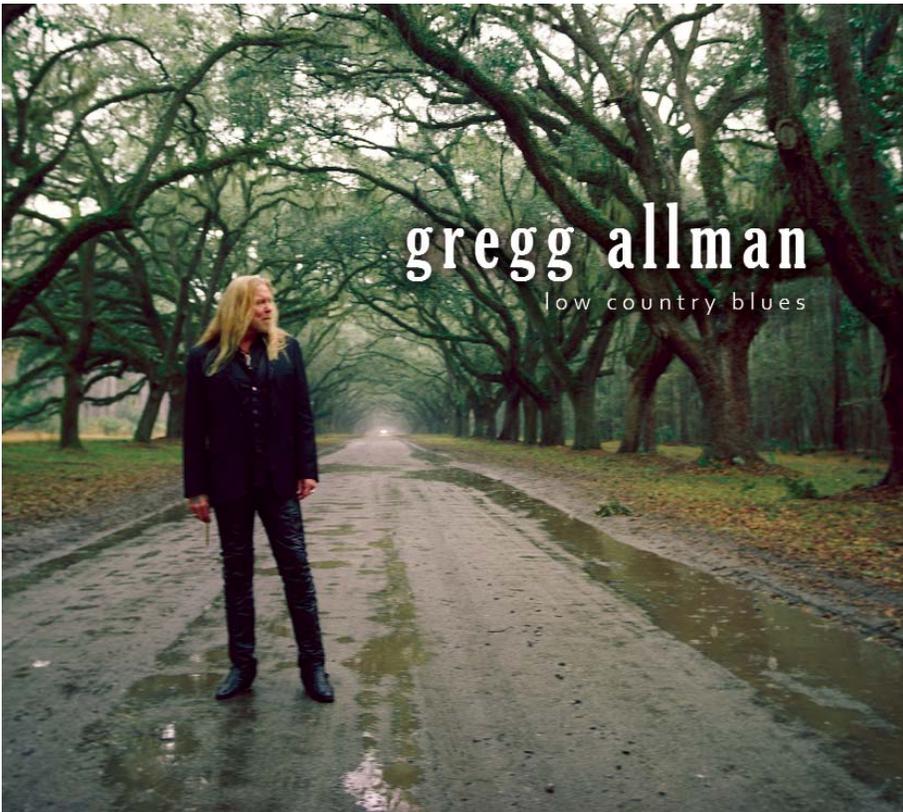


Larry Jaffee



## Blues

Gregg Allman *Low Country Blues*  
Rounder 1161-2215-2

**B**EFORE YOU EVEN HEAR a note, coupling of Gregg Allman's guitar and singing with production from T-Bone Burnett seems like a match made in heaven. (Editor's Note: Better than Kate and William, probably.)

It's as if the ownership of a baseball team, bent on winning, breaks the bank to lure over the best offensive and pitching free-agent talent available in the off season (Phillies anyone?) to bolster an already imposing lineup, and they easily triumph through the regular season, sweep all opponents in the playoffs and make a championship look like kids' stuff.

It's a wonder that these two stellar talents haven't crossed paths prior to doing *Low Country Blues*, which is the best album I have heard in the first two months of 2011. It will, most certainly, rank right up there at year's end.

That's not surprising since everyone who works with Burnett sounds better, and this has been the case for the past quarter century. But it was the release of his soundtrack for the Coen brothers' 2000 film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* that the producer gained a permanent position in the zeitgeist of popular culture and the music business.

Allman also is firmly positioned in those heavy-weight annals. He was, of course, the kid brother/front man of the Allman Brothers Band, which courageously carried on following the October 1971 motorcycle death of older brother/lead guitarist Duane. His demise

came a month after of the band's essential *Live At The Fillmore East*, recorded March 1981. Gregg, 13 months younger than his sibling, reluctantly took the reins of the band, and 40 years on, the road, indeed, goes on forever. (The ABB was booked for a near month-long Manhattan residency at the Beacon Theater during March 2011. After a festival gig in April, Gregg then takes his solo band on a tour through the south and Europe, booked solid through the fall.)

However, Allman has sporadically recorded in the past two decades, and *Low Country Blues* is his first solo record in 14 years. He and Burnett reportedly bonded over T-Bone's plans to build an exact replica of Sam Phillips's Sun Studio in Los Angeles. Allman was sold on Burnett, who promptly assembled a crack studio band for them to record in Los Angeles, and picked several dozen blues standards for him to consider.

Right from the lead track's opening acoustic bass notes of Sleepy John Estes' "Floating Bridge" and Allman's unmistakable gruff vocals a few seconds later, we know we have a winner. Three electric guitars, courtesy of Burnett himself, Doyle Bramhall II and Hadley Hawkensmith, and a rolling piano from Dr. John (listed in the notes under his real name Mac Rebennack), who plays throughout (and actually sat in with the Allman Brothers Band on guitar when they performed at Duane's funeral), combine for a sound reminiscent of Tom Waits' *Rain Dogs* era.

"Little By Little" picks up the tempo a bit, with Dr. John doing a fill worthy of Jelly Roll Morton. On Skip James' "Devil Got My Woman," Allman and Burnett retire to the Delta Blues swamp, with nice slide work from Bramhall. Muddy Waters' standard "I Can't Be Satisfied" sounds like it could have been an outtake on the Rolling Stones' Exile On Main Street, with Burnett injecting lots of reverb in the proceedings, and adding his own guitar as well, along beside Bramhall's.

since it's sort of an update on "Midnight Rider," one of the band's classic staples, done by Allman in several different styles over the years. But "Just Another Rider" is not as spooky.

The four-piece horn section carries Amos Milburn's long-lost 1950 blues composition "Tears, Tears, Tears," with a notable horn arrangement by Darrell Leonard. That's followed by a female quartet of soulful female back-up singers who make "My Love Is Your Love"

---

**At the end of 2011, *Low Country Blues* will likely be considered one of the year's best.**

---

When Gregg was 21, he already sounded like an experienced old man, so it's not surprising his voice is grizzly. But his tone has ripened, and one can visualize Burnett behind the control room glass giving Allman vocal direction. This is especially true on "Blind Man," in which Allman fools you that we're listening to Ray Charles. Did I mention Allman's always been a great blues singer with impeccable timing? On this track, Burnett's crack session men weave in and out of Allman's lead vocal growls, as the horns punctuate particularly dramatic moments.

The only original is "Just Another Rider," which Allman co-wrote with Warren Haynes, guitarist in the ABB, which he has played in off and on since 1989. The song could have easily fit well on an ABB album,

memorable. It's followed by some blues testosterone on Otis Rush's "Checking On My Baby." The traditional "Rolling Stone" caps the set, and Allman's trademark Hammond B3 organ is prominent in the mix; he plays the keyboard on eight of the tracks.

There's not a bad track among the dozen on *Low Country Blues*, and its entire 52-minute vibe smacks of a rustic "Unplugged" VH1 session, or at the very least, another trademark Burnett production that no doubt next year will win a Grammy.

For Allman, the success of *Low Country Blues* is all the more poignant when considering that in June 2010 he had a liver transplant, and he wondered whether he would live to see the release of these tracks. The man's a survivor in more ways than one, and you owe it to yourself to hear this album.

**1/2 Horizontal**