

INDIE SCENE



Jeff Fasano

CHRIS SMITHER

A veteran bluesman learns to make it happen all by himself



"PEOPLE SAY TO ME, 'WHAT I REALLY like is the fact that there's a rueful cynicism in what you sing,'" says Chris Smither. "I can see that. But I have to say, in my own defense, that most of my stuff has an element of hopefulness. Usually I'm trying to point out there's a way out of this stuff."

A veteran bluesman who looks on the bright side? Maybe—at 67, Smither has much to celebrate, including the release of *Hundred Dollar Valentine*, his first album to feature all his own material. Smither's infatuation with the blues began while he was a teen, spurred on by his admiration for the genre's giants.

"A friend handed me a record by Lightnin' Hopkins," he says. "I heard this solo guy that sounded like two guitars to me, although I was assured it was just one. I sat there and thought, 'You can call it blues all you want, but this is rock 'n' roll! That explains a lot right there, because I never wanted to be in a band. I wanted to do it by myself and here were these guys playing all by themselves. I felt so relieved. I thought, 'OK, I'm not crazy.' It was like a vindication."

It's been many years since the Miami-born Smither began writing and performing, achieving local notoriety on the Boston club circuit of the late '60s before releasing his debut album, 1970's *I'm a Stranger Too!* Wider recognition came when Bonnie Raitt recorded his song "Love Me Like a Man" on her second album, 1972's *Give It Up*. Smither has since seen his work covered by the likes of Diana Krall and Emmylou Harris. "Recordings are snapshots along a career, along a life, and there's going to be the wild hairs sticking up on top of your head or the place you forgot to shave," says Smither. "In the very beginning songwriting was daunting. I'd finish a song and think, 'That's it, I'll never be able to write another.' I didn't know enough about where they came from, and it was always a mystery as to how they got done at all. It's still a mystery to me how it happens but now I've learned to make it happen."

Smither has recorded for a variety of labels over the years, but today he's going his own way. "For one thing, there's no one to blame but yourself," he says. "When I was

starting, you had to have a record company, and you were at their mercy. They owned you, lock, stock and barrel. You basically gave away half your publishing—and for what? Who needs them? The digital age has made all the difference."

Smither finds satisfaction as CEO of his own career. "You can hire business people without having them own you," he says. "Sure, there are business decisions to make, but one would hope that over a 45-year career you can find people to make decisions for you that you can work with. Part of it is luck, and the other part is learning from experience that life's too short to be dealing with people who aren't optimistic or don't like to work. Then it's not so daunting. The choices look obvious." Indeed, Smither now realizes he's the same age as many of the masters he idolized early on. "Don't think that's escaped my attention," he says with a chuckle. "There's a realization that I've been doing this a while, and I'm still doing it successfully. It's an indication that I did something right."

—Lee Zimmerman

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