

T A H O E ONSTAGE

Album review: 'Butterflies & Snakes,' Crooked Eye Tommy's white-hot blues



Debut albums are usually the glimpse of a band just beginning to build the base of its sound and sometimes are a relatively sloppy affair. However, some bands surprise you by coming to the plate with a fully formed and realized sound and blow you out of the water. Santa Barbara blues band Crooked Eye Tommy does just that on its debut album "Butterflies & Snakes."

The album is an impressive specimen of dynamic guitar playing and lively rhythm, especially for a band of such new origin. Crooked Eye Tommy screamed into Southern California blues circles in 2013. Frontman Tommy Marsh is the soul of the band with his blazing guitar chops and commanding vocals. Tommy's brother, guitarist Paddy Marsh, wrote and sings three of the songs. Tony Cicero plays drums and Glade Rasmussen the bass, and veteran Jimmy Calire is on saxophone.

The band means business right from the start. With Marsh's slide guitar as venomous as a rattlesnake bite, "Crooked Eye Tommy" boils up from somewhere deep in the backwoods of Texas. The song is as weathered and tortured as its protagonist, the sort of man who everyone in town sees but no one knows. Marsh's ominous warning that "someday you'll see what a crooked eye can do" comes to fruition over the next 10 tracks, as the band displays its white-hot version of the blues.

Blues music can sometimes get weighed down in its own emotions that the music becomes limp and uninspired. Twelve-bar blues strolls become routine and the music rarely pulls back the curtains to gaze out into the rest of the world. But Crooked Eye Tommy breathes so much life into the blues, and its songs shimmer with such personality.

Paddy Marsh's "Come On In" swings through the humid and smoke filled alleys of New Orleans. It is haunting blues with Tommy Marsh's murky reverb giving way to a sinister solo. Just as you might be escaping from the undercurrent of the city, the tempestuous rasp of Calire's saxophone pulls you back into the city's vices as the song drifts away.

The band spruces up for "Time Will Tell" with Marsh's bendy intro jump-starting the band into slick groove. With Cicero and Glade keeping the ride steady, Marsh is able to somersault into some guitar gymnastics. The cleanliness with which he lands on the frets and the ability to do it with a little flare while still remaining true to the groove draws comparisons to Stevie Ray Vaughn. He is equally thrilling on Paddy Marsh's "Tide Pool," though his playing changes to embody the rolling rhythm of the ocean. The band is gentle but you are overwhelmed when the full wave of Marsh harmonizing with his female singers moves the song into almost gospel territory.

The band never stays in one place on the album and it gives it such a fresh vibe, which is a crucial characteristic. "After The Burn" cruises with some heat on a Latin-inspired rhythm, giving the blues some much needed motion, but then the band can slow it down to a simmer on the sultry "Over and Over," taking its time on the seven-minute track to slip you into its desire.

Crooked Eye Tommy sounds best on the effortless "Love Divine." Marsh sounds so relaxed as he slides in-and-around the melody with deft precision and the band is at its most charging, urging him to keep bringing it. It is such intuitive playing and it is so obvious that the band is doing exactly what it's been put on this earth to do.

"Butterflies & Snakes" is such a surprise for its complete feel, that the band couldn't but leave you with one more surprise. After a whole album of blues music, the band pulls a complete 180 and sends the album off with the energized country ballad "Southern Heart," pedal steel guitar and all. Keep an eye on Crooked Eye Tommy because there is nothing telling just what a crooked eye can do.

- **Crooked Eye Tommy**

- **"Butterflies & Snakes"**

- **Notable Tracks:** "Love Divine," "Crooked Eye Tommy," "Tide Pool"

Love Divine (Tommy Marsh) - Crooked Eye Tommy - LIVE in Car...



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