



Rob Blaine
Big Otis Blues

Swississippi Records

The liner notes for this are on-target when they say Rob Blaine yanks “big chunks” of music from his guitar. But that’s not the whole story. Yes, he can channel Freddie King, Jimi Hendrix and, stomping on his wah pedal (“Not The Forgiving Kind”) he can even pull in the spirit of the underrated Ernie Isley. But Blaine can play it sweet and soulful, too. The Memphis-styled R&B of “Only Mine” and the Leslie-West-cum-Paul-Kossoff heaviness of “Affection and Pain” showcase his versatility as a player and writer, with the latter bringing back the spirit of the best of ’70s power-trio blues-rock.

A very good if not great vocalist, Blaine is also effective on the near-gospel slow blues of Don Nix’s “Same Old Blues.” And, showing he’s not one to let his ego get in the way of the big picture, he let’s Nigel Mack and his National steel take the spotlight on the instrumental “Gone, Not Forgotten” which bears a precariously close (but forgivable) resemblance to Rod Stewart’s “Mandolin Wind.” — **RA**



Mehran
Angels of Persepolis

Self-distributed

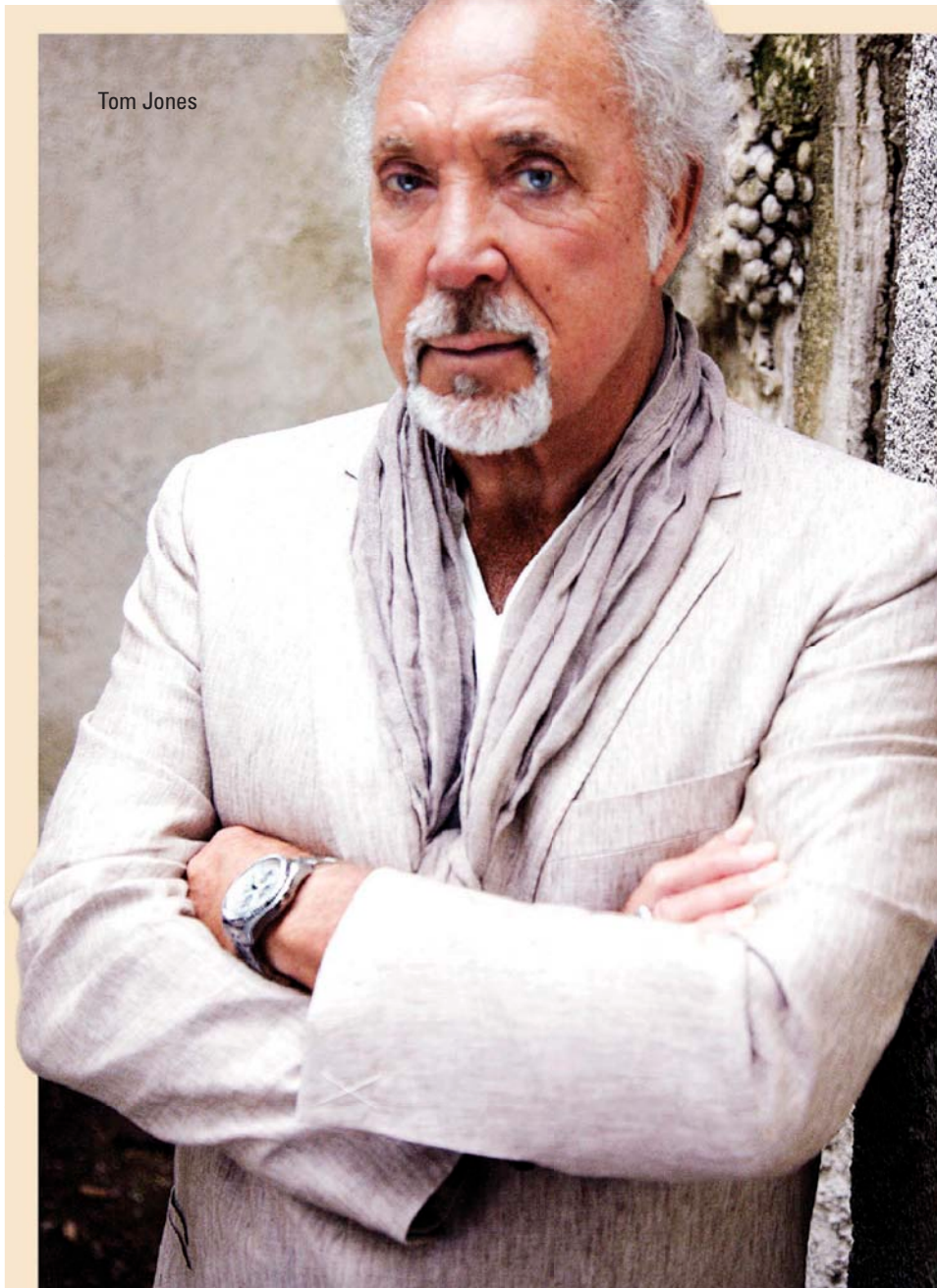
Iranian-born Mehran has mastered flamenco guitar and here uses his skills on a concept album about events in his home country.

