

John Hammond
PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

It's a precious few artists who reinvent themselves at the age of 64, but blues luminary John Hammond proves himself the ultimate untraditional traditionalist as the dozen stellar songs on *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE* illustrate. Produced by G Love (the innovative and soulful Philly singer/guitarist and longtime Hammond fanatic), *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE* is a dynamic step up from *IN YOUR ARMS AGAIN*, Hammond's 2005 effort. *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE* marks an increased output in Hammond's original compositions—he penned five of the CD's 12 songs—and there's a bold collaboration with Dutton in the hip hop-tinged blues of "Tore Down" as well as a handful of personalized renderings of traditional blues numbers, a musical modus operandi that has earned Hammond multiple Grammy nominations since his 1962 self-titled Vanguard Records debut. Since that bow, Hammond has made 31 records, often touring year-round, learning from and playing with musical greats and friends including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Duane Allman, Michael Bloomfield, J.J. Cale, Tom Waits, The Band and many, many others. Those unparalleled experiences and authenticity shine through brightly on *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE*.

Producer G Love, who counts Hammond as one of his own main musical influences, and was still in high school when he first snuck into a club to see his idol live, was beyond thrilled when the call came to produce *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE*. And he knew what he wanted from Hammond: "My objective was for him to include more originals," says G Love. "In 30 records, he hadn't done any writing until a few years ago. [Hammond's first original composition appeared on 2003's *READY FOR LOVE*, he then penned two more original songs on 2005's *IN YOUR ARM'S AGAIN*]. There are now five of John's songs on this record and the title track is quintessential John Hammond. To me, it symbolizes what the record is about. It's raw, it's dirty, it's blues, but it still has a funky edge to it."

Hammond's wife Marla, who executive produced the album, is a big inspiration for and booster of her husband's original material, though Hammond says humbly, "I'm new at songwriting; I'm just getting the hang of it. I recently discovered this aspect of myself. I was always a little bit intimidated writing songs because I knew so many people who wrote so well and it just flowed through them. For me, I knew so many great songs; I didn't feel my calling was necessarily songwriting. That said, the last few years, thanks to coaxing from Marla, I've found my voice and it's been delightful." Of the songs he chooses to record, Hammond explains, "I don't like the word 'cover.' It doesn't resound in my brain. When you do a song, you make it your own. The songs I chose to go along with the tunes I wrote for *PUSH COMES TO SHOVE* were songs I felt I could make my own and add my dimension to. Some are traditional--there's one by Junior Wells ("Come On In This House") and Little Walter ("Everything's Gonna Be Alright"); artists I've worked with and admired. I got all inside of these songs. I've been a blues singer for 44 years; I've recorded so many songs, and sung so many titles, I've absorbed a lot of the genre."

And he's absorbed straight from the source. Of the album's title and title track, Hammond says: "I worked on and off for years with a drummer named Charles Otis, a musician who played with Little Richard and Frogman Henry; a real New Orleans cat. Charles had all these expressions and 'isms,' and he was a true mentor. He'd say stuff like 'I'm a very nice person but when push

comes to shove, I can be extremely dangerous.” Several of those Otis phrases inspired titles to songs on PUSH COMES TO SHOVE. Hammond gives major credit to his band for the stellar sound and feel of the songs on PUSH COMES TO SHOVE. “The band we put together, Stephen Hodges on drums, Marty Ballou on bass -- I’ve recorded and toured with them, we’re a tight unit. We added Bruce Katz on piano and organ; he’s a gem who has added all these extra dynamics, he’s the newest member. It was terrific to have all these guys in the same room and everyone admiring everyone else. That’s the way it’s supposed to be; when you feel good about your playing and your ideas and everybody is on the same page. And Garrett Dutton, [aka G Love] was certainly no slouch! We had the ingredients for doing exactly what we hoped to do. Marla’s idea of using G Love as producer really had a ring to it.”

PUSH COMES TO SHOVE came together in an astounding 9 days, including recording, mixing and mastering. “We had great focus,” Hammond understates, crediting Marla, who has teamed with her husband musically for 14 years, citing her stellar coordination skills. “It was bare bones, we put down all the songs in four days.” Hammond adds, “I’ve never had any big budgets for my work, so you get your act together! We recorded analog as opposed to ProTools, so it’s all done old school with the brilliant guidance of engineer Oz Fritz who I consider part of my band. We kept a daytime schedule, the idea being to come in fresh with all our energy; it’s important that you have that intensity that comes from that energy.” While Hammond’s last CD was recorded in a church in Salina, Kansas, PUSH COMES TO SHOVE was born in West Orange, New Jersey, near Hammond’s house, in a studio built in the 1950’s by Frankie Valli. Recording the band live gave Hammond’s newly minted tunes their sonic due. As G Love says: “My game plan for John was to push him to make a record really raw and real and dirty--and do a little something different, but not lose anything he does. I consider myself one of his biggest fans. I have all his records on vinyl, I know about all his recording sessions. I thought about how I could use all my knowledge of John as a musician and person to achieve a record he’s never done before. He’s always kept so true to what he does, so I didn’t want him to change, but an artist like him who is in his 60s and has put out 30 records, well, he’s earned the right to do something a little bit different and get some new attention.”

That “something different” can be heard on “Tore Down,” a departure reminiscent of R.L. Burnside’s later recordings. The song, explains G Love, “is a collaboration between me and John with a sample of the Freddie King version of Sonny Thompson’s ‘Tore Down,’ and it blends blues with hip hop--but not in an obnoxious way that would piss off blues purists. John is willing to experiment and grow and that’s why this song turned out so cool.” Hammond concurs. “Garrett and I were of the same mind; his take on ‘Tore Down’ was really interesting and different and added another dimension to the whole project—it’s what we were hoping for.” Other key cuts include a version of the blues nugget ‘Mean Ole Lonesome Train,’ a favorite of both Hammond and G Love, as well as Hammond’s own “Eyes Behind Your Head,” a sexy jazz-blues shuffle done in a guitar-free Mose Allison-style-- which G Love imagines in a movie—“it’s like a breeze when that song comes in.” There’s also a Tom Waits song, “Cold Water” (WICKED GRIN was Hammond’s acclaimed 2001 CD of Waits songs), which Hammond has been performing live for years, recorded for the first time on PUSH COMES TO SHOVE.

Though Hammond may be a 40-plus-year veteran of the music business, he’s lost none of the fire and credibility that first attracted G Love to Hammond’s music: “He attacks the guitar and

harmonica and vocals—he goes after it!” That passion and openness is evident in the laid-back but vital grooves of PUSH COMES TO SHOVE. Hammond's voice runs the gamut from big and gruff to sly and sexy, while his stellar steel guitar work and harp playing would be at home in any gritty roadside honky tonk. If much of Hammond’s past genius has been re-imagining other’s songs, on PUSH COMES TO SHOVE, he’s re-imagining and pushing the boundaries of his signature style and career while staying true to his roots. And when Hammond sings, “I’m a rhythm king, baby.... / If you wanna rock and roll, I sure won’t do you wrong,” he couldn’t be more right.

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