

The blues has a new hero, a fresh voice, a young champion, a guitar god in the making. His name is Jonny Lang, he's still a teenager, and he's got the fire in his belly. Lang hails from America's frozen tundra - Minneapolis, Minnesota, via Fargo, North Dakota - a locale that in winter could give anyone the blues. Young Jonny Lang got a particularly bad case, for which listeners should be most grateful.

While his junior high pals were off playing video games on their TV's, flipping burgers, chasing girls, or lining up for the latest alt-rock CD, Lang was holed up in his room learning chords, writing songs, and closely studying the works of America's 12-bar greats. The Awe-inspiring results can be heard on LIE TO ME, Lang's major label debut. LIE TO ME is what blues fans would call a "barnburner." It's a smokin' set of potent originals and choice covers, played with soul, taste and intensity. If Lang were 45, instead of 15, the results would be no less staggering. "I want people to really make a judgement on me as a musician, without anything else clouding the issue, like my age," says the soft-spoken thoughtful Lang.

Still, Jonny Lang is probably the only artist ever to record the classic, "Good Morning Little School Girl," who isn't in danger of being arrested if he really did "come home with" the schoolgirl in question. "I just have fun singin' those old blues numbers," Lang says. "They're so soulful and deep - really raw. I don't really think of them as being full of sexual innuendo. I just dig their groove."

Listeners all over the Midwest have gotten off on the feeling delivered by Lang on stage. Unlike most young guitar phenoms, Lang is even more impressive as a singer than as a string-bender. He's got grit, soul, poise, range, and a powerhouse delivery that drips confidence. "I've never been nervous or scared on stage, except maybe the very first time," Lang says. "And I've never been shy about doing what I do, or afraid to express myself in public, even sometimes when I had no idea what I was doing, and when I was probably embarrassing myself," the blues A-student laughs. "I just dig in and play."

Lang has been invited up on stage to jam by many of his personal heroes - Luther Allison, Lonnie Brooks, Kenny Neal, Jimmy Thackery, Syl Johnson, Buddy Guy - and nobody remembers him embarrassing himself lately. Quite the contrary. Crowds have roared and clamored for more of his stinging, blitzkrieg guitar and impassioned, tough as leather vocals.

It all started for Lang back in North Dakota, when he went to a concert by the Bad Medicine Blues Band, and was floored by their lead guitarist Ted Larsen. It was the first real concert the then twelve year-old Lang had ever attended, and it sure did leave an impression. A few months and a very few lessons later, with the teacher being the same Ted Larsen, lightning-quick learner Lang had become the star and leader of Bad Medicine. The group was rechristened Kid Jonny Lang

& The Big Bang, and their independently released album SMOKIN' became a regional smash, selling in excess of 25,000 copies.

Larsen appears on LIE TO ME as a rhythm guitarist on some tracks, along with a seasoned cast featuring several other Midwest blues-rock stalwarts. There's keyboardist and songwriter extraordinaire Bruce McCabe, a veteran of four CDs and ten years with his former band the Hoopsnakes. Though McCabe's old enough to be Lang's dad, he's quite happy in a sideman role, and has provided Lang with several strong cuts: the moody and compelling ballad, "The Darker Side," the cheerful pool hall blues, "Rack 'Em Up," and the killer title track, "Lie To Me."

There's also rhythm guitarist and songwriter Kevin Bowe, leader of a band called The Revelators, who's penned songs for Kenny Wayne Shepherd. Drummer Rob Stupka has worked with a boatload of regional blues greats - Luther Allison, Earl King, Gary Primich - while keyboardist Ricky Peterson has recorded for Warner Brothers and toured with David Sanborn. The Minnesota contingent is rounded out by guitarist Billy Franze, and harp livewire Pat Hayes - longtime leader of the Lamont Cranston Band, and a frequent Bonnie Raitt sideman.

Lang also got yeoman help from several Memphis musicians, since much of LIE TO ME was recorded in the historic music city. The Memphis sound is particularly evident on a cover of soul man Syl Johnson's 70's gem, "Back for a Taste of Your Love." A rather relentless R&B groove, it packs the punch of a classic Hi Records 45, as Lang completely nails a style that was all the rage when he was just a gleam in his mother's eye.

No other normal teenager can unleash the firestorm of guitar licks heard on Ike Turner's old shuffle blues, "Matchbox." Somewhere in blues heaven, Lang's main man Albert Collins is no doubt smiling down his approval. "I never de-tune or use a capo like Albert did," Lang says. Yet somehow he gets the Icepicker's classic tone, and fully claims it as his own. The late guitarist's wife, Gwendolyn Collins, is responsible for writing the funky, "There's Gotta Be A Change."

Lang's remarkable on-stage poise and hard-hitting drive comes through on the Tinsley Ellis-penned track, "A Quitter Never Wins." But another side of his big blossoming talent, a side rarely seen at a bar or festival, emerges on two tracks co-penned with Dennis Morgan. "When I Come to You" and "Missing Your Love" are both unabashedly romantic ballads. "It was a blast to co-write with Dennis," Lang says, flashing his broadest grin. "I just write whatever comes into my head. We collaborated on both music and lyrics. In concert, I pretty much stick to straight ahead blues and old-style R&B. But the album often hits a middle ground between mainstream pop and a really strong blues root, I think."

LIE TO ME's guiding light in the studio was the Minnesotan with the Midas touch

- David Z. A past producer for Prince, Fine Young Cannibals, and Big Head Todd and the Monsters, David Z kept the focus squarely on Lang's searing guitar and mature, full-throttle vocals.

Jonny Lang is the genuine article, an artist with an overflowing well of blues feeling, personality and not-so-raw talent. And he can only get better with age - the thought's downright scary.

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