

ME AND THE DEVIL / I ASKED FOR WATER, SHE GAVE ME GASOLINE

Two compilations were just among the many to come out in the late '60s dedicated to British blues. And every single one seemed to feature the remarkable Jo-Ann Kelly (simply one of the best blues singers of any time and place, who sadly died in 1990) and Tony McPhee, who'd go on to greater fame and fortune and guitarist and leader of the Groundhogs. They were among the leading lights of the scene, and the ones who rose above (even if, ridiculously, Kelly didn't think her voice had matured). But the richness of the scene can be heard from the presence of artists like Andy Fernbach, Simon & Steve, and Dave Kelly, brother to Jo-Ann. John Lewis -- who'd re-emerge after the heady days of punk as Jona Lewie and score a couple of U.K. novelty hit singles -- Brett Marvin and the Thunderbolts (best described as a jug band, one which, like Lewie, earned a pair of British hits), and those who vanished without trace, like Jim Pitts and Graham Hines. The very best of them channel the spirit of the Mississippi Delta in their singing and playing -- to hear Kelly and McPhee together on "Oh Death" is a spiritual experience -- but the first of the two CDs actually seems to have more depth about it, while the second is content to settle for throwaways like "Crazy With the Blues" or Lewis's "London's Got the Blues," which don't seem to do anyone any favors. The first disc, produced by Mike Batt (of Wombles fame) has more sonic depth, while McPhee's work behind the board on the second is thin -- which is surprising, given the fact that some of the tracks, like "She's Gone" by the John Mayall-sounding Andy Fernbach Connexion, feature full electric bands. As snapshots of a time and place, these compilations are invaluable; they let us reflect on the fact that British blues isn't an oxymoron, and that, for a while at least, the quality approached that of Chicago, Memphis, or even Clarksdale.