

Rolling Stone

Album Reviews



Eric Clapton

24 Nights

RS: 3 of 5 Stars Average User Rating: 5 of 5 Stars

1991

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Under normal circumstances, the release of this comprehensive live Eric Clapton album should herald a tribute to a rocker who has weathered more than twenty-five years in the trenches with a singular grace. Recorded in the cavernous Royal Albert Hall over the course of twenty-four concerts in 1990 and '91, the package bears a biographical imprint by evenly traversing Clapton's various forays into blues, pop and beyond.

But the celebratory aspects of the album are tempered by harsh realities, clouding the separation of art and artist. Given Clapton's recent travails – the accidental death of Stevie Ray Vaughan after a gig with Clapton, and then the death of Clapton's four-year-old son – our collective heart goes out to the artist. When Clapton gives his all to Ray Charles's "Hard Times" late in the set, it's hard to hear it from an emotional distance. The blues are made of this.

Clapton has always been king in that paradoxical category of gentleman bluesman. His voice sits somewhere between grit and silk, the eloquence of his guitar somewhere between urgency and poise. At times, his savage and suave elements balance each other out. Heated, wah-wah-doused guitar riffs punctuate the hooky chorus of "Pretending." Coloring from the National Philharmonic Orchestra lends extra elegance to the inherent luster of "Bell Bottom Blues."

Designed less like a greatest-hits package than a thoughtful selection of songs, *24 Nights* tells just one version of the Clapton story. It's all in the editing. "Badge" appears with an impassioned, extended coda. The Cream chestnuts "White Room" and "Sunshine of Your Love" sound somehow fresher than ever, although the current rhythm section is more

reliable and less volatile than the Jack Bruce-Ginger Baker model of old. Meanwhile, the more poppish hit material from the midperiod of Clapton's own solo career is downplayed.

Clapton takes care to pay respect to his elders. On the straight-shooting blues material, Clapton rightly sandwiches himself between one of his heroes, the veteran guitarist Buddy Guy, and young blood Robert Cray, who was weaned on the legacies of both players. Guy's "Watch Yourself" benefits from Clapton's coolly measured vocal approach, and Junior Wells's "Hoodoo Man" features pianist Johnnie Johnson, who has recently come out of the shadow cast by his longtime employer Chuck Berry.

In the "beyond" portion of the program lies Michael Kamen's "Edge of Darkness." Kamen, the film-scoring journeyman who worked with Clapton on *Lethal Weapon*, honors the guitarist by fitting varying orchestral maneuvers underneath Clapton's simple melodic phrase. The end effect, unfortunately, is less grandly cathartic than decorative, something better suited to the end-credit sequence in a moody thriller.

Even on that tune, though, the essence of Clapton cuts through – a felt vocabulary of blues licks and a tone that is both slicing and nuanced. Clapton's steady-as-she-goes persona is at the heart of *24 Nights*. At the ripe age of forty-six, Clapton is a model of resiliency, riffing with the same intensity of the young "godly" Clapton and also embodying the art of survival with dignity. Now we know how many tears it takes to fill the Albert Hall. (RS 616)

JOSEF WOODARD

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