

SAVING THE BLUES

A sensational young guitarist elevates the blues to a level rarely heard, and an indie rock musician tells dark stories

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WHEN *BLAK and Blu* was released by Warner Bros in 2012, Gary Clark Jr became an instant sensation. Critics raved that the talented young blues guitarist and singer could be a revivalist for the genre. Clark is much more than that. If you've heard *Blak and Blu*, you know how the 31-year-old is able to take the blues, infuse it with his raucous guitar playing and easy, super-smooth style of singing, and elevate it to a level rarely heard. Soon, *Blak and Blu* and the several gigs where the young Texan wowed audiences got him calls. Important ones — such as the one from Eric Clapton who invited him to play at his Crossroads Guitar Festival and is believed to have said that listening to Clark made him want to play the blues again. High praise came from others too: such as Buddy Guy who thinks Clark is the new saviour for the blues. And from bands such as The Rolling Stones and The Foo Fighters with whom he has also played.

So, three years after I first heard Clark, on *Blak and Blu*, on a few live recordings, and in the Jon Favreau film, *Chef*, I couldn't wait to listen to his second studio album, *The Story of Sonny Boy Slim*, which came out last month. I was in for a surprise. On *Blak and Blu* and the other live tracks, Clark's music is distinctive for its rawness: his guitar influences



REVIVING THE BLUES

Gary Clark Jr has been making waves with his raucous guitar and smooth singing. On his second album (right), the first thing that strikes you is restraint



listening to *Hold On*, a song that is clearly a response to the resurgent racism in many parts of America, you are completely hooked to Clark. Again.

The other album that made its way to my playlist last fortnight was Craig Finn's (frontman of The Hold Steady) new solo album, *Faith in the Future*. The Hold Steady and Finn make songs that tell stories — dark, sad and odd ones — about characters that inhabit the urban underbelly. Their songs are tales about people that are treated unfortunately by circumstances. The 10 songs on the new Finn album aren't different. His booze-soaked bar-ready vocals; the bit of reverb in the music; and the stories that aren't going to make you happy. If you fancy a walk into the dark side, it's a perfect album to play. I like The Hold Steady, and their 2005 album, *Separation Sunday*, creeps back into my playlist often. Craig's storytelling is compelling though the stories are often disturbing. An album to play when you're down and intend to stay there for a while. What? That doesn't

happen to you?

DOWN MEMORY LANE:

There are two tracks on Miles Davis's 1970 album, *A Tribute to Jack Johnson: Right Off and Yesternow*; the first is nearly 27 minutes long and the second nearly 26. Originally intended as a soundtrack for a documentary on the legendary black boxer, it's probably the finest piece of electric jazz I've heard. Yes, finer than *Bitches Brew*. Oh, and who else besides the ace trumpeter is playing? Well, there's John McLaughlin (on guitar), Herbie Hancock (on organ), and Billy Cobham (on drums). Want more? There's also Dave Holland (on electric bass), Jack DeJohnette (on drums) and Chick Corea (on piano). Legends. Just like the album. Get a drink. Put it on. And switch off the lights.

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STUFF OF LEGENDS

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Sanjoy Narayan

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WALK INTO THE DARK SIDE

In his new solo album (inset), the booze-soaked vocals of Craig Finn (of The Hold Steady) tell stories that aren't going to make you happy



range from Jimi Hendrix to Stevie Ray Vaughan; but also, a bit oddly for a bluesman, the power chords and distorted notes of grunge bands — in fact, in a long interview to *Relix* magazine, Clark mentions Nirvana as one of his influences. On *Blak and Blu*, the stand-out song is *When My Train Pulls In*, which, I think, showcases the bluesman's oeuvre the best. His music, even on a studio album, is like listening to a live band. Or at least that's what I thought. Till now.

On *The Story of Sonny Boy Slim*, the first thing that strikes you is the restraint. For the 13 songs, recorded not in an LA studio but in his hometown in Texas, Clark dropped his band and played every instrument on his own — diving deep into the music and making an album that is more like a personal project. The searing guitar licks do show up on the new album but it also demonstrates how deep and mature a musician the young bluesman is. Genres are hopped with ease: from R&B (on *Our Love*) to gospel (on *Church*) to funk (on *Can't Sleep*). His guitar is still the biggest magnet of his music but he also shows how comfortable and versatile his vocals can be. The a capella opening to the first song, *The Healing*, is deceptive — it soon segues into a high-energy scorcher. And by the time you're halfway into the album, and