
MIKE BAYTOP AND JAY SUMMEROUR

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Patuxent Music – CD 314

Harmonica player Jay Summerour is best known for his longtime partnership with guitarist Warner Williams. Both are friends with 6'8" "Big Mike" Baytop, a Washington, DC, musician renowned for his debonair, sharp-dressed style. He sings, plays guitar and bones, which he learned directly from master Richard "Mr. Bones" Thomas. Mike Baytop had emerged as one of the important and beloved players of the "new generation" in Archie's Barbershop scene, the epicenter of the traditional acoustic blues scene in the African American community in Washington, DC, along with fellow guitarist Rick Franklin. They issued a wonderful album titled ***Searching for Frank***, a tribute to Frank Stokes, also on the local Maryland label Patuxent Music. This record alone should have put them on the national map as serious practitioners of the Piedmont acoustic blues, but both of these musicians stayed predominately local and deserving of greater national attention.

The guitar-harmonica duo went into the recording studio in 2009 to put down tracks for the new album ***Mike Baytop and Jay Summerour***, starting out strong, as fine as any acoustic blues recorded today. Baytop was in top form, singing with energetic force and passionate drive. Summerour, who is an experienced harmonica player in the duo setting after more than 30 years with Warner Williams, came in behind him, gently filling in the spaces. Their versions of *Standing on the Landing*, *Walkin' Blues* and *Maggie Country* stand as a testament to the musical prowess of Baytop and the ensemble.

Then, a cruel twist of fate hit tragically. Mike Baytop had a serious and debilitating stroke. The album went into the can, sitting unfinished while the musician struggled through slow and difficult rehabilitation and recovery. As the years passed, the unfinished album became mysterious local lore and legend. Friends and fans wished to see it finished for Mike, and for history. As a matter of personal pride and determination, Baytop and Summerour went back into the studio in 2017 to finish the record. Baytop's disability is noticeable with slight but ineffectual vocal slurring. As he had not quite gained the motor control to play guitar, they called in friends to fill in the gaps. Guitarist and musicologist Mark Puryear helped out and mandolinist Tom Mindte, who is also the sound engineer and producer, joined them to add a lovely string layer. The result is the real, true blues, literally and figuratively, like on their tormented version of Neal Pattman's *I to 99*.

This is an album of exquisite instrumentation by marvelous musicians who go down deep. The cliché is that “the blues is a feeling.” You can't get more feeling than this—raw and exposed pain and redemption—gut-wrenching,