

So what if Ron LaSalle is a late bloomer? His tobacco-cured vocals and stellar spirit have emerged fully mature from the confines of the rickhouse. The jazzy, bluesy, twangy mash of soulful roots rock that he distills for his sophomore album, *Nobody Rides for Free*, is magic and every second worth the wait. Perennially compared to Van Morrison, John Hiatt, Bob Seger and Tom Waits, LaSalle earns similar accolades this time out.

With *Nobody Rides for Free* LaSalle successfully manages to simultaneously seduce, preach, hypnotize, and amuse. Produced by the Manhattan Bros. and Recorded on 16-track 2" tape at Brent Little's Cream Puff Studios, Nashville, the album fittingly opens to the boot-thumpin', tambourine-jangling, Delta front porch-pickin' *Nashville Blues*. The only old-school blues number on the disc, the tune is a tribute to the artist's musical roots.

As a young bassist on Niagara Falls, New York's east side, LaSalle idolized James Jamerson and Duck Dunn. The influence of their rawly sensual styles ignites the bass-driven second track *Got Love to Blame*. Lyrically exploring a woman's romanticized hopes and loss, the music is unabashedly bump-n-grind. When you were young girl/ did you have little girl dreams?/About Prince Charming/ and his fairy tale steed?/ But did you settle/ for less than enough?/Maybe afraid girl/that you'd never find love? The sexy texture that results from the juxtaposition is fat, fine and silky smooth.

On any other album *Got Love to Blame* might be the pinnacle, but LaSalle is not content to leave well enough alone. Despite a recent divorce, he remains a true believer, and the ultimate theme of this album is love, had and lost, and what the choices you make in life cost. The gospel-influenced *I Am Love* takes a look at Love through Love's own eyes with LaSalle's guttural voice as conduit. All the white-washed souls/selling their quick cures/to the lost and lonely/forgetting I'm right here.

LaSalle co-wrote *I Am Love* with Dennis Robbins, of 70's Detroit blues-rock band The Rockets and *Two of a Kind, Workin' on a Full House* (Garth Brooks) fame. One of the great slide guitarists of his generation, it is Robbins' licks, supplemented by those of protégé son, Corey Robbins, that propel the goose-bump inducing bridge.

A step bluesier than *Too Angry to Pray*, LaSalle's critically acclaimed 2001 release, this bohemian bluesman is careful to reward faithful fans who still will find plenty of twang to enjoy on this record. But, as longtime admirers know, LaSalle's trademark soul twang is driven by rhythms more reminiscent of Muscle Shoals than of Nashville. The fact that, as a teenager, LaSalle heavily supplemented a de rigour diet of the Stones, Animals and James Brown with classics from John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf is obvious.

The sleeper highlight for twang lovers may well be the Delbertesque promise embedded in *Changed My Ways*, which, according to the artist, kicks off "Side Two" of the album. The Manhattan Brothers' production of it is marvelously raggedly and full of unrepentant fun. I've been doin' my best to break in/a brand new circle of friends./I quit drinkin', almost smokin'/ hell, those habits had to end./ I'm livin' straight as an arrow/ baby I'm doin' fine./I've changed my ways,/now how can I change your mind? They'll also

appreciate *Changing Horses*, a rocking, roadhouse party song and *To You* a serenade that could easily find its way into diehard country lovers' hearts.

A number of satisfying tunes round out the album, including Try to Trust Again (a seductive transition with dueling guitar licks so golden it could hold its own as an instrumental), *Act Our Age* (a 60's, south Philly style do wop ditty embracing mid-life crisis), *I Still Talk to Angels* (inspired by New York artist Samantha Keely Smith's painting Brightness Falls), *What Never Was* (a lament of passion and angst), and She Did Love Me (a bittersweet ballad highlighted by the mellow tremolo of its baritone guitar).

Vowing that his love was, in fact, true, LaSalle heads into the finalé like he opened the album, steeped in the blues. But with *Running Blues* the result is more nightclub reminiscent of Ray Charles than it is of anybody's front porch. Lived like strangers far too long./Let something right go so wrong./You blamed me, just like I blamed you./Now ain't it me, babe, who's here for you?

Almost as an epilogue, the album then concludes with its title track, Nobody Rides for Free. A hauntingly stark contrast to full band numbers on the record, lyrically this song is every bit as or more intense. /Ain't no shortcuts to happiness,/Life's just a lottery./We take our chances/ it's hit or miss,/but nobody rides for free. An intimate close, this cut will linger in your soul and ear long after the band goes home.

LaSalle's rootsy musicality, showcased across an eclectic mix of songs blended together by the warm growl of his distinctive vocals, makes Nobody Rides for Free slide down smooth like a fine bourbon should. Complex, creamy and deeply textured, LaSalle's sophomore album is equally sure to please both devout fans and new ones alike. Here is one musical brewmaster whose product we can enthusiastically recommend to connoisseurs.

LaSalle has written and recorded with some of the world's finest writers and musicians including Garry Tallent and Max Weinberg (Springsteen's E Street band), Richard Lee, Alto Reed (Bob Seger & the Silver Bullet Band), Bucky Baxter (Steve Earle, Bob Dylan), and George Marinelli (Bonnie Raitt, Bruce Hornsby). He has also had numerous songs used in films like Jeff Daniels' *Super Sucker*. A veteran of the road LaSalle toured with his band, the East Side Rockers, for over ten years, averaging 300 shows in 300 cities a year across the U.S and Canada. SRO crowds became the norm. You'll want to make sure to catch him when he brings *Nobody Ride for Free* to your town.