

BLACKFOOT

Title: Highway Song Live

Label: Atco

Release Date: 1982

Medium: Album

Availability: Very Good

Venue: Hammersmith Odeon, London, UK
Glasgow, Scotland

Recording Date: 1982

Lineup: Rick Medlocke - Vocals, guitar
Jakson Spires - Drums, vocals

Greg T. Walker - Bass, vocals
Charlie Hargrett - Guitar

Set List: Gimme Gimme Gimme
Every Man Should Know
Good Morning
Dry County
Rollin' & Tumblin'

Fly Away
Road Fever
Trouble In Mind
Train Train
Highway Song

Formed in the same Jacksonville, Florida bar circuit that produced contemporaries like the Allman Brothers Band and Lynyrd Skynyrd, Blackfoot moved from their southern rock roots to a harder rock sound in the late seventies and scored a platinum record. The album also contained two top forty singles. When subsequent albums did not sell as well, the group broke up in 1984. It has since reformed and is active today, with two of its original members still on board.

Blackfoot was initially formed in the late sixties by Rickey Medlocke, Jakson Spires, and Greg T. Walker. All three were American Indians. Medlocke was the grandson of bluegrass/delta blues singer Shorty Medlocke. He was raised as a son by the legendary musician and his wife. By the age of three, his grandfather had taught him banjo. As a five year old, he was proficient on guitar and was playing drums in his grandfather's band at the age of eight.

He formed his first band with Spires and Walker at the age of 10. Bizarrely, Medlocke appeared in a series of high school musicals (West Side Story, Oklahoma, Brigadoon) before turning his attention to rock and roll in the late sixties. Along with Walker and Spires, he found a transplanted New Yorker named Charlie Hargrett and formed Fresh Garbage. After changing their name to Blackfoot, the group developed a reputation as a great bar band. However, their attempts to break through outside of Florida failed and they broke up in 1970. Medlocke joined an early version of Lynyrd Skynyrd in 1970. When Medlocke left Skynyrd a year later, he reformed Blackfoot.

The group signed a record deal with Island Records after establishing themselves on the competitive Jacksonville bar circuit. In 1975, they debuted with *No Reservations*. They followed with *Flyin' High* in 1976 on Epic Records. While neither of these records charted, they were talented enough that Atco decided to sign them. Their label debut, *Strikes* (#42-1979), was their breakthrough, going platinum. The record yielded two top forty singles, "Highway Song" (#26) and "Train Train" (#38).

Despite the success of the album and high profile opening gigs for superstars like The Who, Deep Purple, AC/DC, ZZ Top, and Ted Nugent, they could not maintain their momentum. *Tomcattin'* (#50-1980) and *Marauder* (#48-1981) were disappointments. With US record sales sluggish, the band temporarily relocated

to England, where they were very popular on the concert circuit. During a three month tour of the British Isles, they recorded a live album, *Highway Song Live* (1982). Because of an internal fight between Atlantic's U.S. and European labels, it was only released in Europe. While popular there, this sealed their fate in their home country.

During recording sessions for their next studio album, *Siogo* (#82-1983), Hargrett left and was replaced by Bobby Barth. He also played on their last Atco release, *Vertical Smiles* (#176-1984). The last two albums also included ex Uriah Heep member Ken Hensley, who joined the band on keyboards in an attempt to broaden their sound. When it barely charted, Atco dropped the band. A couple of years later, they resurfaced as Rick Medlocke & Blackfoot. By then, Walker and Spires had left.

This version of the group released *Rick Medlocke & Blackfoot* in 1986 on Atlantic Records. It went nowhere and the band hit the road to survive. They toured constantly into the nineties. In 1990, they landed a record deal on a small label, Nalli Records, where they released *Medicine Man*. Five years later, they released *After The Reign* on Wildcat Records. It did not catch on and Medlocke finally gave up, joining Lynyrd Skynyrd in 1996. He remains a member to this day.

In 2003, interest grew via the internet in a Blackfoot reunion. Walker, Hargrett, Spires, and Barth agreed to reform and hit the road in 2004. On March 16, 2005, Spires died suddenly from an aneurysm. He was replaced by Christoph Ullmann. In early 2006, Barth became ill and was forced from the road for several months. During this time, Ullmann left. When Blackfoot returned to the concert circuit later that year, Michael Sollars had joined as drummer. He was replaced by Scott Craig in 2009.

