



## THE NIGHTHAWKS

**444**

EllerSoul Records - ER1406-18

In and around Washington, DC, the Nighthawks, the quintessential American blues and roots bar band, are legendary—even if the term has otherwise been cheapened by massive overuse. They have outlasted most of the bars

and clubs they started in, way back in the early '70s when Jimmy Thackery was the guitarist and harp player Mark Wenner's full arm tattoos were still the shocking stuff of rough-and-tumble sailors, outlaws, and bikers. Nowadays, your average banker has more tattoos than Wenner, who is, however, just as intimidating with his fierce ten-hole Mississippi saxophone, as bombastic and fearless as ever.

Things have changed a little. The impassioned band went through many iterations and incarnations, always with Mark Wenner holding the name and sound of the ensemble together. By now, their original fans can attend their shows with three generations of family members, all of legal drinking age. Nowadays, Wenner is in the company of guitarist Paul Bell, bassist Johnny Castle and drummer Mark Stutso. No matter who was in the band, their Mid-Atlantic fans have always known them to be one of the very best bands in America. Indeed, for more than four decades the regional fans have been mystified and could more easily explain string theory than why this amazing band has not reached global fame.

If you need to explain that concept to the rest of the world, just give them **444**, the Nighthawks' explosive new CD, their 27th, a typical amalgam of blues, rock 'n' roll, honky-tonk, rockabilly, and roots rock—always blues based and heavily saturated with all the 'chillen of the blues. Muddy Waters loved the Nighthawks and they love him back, covering a Muddy song on every release. On **444** they put down a faithful version of *Louisiana Blues*. The CD starts off with the Du Drop-pers' 1950s R&B tune *Walk That Walk* (originally *Talk That Talk*)—lovely vocal harmonies with a blast of Wenner's superb harping. Johnny Castle wrote three fine songs for the album: the rockabilly title cut *444*, which could have come straight out of Sun Studios in the '50s, *High Snakes*, and *Roadside Cross*, an acoustic folk-Americana song that finishes the album with a gentle touch, with a guest appearance of mandolinist Akira Otsuka. Blues fans will delight at their hard-driving, passionate renditions of Gary Nicholson's *Nothin' but the Blues* and *Livin' the Blues*.

The Nighthawks have always been torch-bearers of pure, unadulterated roots and blues at its finest and **444** continues that proud legacy—interesting, fun, drawing on diverse traditions, and smooth like fine Kentucky bourbon.

—Frank Matheis