The music is a mix of jazz, new age, and Iranian. The songs include dazzling solos and a mix of instruments, along with ambient sounds, snippets of speech from Winston Churchill and crowds of people.

Mehran’s soloing covers a lot of ground, but even in the quickest passages, it’s melodic. The solo on “Korean Soup” mixes his flamenco skill with jazz harmony where he solos flawlessly over nice changes. Same can be said for “The Oblong Box,” which is a melding of styles. “Minds Eye” is a solo piece that shows masterful chordal work and single-line soloing.

The instrumentation on this album supplies a noteworthy, different feel. The cello of Alyson Burger and violin of Manoela Wunder are prominent, and serve as tremendous foils for Mehran’s soloing.

Mehran is using his gift to spotlight the plight of the Iranian people, and this record is dedicated to their efforts to overthrow tyranny. The closing piece has no instrumentation. Instead, it’s a recording from Iran of the reading of “Rooftop Poem.” His commitment to the people shines. So does his guitar playing. — **JH**



Lowdown But Uplifting

A Tom Jones gospel album? The image that first comes to mind is probably something like Elvis’ *How Great Thou Art* – big production, choirs – and Jones certainly has the lungs to deliver that in spades. But his son/manager, Mark Woodward, obviously had a different idea when he called Ethan Johns to produce.

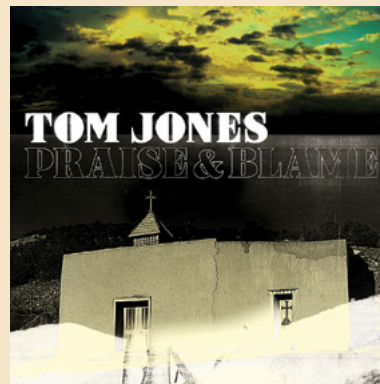
The 32-year-old son of famed Glyn Johns (and nephew of Glyn’s brother, Andy), Johns adds U2, Emmylou Harris, Joe Cocker, John Hiatt, CSN, Ryan Adams, Glen Phillips, Counting Crows, the Jayhawks, Ray LaMontagne, Kings Of Leon, Crowded House, and others to the family’s who’s-who resume of credits. But whereas Glyn

and Andy are producer/engineers, Ethan handles those roles in addition to playing guitar, keyboards, drums, bass, melotron, steel, banjo, Omnichord – just about anything except fiddle.

Anyone who saw director Mike Figgis’ “Red, White & Blues” chapter of Martin Scorsese’s PBS blues series likely had their eyes and ears opened if they thought Jones’ range ended with “What’s New Pussycat?” – as he displayed ample familiarity and ability belting out Howlin’ Wolf and Ray Charles tunes.

Here, Johns takes the Welsh singer back to the basics – not unlike Ry

Cooder’s production on Mavis Staples’ *We’ll Never Turn Back*. The rhythm section (sometimes just



Tom Jones
Praise & Blame

Lost Highway/Island

Johns playing guitar and kick drum) set up in a circle and played live in the studio – Jones laying

down vocals without even using headphones – and were done in 12 days flat.

Instead of copying source materials, they came up with mostly new arrangements – in some cases, barely referencing the old recordings. Hence, the lowdown riff Johns plays on Jessie Mae Hemphill’s “Lord Help” has nothing to do with what the blues singer/guitarist originally played. Likewise, the definition of gospel is flexible enough to accommodate John Lee Hooker’s “Burning Hell” – again, with Johns’ distorted slide riff utterly distinct from the Hook’s version.

It would be sacrilegious (no pun intended) to compare Tom Jones’ version of “Don’t Knock” to Mavis Staples’ reprise of the Staple Singers’ ’60s standard on her new CD, but, while Staples is more expressive, atop a loping groove, Jones rocks out over Johns’ one-note garage riff.

Johns played a different guitar on virtually every track – a Firebird on “Burning Hell,” a Phantom Teardrop on “Run On,” for instance – mainly through a late-’50s tweed Champ. (Among others, a Tele with a bender and Andy Blake Pickup Wizard pickups, a Harmony archtop, a ’69 Martin D-18, a ’62 Gretsch 6120 Nashville with Filtertrons were also employed – through Premier or Kay reverb tanks.)

In addition to such gospel fare as Blind Willie Johnson’s “Nobody’s Fault But Mine,” Mahalia Jackson’s “Didn’t It Rain” (penned by Roberta Martin), and traditional favorites “Run On” and “Ain’t No Grave” – the liners mistakenly crediting Jones and Johns as writers instead of arrangers – Jones is equally comfortable on the folk/country side of gospel, as evidenced by Dylan’s “What Good Am I?” and Susan Werner’s “Did Trouble Me.”

What direction Jones will take next is anybody’s guess, but after his recent riveting Letterman appearance, one hopes he’ll give this repertoire a nice long run on the road. — **Dan Forte**