: My Head Is Bald—Live at Vern's Friendly Lounge, Chicago. With Billy Branch, Lurrie Bell, and Jimmy Dawkins. Steven Wagner, producer; Tom Koester, director. Delmark DVD 782, 2005.

Outside the Chicago Loop, the cramped neighborhood blues taverns that dot the city's South and West Sides share the same mess of Christmas lights, wood-paneled and mirrored walls, worn vinyl-covered bar stools, colorful cocktails, and spirited entertainment. In this 2005 recording of an animated live set performed at Vern's Friendly Lounge in the black ghetto community of North Lawndale by blues veteran Tail Dragger and his band, Delmark Records and director Tom Koester offer viewers a rare and rewarding document of the social and musical environment surrounding the contemporary Chicago blues bar.

Born James Yancy Jones in Altheimer, Arkansas, in 1940, Tail Dragger was a protégé of Chicago blues legend Chester Burnett, a.k.a. Howlin' Wolf, and his stage name comes from the title of a 1962 Wolf classic: "I'm a tail dragger/I wipe out my tracks/When I get what I want/Well, I don't come sneakin' back." (Unlike the song's smooth narrator, Jones apparently received the nickname from Burnett due to his frequent lateness to gigs.) As perhaps foreshadowed by his unusual name, Tail Dragger is not like other blues singers in the city. While critics complain that the average blues bandleader packs his repertoire with moldy standards and overplayed R&B hits—"Sweet Home Chicago," "The Thrill Is Gone," "Every Day I Have the Blues," "Mustang Sally," "Soul Man"—Tail Dragger plays original material almost exclusively. Many contemporary Chicago blues shows resemble a boozed-up fraternity blowout packed with dance jams like James Brown's "Get Up (I Feel Like Being a Sex Machine)," while Tail Dragger's slow tunes suggest anything but party music, as illustrated by their depressing titles: "Sitting Here Singing My Blues," "Cold Out Doors," and "Prison Blues." (In the 1990s, Jones did serve time in prison for fatally shooting fellow bluesman Boston Blackie.) Blending the country twang of the harmonica with popping guitar riffs and a rhythm section that swings, Tail Dragger's band (featuring established journeymen Billy Branch, Lurrie Bell, Kevin Shanahan, Bob Stroger, and Kenny Smith) executes an energetic but stripped-down Chicago sound. This style of music making represents a throwback to the city's late 1940s–early 1950s blues era when pioneers like Muddy Waters, Jimmy Rogers, Little Walter, and Howlin' Wolf wedded the countrified honky-tonk of the Mississippi Delta to the amplified buzz of the electric guitar and the swinging jump-blues of urban jazz. If much of the blues music currently performed in Chicago sounds weighted down from the guitar pyrotechnics, digital synthesizers, and heavy-metal drumming reminiscent of classic rock, Tail Dragger's emotional intensity soars because his band's controlled tempo highlights the gruff swagger of his raw and guttural voice.

But even in its most dramatic moments, Tail Dragger's performance is a throwback all the same. Like many other contemporary Chicago blues performers, Tail Dragger's shtick often emphasizes stale impersonation over creative improvisation. He has nailed his mentor's buoyant strut and showmanship, as well as his signature

octave-jumping howl—“Ah-woo-hoo!” Unfortunately, his overwrought style of whooping, a survival of African vocalizing once popularized in the hollers and blues sung by Mississippi field hands, can feel as gimmicky as his clichéd getup, replete with signature cowboy hat, silk string tie, and well-chewed cigar. Following the tiresome performance of masculine bravado seemingly expected of all male soul singers and hip-hop artists today, Tail Dragger introduces “My Head Is Bald,” the recording’s title track, with this tired bit of banter: “You know, before we start this tune I’m gonna tell you something. A lot of men have walked around, they made fun of me, you know, because I don’t have no hair. But the ladies never ask me for no hair! They ask for money, and some loving, and as long as I’ve got this wiggle, I don’t need no hair!” (Perhaps, but spontaneous Tail Dragger is not. As far as this writer and blues enthusiast can gather from his own fieldwork, Jones has used a variation of this overrehearsed script every time I have seen him perform in Chicago during the last ten years.)

Still, amid the soured beer bottles, dirty ashtrays, and empty cocktail glasses at Vern’s Friendly Lounge, Tail Dragger’s performance represents one of the few bright spots in North Lawndale, a neighborhood plagued by violent crime, poverty, and social isolation. Pocketed with vacant lots and boarded-up buildings, this devastated neighborhood once anchored by the world headquarters of Sears, Roebuck, and Company now hobbles along as a crippled postindustrial shadow of its former self. Since the 1960s the population of North Lawndale, one of Chicago’s most racially segregated African American ghettos, has dropped from 125,000 residents to 42,000. In 2000, over 45 percent of its neighborhood population lived below the poverty line, the fourth-highest rate in the city. In this hollowed-out enclave miles away from Chicago’s downtown and North Side tourist-oriented blues corridors, Vern’s Friendly Lounge represents an oasis of local urban culture, musical pleasure, and even racial integration as emphasized by the venue’s multiracial audience and the addition of white guitarist Kevin Shanahan to Tail Dragger’s supporting ensemble. Despite the expectations of Chicago music fans searching for an authenticity superficially symbolized by blackness, the city’s blues bands represent a racial and ethnic polyglot of musicians that include African American southern migrants, local Polish residents, and Japanese immigrants among their ranks. Tail Dragger himself has fronted for the Rockin’ Johnny Band, a talented collection of young white and Asian American upstart players from Chicago’s racially integrated Hyde Park neighborhood. Alongside his older black bandmates Shanahan stands out with his long hair and pierced tongue (he grew up in the Chicago suburb of Flossmor), but as he has illustrated for years as a featured accompanist for blues and soul singer Jimmy Burns, he comfortably excels when backing an old-timer like Tail Dragger, who cheers him on during an up-tempo, rollicking performance of “So Eeze”: “Hey, Kevin, give me a little bit, son!” These and other close-up moments of bandstand camaraderie at Vern’s Friendly Lounge add distinctive and complementary detail to this lively and edifying ethnographic portrait of the Chicago blues scene.

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