

ECLECTO GROOVE

R E C O R D S

THE SOUL OF JOHN BLACK

The Soul Of John Black is the nom de musique of John Bigham, whose impressive resume includes a stint as percussionist with the Miles Davis band, eight years of guitar and keyboard work with the pioneering rock-funk-ska band Fishbone, and touring and session work with Dr. Dré, Eminem, Nikka Costa, Bruce Hornsby and Everlast, just to name a few.

"I never intended to be a performer," Bigham says. "I loved music and wanted to be a part of it, but by picking up a guitar, coming to California and telling people I was a musician, I put things in motion. Somebody told somebody else I was a musician, then next thing I knew, I was in Paris playing with Miles Davis. When Miles first asked me if I could play percussion, I said yes, even though I'd never played percussion, because I knew how percussion should sound, and I knew I could do it. He said 'Show me,' and I did, and that was it."

Bigham's been doing it ever since and on new album Black John, there's more sex, more funk, and deeper, more complex rhythms than his previous work. The album's loose, friendly vibe is guaranteed to pull you out of your seat and onto the dance floor. "I was on the road last year, playing clubs," Bigham explains. "The people who go to clubs are all about the party. They come out to have a good time and dance and get into it. I worked a lot of these new songs out playing at Café Boogaloo in Hermosa Beach, a place with plenty of good time beach energy. Playing there made me want to make an upbeat album."

The arrangements on Black John blend blues, folk, funk, rock, country, classic soul, Gospel and world music, but Bigham doesn't spend a lot of time planning out his line of attack. "I have my own style, but I have no preconceived notions about what a song's going to sound like. I get it down by feel and instinct, just doing what comes naturally. It's the same approach I've taken to my entire career, and my life, for that matter.

"Black John" kicks off the party off with a folk-like tall tale in the tradition of John Brown and John Henry. It opens with acoustic guitar and handclaps, then jumps into the groove with funky, stuttering electric guitar accents, booming bass, and electric piano. Bigham's forceful vocal, swooping synth accents and a short, stinging guitar solo give the tune an ominous feel, building up to the song's violent, ambiguous conclusion. "It seems like someone's going to die," Bigham says archly, "but it's unclear who. I like that element of uncertainty." Laura Jane Jones and Kandace Linsey provide backing harmonies that blend elements of

the street and the church.

"Betty Jean" is a tribute to Betty Davis, the black rock singer, known for her outrageous stage shows and radical costumes. The tune is funky and soulful with a laid back Caribbean feel. Adam McDougal's whistling, Memphis-style Hammond B3 work and guitar stabs that mimic the sound of a horn section, compliment Bigham's sly, sexy vocal. "White Dress" combines acoustic guitars, call and response vocals, and a popping snare and timbale pulse to create some Delta funk. Bigham's vibrant slide work on the acoustic Stella and his languid, slurred vocals bring to mind the lascivious singing of Son House and John Lee Hooker. The hook line - "white dress, black drawers" - creates an indelible image. "I didn't make that up," Bigham says. "When I saw that woman dancing in the sun in her white dress, I knew I had to write about it."

Bigham channels his inner Al Green for "Never Givin' Up," written with Chris "CT" Thomas, his long time musical collaborator. The tune has a Gospel feel with electric piano that mimics the sound of an R&B hit from the 70s. CT's atmospheric synthesizer accents and backing vocals by Kandace Linsey and Laura Jane Jones intensify the pleading quality of Bigham's lead vocal. Other stand out tracks include the slow, slinky PFunk groove of "Ever Changin' Emotions;" the lighthearted blues/rock of "I Knew A Lady," with a Texas blues meets DC Go Go bounce to its beat; the wide open country tune "Better Babe," marked by the ringing sound of Bigham's lingering guitar overtones and "Bottom Chick," which blends elements of ragtime, jazz, and boogie woogie piano into its countrified groove. Bigham delivers a faux harmonica solo using only his own vocal chords. "Thinking About You" closes the record with a traditional blues, just guitar and vocal. Clifton Collins, Jr., the actor famous for his role as killer Perry Smith in *Capote*, directed a video for "Thinking About You."

Bigham produced Black John cutting the tracks live, with minimal overdubs, at Kali Coast Studio with engineer Richard Segal, long time associate of Dr. Dré; Nikka Costa's Stella Studio with Justin Stanley; Jimmy Sloan's New King Studio, and Bigham's own home studio, Whitley Manor. Bigham assembled a large cast of like minded musicians to help him get his groove thang going including Adam McDougal on keys (Black Crowes, Macy Gray, Maroon 5, Nikka Costa), Oliver Charles (Ben Harper, Rhythm Roots All-Stars), Scott Seiver (Nikka Costa, Inara George), and Jake Najor on drums (Carl Denson, Connie Price, Breakestra), Shawn Davis on bass (Beck, Nikka Costa), Davey Chegwiddden on percussion (Rhythm Roots All-Stars, Bitter Sweet, Ghost Face Killer, Big Daddy Kane), and Bill Botrell (Grammy winning producer for Sheryl Crow and Shelby Lynne) on second guitar on "Never Givin' Up." Bigham played all the guitars: slide, acoustic and electric.

Bigham's last album, *The Good Girl Blues*, was nominated for Best New Artist Debut from the Blues Music Awards (formerly the W.C. Handy Awards) in 2008. It was hailed for the emotional power of its stark musical vision, a journey back to

the primal roots of the blues. On Black John, Bigham lightens up with songs that are funkier, more soulful and more groove oriented. The music still has its wicked moments, but there's a ray of sunshine shining through, even on the album's darkest tracks. Bigham brings the same laid back, but focused approach to his live gigs, be they solo with guitar and voice, guitar-bass-drum trio outings or full band jams. "I always keep my mind open to fresh ideas," he says. "The best music comes from free styling it within the confines of a structure. You have to let the music be what it wants to be and stay open to the sudden inspiration that you can get to with the perspiration."