

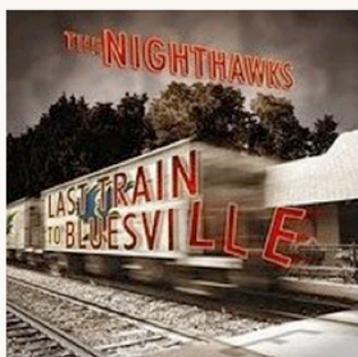
'Listen to the jingle, the rumble and the roar'

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[Home](#) [Contents](#) [Reviews](#) [Beyond The Blue](#) [Gospel Set](#) [News & Notes](#) [Archive](#)



LAST TRAIN TO BLUESVILLE

The Nighthawks

Rip Bang Records

Dating back to 1972, when they emerged from a robust roots music scene centered on the Washington, D.C. area, the Nighthawks have undergone the usual comings and goings of personnel common to most bands of long standing, especially in the blues field. Even since the release of this spirited new album, drummer Pete Ragusa has flown the coop for other projects and been replaced by Mark Stutso. Guitarist Paul Bell and bass man Johnny Castle have now been on board since 2005, providing some stability along with impeccable instrumental credentials. But the Nighthawks would be the Nighthawks in name only without group founder Mark Wenner, and it may well be that *Last Train to Bluesville* contains his most affecting performances on harp and vocals in the group's proud history. He is nothing short of sensational from the start, complementing his band's drive with a swaggering vocal take on Big Joe Turner's (by way of Leiber and Stoller) "The Chicken and the Hawk" that is redolent with style, attitude and wry disposition, all elements serving as the ideal setup for swinging, top strings workout by Bell when his solo comes around. From Big Joe's urban R&B the band heads south, to the Mississippi Delta, to divest themselves of a grinding take on Muddy Waters's "Nineteen Years Old," a pitiless indictment of a gal who ages from 19 to 49 over the course of the song and still can't be satisfied. Punctuating Wenner's lowdown vocal and low, moaning harp with stinging, moody ruminations of resonator guitar, Bell moves Wenner to cry out, "Aaahhh, Paul, tell the truth, the whole truth and nothin' but the truth, man!" Muddy, Wenner and Bell prove themselves a titanic trio at album's end, too, when the band tears into shambling take on "Rollin' and Tumblin'," with sizzling, breathtaking fervor, its assault centered on Wenner's rollin' harp and Bell's tumblin' guitar figures ahead of Wenner growling a positively doom-laden lead vocal set against a spooky, roiling soundscape. Ragusa makes his final Nighthawks appearance memorable, first with his tasty application of brushes on ballads and bruisers alike, and not least of all with a fabulous, crying lead vocal on the early, obscure, James Brown R&B pleading, "I'll Go Crazy"; Castle provides his usual bulwark bass, but also leads the way on Chuck Berry's "Thirty Days" with a lively vocal reading to which guitarist Bell adds an interesting variation on the trademark Berry instrumental signature. But in the end things are as they should be—Wenner sets the mood and the attitude, and literally and figuratively is the voice of the Nighthawks. His harp playing throughout is as impressive for its succinct statements as it is for its expressiveness, and as assured as he is vocally on the strutting numbers, he turns in two exceptionally deep ballad performances here, with an evocative appeal on Slim Harpo's "Rainin' In My Heart" and an affectingly weary rendition of Sonny Boy Williamson's "Mighty Long Time." Don't take the album title too seriously. If history has taught us anything about the Nighthawks, it's that the band is always coming back to bluesville. The train may be carrying different freight on some trips, but it's always running, and it's always right on time. —David McGee