

ON THE RECORD

LOUISIANA RED

When My Mama Was Living

(LABOR)



By all accounts, the late Louisiana Red had a rough life. From spending his youth in an orphanage to living on the

streets in the company of winos, he was the quintessential rambling bluesman of storied lore; his music was once described by critic Tali Madden as “partially demon and mojo-driven and almost always chilling.” This collection, recorded during the ’70s, showcases an artist throwing himself back into his craft after years of civilian life, painting a portrait of callus-riddled living—the torment as clear as the wail in Red’s voice.

Compiled by Red’s longtime friend and collaborator, Kent Cooper, the set focuses mostly on hair-raising back porch acoustic material. The immediacy of Red’s frayed-at-the-edges-life is genuine as he moves from womanly discontent (“Caught Your Man and Gone”) to gut-stabbing loneliness (“Cold White Sheet”) and then razes his harp through the cotton field jubilation (“John Henry”). Tracks like “Joanne” leave plenty of emotive empty space between piercing slide licks as Red groans how “They’re going to hang me tomorrow, if I don’t get that parole from this chain gang.”

This period, arguably the pinnacle of the real-deal bluesman’s existence, saw Red capture wandering Mississippi affliction as good as anybody’s ever done. MARK URICHECK