

Hammond Gamble, the album...

On B.B.King's 'Gambler Blues', Hammond Gamble sings:

*I don't know too much about gambling
I don't know much about the dice ...
But I know I'm going somewhere
I know I'm not gonna mess up twice.*

Yeah maybe, but for better or worse this album is very much Hammond's Gamble.

Now I don't know whether *Rip It Up* readers or Street Talk fans are blessed with a retentive memory, but, as I recall, defending Street Talk's complete lack of blues on their debut album, Hammond told this magazine something like, "Who wants to listen to me sing the blues, when you can go out and buy a B.B. King record?" It was, I thought at the time, a fair enough statement but, somehow, it seemed something of an injustice to the many Street Talk fans who demand a large slice of blues at every gig.

Despite a couple of blues concessions on *Battleground Of Fun*, the album, like the first, failed to sell particularly well. Shortly after the release of *Battleground*, Hammond entered Mandrill Studios with producer/bassist Bruce Lynch, skinsman Frank Gibson Jr and pianist Dave MacRae to fulfill a long-time ambition: to record a solo album. This, then, is the album that led to Street Talk's untimely demise.

Andy MacDonald's two contributions to the second album complemented Hammond's melodic 60's styled pop. Mike Caen's compositions, however, were very much entrenched in Eighties' raunch, at odds with the album's concept. Or so it would appear. Me, I thought Mike's songs balanced the affair out nicely. Still, this is neither fact nor hearsay, merely speculation on my part. All I know is Hammond left Mandrill after those initial recording sessions and announced his departure from the band. The rest, as they say, is ...

This album can be divided into three parts: blues (natch), ballads and, for want of a description, pop/rock. As a songwriter, there are many sides to Gamble. As has been mentioned in the past, his melodic structure owes much to the Beatles but also here on vinyl for the first time is a strong Stevie Wonder influence (particularly on 'Whistling The Blues In The Rain'). The production throughout is full-bodied with the musicianship always potent, if, sometimes, a little too precise.

The MacRae/Lynch/Gibson line-up is tough company to be sure, and one that appears — on the surface — to be somewhat incongruous

with the boozy blues one has come to associate with Hammond Gamble. But Street Talk fans can rest assured that Hammond has not (at least not yet) made any forays into the jazz world (Stuart Pearce, incidentally, relieves MacRae on five of the eleven tracks and even Jim Lawrie makes an appearance on one track) and the Lynch/Gibson rhythm machine expertly handle one or two tracks that would, I'm sure, be fumbled by Street Talk.

As a vocalist, Hammond Gamble just gets better and better. Even on the album's weakest moments, something is saved by Hammond's delivery. The set's bummer, for me, is 'Cold In Winter', a schmaltzy ballad with lines like:

*Autumn has taken the leaves from the trees
Blown by the wind that took your love from me*

As a lyricist, Hammond has rejected both the notion of arty poet and social commentator but he's drawn that fine line between pap and pop sensibility with a fine knack for turning clichés into ... profundity? ('I'm Kinda Lucky':

*I hope I wind up in heaven
And if I'm not wrong
They'll even let you in with a t-shirt on.)*

The two covers on the album are, not surprisingly, both blues numbers — 'Gamblers Blues' and the Alberta Hunter/Bessie Smith chestnut, 'Downhearted Blues'. The former features Gamble's guitar in all its familiar agony; the latter, however, is dominated by MacRae's honky-tonk piano. Although both MacRae and Pearce relieve Gamble at times, this is very much a guitar album; 'Daylight Robbery', for instance, features three (acoustic, slide and straight Fender) and Hammond even embellishes the album's closer, the ballad 'Who Did All This To Me?'

Despite being the country's biggest rock drawcard over the past twelve months, Street Talk have never enjoyed chart success. This irony could be explained by the shortage of their blues trademark. This album isn't all blues but it is the finest example of Hammond Gamble's soaring guitar and soulful phrasing to date. As a bonus we also get to hear Hammond with female backing chorus (Suzanne Lynch). This isn't the best locally-produced album of 1980 (I'll stick with *Battleground Of Fun* for that honour) but it is an excellent example of the multi-faceted Hammond Gamble and should get the Gluepot regulars running to the record rack.

John Dix

