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Altered Five puts a soulful twist on the blues with "Cryin' Mercy"

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Published Oct. 27, 2014

Milwaukee's Altered Five is a quintet that knows a few things about the blues -- a genre that, despite its name, often makes people feel good thanks to its soulful vibe.

Over the last year, the band -- which includes singer Jeff "JT" Taylor, guitarist Jeff Schroedl, bassist Mark Solveson, drummer Scott Schroedl and keyboardist Ray Tevich -- often put a little groove to its step when treading familiar turf with its own soulful, lyrical twist, especially on its latest album, "Cryin' Mercy."

The disc, set for release on Oct. 28, is the band's third in six years following the 2008 debut "Bluesified" and 2012's sophomore effort "Gotta Earn It." It sets out to put a contemporary spin on many common themes of the blues genre.

When Altered Five first launched onto the local music scene 12 years ago, it started out performing "bluesified" versions of popular songs and experimented with different genres including rock and soul.

By the release of "Gotta Earn It," the group had recorded and performed mostly original songs. With the new album, the band shows it's continuously evolving and steering more toward originality with all 11 tracks an original rather than familiar.

"It's always important to keep the listener engaged," Jeff Schroedl said. "It's no different than a movie; who wants a predictable plot? It can be little things, too, such as in the attention grabbing opening track 'Demon Woman,' we play through the start of the second verse and hit hard on beat 2 rather than typical downbeat of the measure. It keeps the listener off balance a bit and hopefully gives the music some added edge."

The fusion of elements is not always easy work, says Schroedl.

"There's a fine line between staying respectful of vintage traditions and evolving the sound to keep it current," Jeff Schroedl said. "It's a balance we don't take lightly. We try not to overthink the music, but we're certainly aware of how our sound bridges the past and present."

The band started working on the album in early 2013, only a few months following the release of "Gotta Earn It," which it had produced itself. This time around, Grammy-winner Tom Hambridge jumped on board to produce the album following a connection with mutual friend Bruce Iglauer from Chicago's Alligator

Records. Hambridge ended up being extremely valuable in terms of shaping the songs and the record overall.

"Tom had just finished his third album with Buddy Guy and was up for another Grammy with James Cotton, so we thought the chances of him agreeing to work with us were slim," Jeff Schroedl said. "Fortunately, he really liked what he heard and made the trip to Madison on one of the coldest weeks in the winter. It worked out great."

As it was prepping "Gotta Earn It," the band tested original songs at various shows before recording took place to get a feel as to what the audience responded to. By taking this approach, it allowed the new songs to evolve during performances. This is an approach that the quintet applied again for "Cryin' Mercy."

"We were able to try some of the songs live before recording again," Tevich said. "It's always really helpful to do that if possible. There's no better testing ground than a live audience."

The band tested a few songs live that summer and then started to focus on getting all of the work together later in the year.

"We've been playing together so long now that we have a really good sense for direction we'll take with a song, from aligning the key to JT's voice to the type of groove and feel that fits with the lyric and style," Scott Schroedl said.

The band experienced a wave of success following the release of "Gotta Earn It," including winning a WAMI award for "Best Blues Artist of the Year." Because the album received a lot of acclaim, especially for its unique blend of styles, the band felt confident in taking a big step up both lyrically and musically for "Cryin' Mercy."

"It always starts with the songs," Scott Schroedl said. "We tried to build on the little stylist things we do that are unique, and put even more effort into preparing for the recording, but most of all, we were especially focused on building the album from the ground up, starting with solid songs."

When approaching experimentation for "Cryin' Mercy," the band is more focused than ever and feels like it's found its sound, each member bringing different sounds to the table. According to Jeff Schroedl, this album plays directly to the musicians' strengths.

"In some ways, our last album sort of put us on the map with blues fans," Scott Schroedl continued. "This time around, we hope we can build on that and move up a notch or three."

Although the band has been busy prepping and recording the album over the last year or so, it's been keeping busy playing live year-round, performing recently at the Grafton Blues Festival and even finding time to film a couple of videos this month in Madison.

A release show is planned for Friday, Dec. 5 at the Milwaukee Ale House.

Although there isn't a song on the album titled "Cryin' Mercy," Jeff Schroedl says the name sums up the context of the sessions.

"Some of the best blues songs are deceptively simple," Jeff Schroedl said. "'I'm In Deep' is a good example of a simple lyric and blues form that just seems to connect with almost anyone; it's strange, but the blues often makes people feel good."