In 2010, Barth had to leave again due to back problems. He was replaced by Mike Estes. Craig also left that same year, replaced by Kurt Pietro. The following year, Hargrett was kicked out of the band and replaced by Randy Peak. A new live album, *Fly Away* (2011), was released that same year.

In 2012, Rickey Medlocke became the band's producer. His first move was to fire all the members of the group and form a new version that would concentrate on both recording and touring. The new lineup includes Philip Shouse, Tim Rossi, Brian Carpenter, and Christopher Williams. As of April, 2012, they have numerous concerts scheduled.

The only compilation devoted to Blackfoot is Rhino's 1994 release, *Rattlesnake Rock 'N' Roll: The Best of Blackfoot*. It includes 18 tracks, including three live cuts.

The group also has released five official live albums, but four of them are from the same source recording. The two legitimate recordings are Atco's 1982 set, *Highway Song Live*. It was initially released only in England, but was finally issued in the United States in 2002 and is available. It includes 11 tracks. The other primary source recording is King Biscuit's 1998 set, *King Biscuit Flower Hour*. It contains 9 tracks recorded in 1983. This same recording has been released as *Live* (EMI-Capitol – 2000), *Hits You Remember Live* (Madacy – 2001), *Greatest Hits Live* (King Biscuit – 2003), and *Live On The Run* (Disky – 2004). It is also available via download from Wolfgang's Vault. Most of these versions also contain an 18 minute interview with Medlocke. The compilation and numerous live sets can be found at a large music retailer.

I have two live recordings of Blackfoot including *Highway Song Live*, which was recorded during the band's 1982 tour of England and Scotland. By that point, Blackfoot's U.S. career was in decline but the band was still very popular in England. This fast paced, powerful set features the best that Blackfoot had to

offer, including three tracks from *Strikes*, three from *Marauder*, and two from *Tomcattin'*, as well as two blues covers. The songs are predominantly heavy metal, with blistering guitar runs from Medlocke and Hargrett. The southern rock style is really only evident on the last two songs, "Train Train" and their "Freebird" like anthem "Highway Song". The later piece follows the same pattern as the Lynyrd Skynyrd classic, starting slow then building to a brisk triplet oriented finish.

Highway Song Live is well recorded and the crowds are boisterous and rowdy, the perfect complement to the furious music. As befitting their reputation, the band's performance is spectacular. It's hard to imagine this music being played any better than this. The guitars are fast and loud, the rhythm section plays at an hell-bent pace and the vocals are forceful and gritty, perfectly suited to the instrumental fury of the band. The John Lee Hooker and Elmore James covers are special treats, showing that the group knew their way around the blues in addition to their ability to play kick ass heavy metal. By this point in their career, the musicians were operating as a single entity and it shows throughout this set. Overall, *Highway Song Live* is a great album from a band that nearly everyone has forgotten. It is a shame that it was not released in the US until 2002, as it might have saved their career. But, it is available now, so don't hesitate before it disappears.

Title: King Biscuit Flower Hour

Label: King Biscuit

Release Date: 1998

Medium: CD

Availability: Very Good

Venue: The Palladium, Los Angeles, CA

Recording Date: August 10, 1983

Lineup: Rick Medlocke - Vocals, guitar
Jakson Spires - Drums, vocals
Ken Hensley - Keyboards

Greg T. Walker - Bass, vocals
Charlie Hargrett - Guitar

Set List: Rattle Snake Rock N' Roll
Wishing Well
Teenage Idol
Train, Train
Easy Livin'

Highway Song
On The Run
Fly Away
Livin' In The City

My second live recording from the group is the 1998 King Biscuit set. This recording is notable in that it includes Hensley, who had just joined the band. The well recorded nine song set includes a cover of Hensley's "Easy Livin'", which was a hit for Uriah Heep. It also includes a song from Blackfoot's then current album, *Siogo*, called "Teenage Idol". Along with "Livin' In The City", this song showed that Blackfoot could play eighties corporate like rock as good as any of their contemporaries.

As is the case with *Highway Song Live*, this set is well performed. The dynamics of the group did change slightly with Hensley on board, but this is mostly the same pile driving hard rock that always characterized the band. The energy level of the set is incredible, with the band playing like their life depended on it. In fact, this was the case, as they disbanded a year later. While the sequencing of the show is off, it is apparent from stage comments that they closed with "Train, Train" and "Highway Song", the set is

enjoyable from start to finish. However, the set does not stand up to *Highway Live*. If you can only own one, opt for that classic.