

### **Altered Five *Gotta Earn It* (Conclave/Cold Wind)**

Pure soul trumps all as the non-negotiable element of the blues and its related genres. In an age where flash and histrionics often masquerade for passion and commitment, it is cause for celebration when the real thing comes along. Altered Five conclusively proves they are it and deserve the groundswell of acclaim they are receiving for their second release, *Gotta Earn It*.

The taut but limber combo from Milwaukee with the hip name have been serving up a pungent blend of “rockin’ rhythm ‘n’ blues” for ten years with the emotional wallop and ecstatic release demanded by blues fans. In that time the five members have evolved from a skilled and discerning cover band into a creator of unique, inventive and authentic original blues-based music. Lead singer Jeff “JT” Taylor with the big voice cruises effortlessly from bruising barrelhouse grit to soothing R&B in conjunction with his writing partner, guitarist Jeff Schroedl, who likewise has total command of his instrument from blazing fury to jazzy finesse. Ray Tevich is that rare keyboardist who knows how to accompany and solo without overplaying while always serving the song. The muscular rhythm section of bassist Mark Solveson and drummer Scott Schroedl are so completely locked in as to be musically inseparable.

Together Altered Five have produced a remarkable musical experience containing seven originals and three select covers. Marvin Gaye’s classic Motown hit “Ain’t That Peculiar” is slowed and turned into a far funkier groove in the opening track as Taylor reaches deep to find the emotional center of the song and Jeff Schroedl comps and fills with barely constrained energy, squeezing out liquid notes in his solo. The original R&B ballad “Three Wishes” should become a modern classic. Testifying like a secular preacher, Taylor reveals his heartbreaking romantic failure with memorable lines such as, “Head in my hands, pain in my heart, couldn’t cope with the truth, or admit we’re falling apart. Lord knows I tried, no doubt remains, nothing ventured and nothing gained. Now it’s too late, too late to undo, because I used all three wishes on you,” intensified by Schroedl’s soaring, yearning solo. As is their exceptional talent, Altered Five take cover tunes and draw the low down blues out of them as they do with the title track, a lesser known Smokey Robinson-penned number for the Temptations. Solveson and Scott Schroedl dig in and add weight and substance to the foot-tapping groove as Taylor expresses with great conviction the meaning of earning love and Jeff Schroedl makes his guitar “talk” in assent.

Tough as nails chugging Chicago blues informs “Keep the Best.” The West Side minor tonality implies a measure of malevolence confirmed by Schroedl’s abrasive tone and bare-knuckles phrasing to match Taylor’s intoning the insistent mantra, “Lord, I’ll give back all the rest, just let me keep the best.” “Older, Wiser, Richer” swings the shuffle like mad with guitarist Schroedl driving the rhythm with sharp chord jabs and a propulsive, searing solo as Taylor proffers hard-earned advice about learned life lessons and Tevich displays his swirling organ chops. “Mona Lisa” visits the bayou for a swampy, hypnotic accompaniment that pays respectful tribute to Slim Harpo while adding dramatic chord changes that provide uplift. Taylor cleverly uses the famous painting as a metaphor for the unattainable woman he desires in his fantasy.

Further exercising his lyrical muscles, Taylor declares, “They call me the juggler, three or four at a time, easy come, easy go, I like a steady flow. No strings attached, no net below” in the

appropriately dark-hued “Tight Spot.” Tevich keeps the minor key track buoyant with his exceedingly tasty keyboard accompaniment as Taylor confesses typical male weakness and Schroedl punctuates with sharp, six-string outbursts, tacking on a sly quote from “All Your Love (I Miss Loving)” in the coda.

“Dynamite” is only one highlight of many on the disk. Polyrhythmic, dynamic, booty-shaking funk surrounds Taylor as he describes in detail the long list of attributes of an exceptional woman, his burning desire ramped up by Scott Schroedl’s pulsing, syncopated drumming, Jeff Schroedl’s wah wah guitar and the insinuating unison vocal/instrumental hook. Continuing with the theme that obsesses most men, Buddy Guy’s “Watch Yourself” jubilantly extols the overlooked charms of less than gorgeous females and even includes the lyric, “Pretty baby, these homely girls are really smart...you know you can’t tell the difference once you get them in the dark” paraphrased from an infamous risqué saying. An explosive house rocker propelled by bassist Solveson, Tevich and the Schroedl brothers, it gives Taylor the opportunity to cut loose in all his virile glory.

“Bounce Back” closes the expansive set with a moody, mid-tempo, jazzy slice of R&B featuring Taylor revealing, “If I’ve been worse I don’t remember, I can’t share the gloom and doom. Gotta get back off the mat, now I’m back a better man.” A moving tale that acknowledges his foibles and ultimate revival, it brilliantly sums up the heart of the blues as the repeating guitar riff simultaneously confers melancholy and hope.

Altered Five are well on their way to reaching the top, lofty level of the blues scene. Seemingly a quick trip over the course of two albums, it actually represents the result of that unbeatable combination of hard work, talent, commitment and obvious chemistry that has them functioning as one. Attaining popular art this great cannot be bought. It has to be earned.

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2005 Keeping the Blues Alive award winner in Journalism