

BLACKIE AND THE RODEO KINGS

Let's Frolic

Let's Frolic, the keenly-anticipated fourth album from Canadian roots rock heroes **Blackie and the Rodeo Kings**, is the sound of a band in this for all the right reasons. **Tom Wilson, Colin Linden** and **Stephen Fearing** have been together as BARK for a full decade now, but their sense of mutual respect, camaraderie, and love of each other's musical company has deepened, not weakened. As Fearing explains, "We can all get very worried and freaked out about our own solo careers, so why get into another career situation where you have to do that again? We take the music we make very seriously, but the process of making it has to be enjoyable."

That approach is clearly audible on ***Let's Frolic***, a typically freewheeling collection of compelling songs that defy easy genre pigeonholing. Here's an album that contains hardcore country ballads ("The Fool Who Can't Forget," Stephen's heart-strings tugging duet with U.S. country star Pam Tillis), Southern soul ("I Give It Up Everyday"), raucous rockers ("Buried In Your Heart," "That's What I Like"), infectious life-affirming anthems ("Let's Frolic," "Life Is Golden"), atmospheric epics ("Under The Rain"), and gentle blues, soul and folk-inflected tunes ("Crown Of Thorns," "Lovin' Cup," and "Heaven For A Lonely Man," respectively).

Enhancing the disc's diversity are the different songwriting teams involved. All three principals brought in solo compositions, and jointly wrote the powerful opening cut, "Silver Dreams," Tom and Stephen co-wrote together, and collaborated with Tawgs Salter, Russell Wilson and Andy White on other tunes. Janice Powers wrote "Crown Of Thorns," and long-time Blackie friend (and fan) Daniel Lanois donated "House Of Soul" on the condition the BARK version make him cry. Mission accomplished.

Giving *Let's Frolic* creative coherence is its consistently stellar musicianship, superb songwriting, and emotionally eloquent vocal performances. Add in the unforced, organic production of Colin Linden, himself an award-winning captain of the recording console (Bruce Cockburn, Colin James, Sue Foley), and you have an irresistible package.

Prior to setting up camp last January at the famed Bearsville Studios in Woodstock, N.Y. (birthplace of albums by Muddy Waters, The Band, and Jeff Buckley), BARK workshopped the new tunes in front of eager crowds at The Black Sheep in Wakefield and their favourite Toronto honkytonk, The Horseshoe. "We have a lot in common with our fans, and they love the idea of us working it out each night," Colin explains.

Fired up by the response, Blackie lassoed 29 songs in the studio, enough for two full albums. In a creative marketing strategy, this musical treasure trove is being unearthed in two stages, with *Let's Frolic* (out on Sept. 12) to be followed by *Let's Frolic Again* in early 2007.

Lending impeccable support on the sessions were longtime BARK accompanists John Dymond (bass), Gary Craig (drums), and keyboardist Richard Bell, a veteran sideman to the likes of Janis Joplin, Bruce Cockburn and The Band. They were joined by multi-instrumentalist Malcolm Burn (Daniel Lanois, Emmylou Harris), keyboardist/engineer

John Whynot (Blue Rodeo, Bruce Cockburn), Wayne Jackson (Memphis Horns), and the legendary Garth Hudson (The Band), whose work will surface on *Let's Frolic Again*.

Recording for Blackie and the Rodeo Kings always means total, 24/7, immersion in the project. Tom Wilson jokingly refers to the process as "a middle-aged *Lord Of The Flies*," in which the trio will retreat to an isolated place, cook, eat and drink together with gusto, then totally focus on the music. "I believe that in making a record it is really important to get away from home, step away from your daily life, and allow yourself to live inside the music. Let it be your life for that period," Tom notes. This method was used with great results on the previous two Blackie records, 1999's Juno-winning *Kings Of Love* and 2003's *BARK*, an album that earned them major Americana radio play in the U.S..

Finding the time for that studio experience is a tricky logistic exercise. All three Rodeo Kings have thriving individual solo careers, with each putting out their own records (Tom's *Dog Years*, Stephen's *Yellowjacket*, and Colin's *easin' back to tennessee*), in the past 12 months.

Not that *BARK* should be seen as some kind of side project. It did start out spontaneously, with the trio forming for what they thought would be a one-off homage to Canadian folk music hero (and still Blackie's guiding spirit), Willie P. Bennett. Their musical chemistry and the reaction to that tribute, *BARK*'s 1996 debut, *High Or Hurtin'*, were so positive, they decided to run with it. Now each member is completely committed to the band, and the result is a band that is even greater than the sum of its parts. Given that the individual parts are pretty damned impressive, that's saying something.

The sheer pleasure they derive from playing in Blackie and the Rodeo Kings shines through onstage, and that's another key to their success. They're simply one of the very best Canadian live bands around, as anyone who has seen them play will testify. Just ask country great Merle Haggard, who invited them to open a national tour in 2004.

The presence of three different lead vocalists allows them to explore wide musical terrain, while they harmonize together in original and thrilling fashion. Factor in Tom's larger than life charisma and wise-cracking asides, Colin's fluent yet fiery guitar work, Stephen's spot-on vocal and guitar stylings, and the vibrantly-hued stage costumes, and you have a combination built to thrill.

So what are you waiting for? Let's Frolic!

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