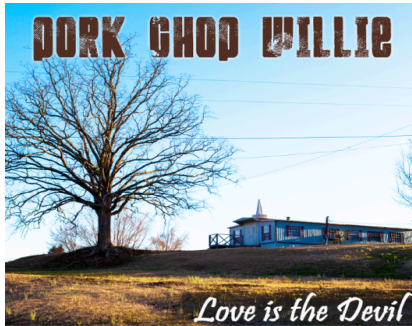




PORK CHOP WILLIE / Bio

PORK CHOP WILLIE'S NATIONAL DEBUT BRINGS THE SOUNDS OF MISSISSIPPI'S HILL COUNTY — FROM THE STREETS OF MANHATTAN



New album 'Love is the Devil' benefits Mississippi blues artists and includes members of the Kimbrough family showcasing Bill Hammer's hook-rich roots songwriting and Melissa Tong's virtuosic fiddle

Pork Chop Willie's debut national album, *Love is the Devil*, lights a new fire under America's musical melting pot, bringing fresh heat to the Mississippi hill country blues tradition while blending in elements of Americana, rock, alt-country and even classical music. The 13-song disc serves as a bridge between those genres, the past and the present, and the band's Magnolia State inspirations and Manhattan home.

Led by singer-guitarist Bill Hammer and violinist Melissa Tong, Pork Chop Willie is fueled by grooves, grit, honesty and passion as well as a unique blend of down-home and uptown musicianship. *Love is the Devil's* songs "have integrity and tell stories about real people in a direct, unfiltered way that anybody can relate to," says Hammer, who founded the band in 2007. "That's something I don't hear much in blues anymore, or in music in general."

The album's tunes, most written by Hammer, cover a lot of territory. The rollicking two-step "Lonesome Poor," which classically trained Tong colors with Louisiana roadhouse fiddle lines, and the hip-shake chant "Ain't Nobody," a one-chord wonder sung in the voice of a lonesome ghost, both embrace the longstanding blues ethos of telling sad tales in a joy-inspiring way, thanks to the undeniable power of their hooks and grooves.

Many songs evoke the kudzu-covered hills of North Mississippi, where Hammer's inspiration dwells. He pays tribute to Junior Kimbrough and R.L. Burnside — the blues wizards of Chulahoma, an unincorporated county just over the Tennessee line — with their "All Night Long" and "Snake Drive," respectively. Both numbers reflect the region's strong preservation of its African musical roots in their hypnotic single-chord, call-and-response arrangements, made even more mesmerizing by the turbulent dance of Hammer's slide guitar in "Snake Drive" and Tong's graceful, melodic ballet in "All Night Long."

Hammer and Tong are joined on those tracks by drummer Kinney Kimbrough and bassist Eric Deaton, the anchors of Pork Chop Willie's Mississippi rhythm section. Another of Junior

Kimbrough's sons, David, contributed guitar in the studio for a graceful rendition of the traditional "Crawdad Song," with Kinney providing a percolating rhythmic base. David also plays on Hammer's heart-broken "She's Gone" and his brooding, swinging "Black Heart."

"These guys, along with legends like Junior, R.L. and Kenny Brown, are my heroes," Hammer explains. "They grew up steeped in the music and by playing with me over the years they've helped me evolve from imitating what they're doing to the point where I am creating my own music, albeit with strong ties to the tradition." *Love is the Devil* is, in part, payback for that musical education. All proceeds from its sale will be used to benefit the musicians and music of the hill country.

For the cuts recorded in Water Valley, Mississippi's Black Wings Studio by engineer Winn Elroy, who mixed the entire album, the group was also joined by vocalists Monique Townes, Wanda Stokes and Justin Showah. The sessions at New York City's Dubway Studios included Pork Chop Willie's regular NYC-based line-up of drummer Robin Gould, bassist Tony Coniff and guitarist Steve Tarshis. Despite its dual cast, the sound of *Love is the Devil* is consistent — driving, gleeful, mesmerizing and memorable.

For Hammer, *Love is the Devil* is the culmination of his discovery of that magical sound, which has echoed in various forms across North Mississippi's hills since Africans first arrived there. He'd already been playing blues with a New York band called the Maxwell Street Roosters, where he'd gotten the nickname "Pork Chop Willie," when its strains first reached his ears.

"I would go out and hear bands regularly in Manhattan, but only get to stay for four or five songs because of my day job," Hammer recounts. "One night I went out to hear Jimbo Mathus at the Rodeo Bar. At one point Mathus turned the stage over to his bass player, Eric Deaton, who did three hill country songs. It was life changing. I stayed the whole night and talked Jimbo into giving me a lesson the next day." Armed with some licks and a raft of suggestions from Mathus, Hammer began acquiring albums by R.L. Burnside, Junior Kimbrough, Kenny Brown, Jessie Mae Hemphill and other proponents of the NoMiss sound.

"I'm an American male, and we're taught to hide our emotions," Hammer relates. "This music was so naked and real that it brought out all of my emotions. I could feel the loneliness and the desire in the songs, and I kept getting drawn back to those hill country rhythms."

Thus inspired, Hammer took a blues pilgrimage to Mississippi — which included a stop at the site of Kimbrough's burnt down juke joint and a visit with Kenny Brown, R.L. Burnside's musical compatriot and "adopted grandson," at Brown's home in Potts Camp, Mississippi, where Brown and his wife Sara stage the annual Hill Country Picnic music festival. Brown has said, "Pork Chop Willie took to the hill country music like a catfish to the mud."

Hammer returned to New York intent on putting together a new band that would focus on the hill country sound. He needed a strong musical foil and began to imagine the sound of a fiddle out front in the mix. That's when he recruited Tong, a freelance violinist and member of New York's

respected Artemis Chamber Ensemble with a long list of classical and pop album credits. She has also toured with violinist/composer Mark O'Connor, accompanying him on piano, and played such prestigious venues as Lincoln Center and Boston's Symphony Hall. Tong was initially skeptical of Hammer's efforts to draft her into a juke joint band.

"So many of the songs had one chord, and I didn't see how my violin would fit into such a gritty, swampy style, because there was no fiddle on any of the records Bill played me," Tong recalls. But Hammer booked studio time, and one session of duet recordings clinched the deal. "I was really shocked at how well the guitar and fiddle meshed. I was new to the idea of playing roots music, but I was in! And it's been amazing. This music puts me in a trance and I tap into another voice that I don't have playing anything else."

Pork Chop Willie has grown through frequent gigs in the New York City area, headlining the Washington Square Festival and playing a variety of well-known clubs including B.B. King's, Terra Blues and Harlem's Shrine. The band also appears annually at Clarksdale, Mississippi's internationally renowned Juke Joint Festival, making stops at the tourist destination Ground Zero and authentic juke joints like Red's, also in Clarksdale, and Merigold's Po' Monkey's during its visits. In 2009, Pork Chop Willie recorded *Hill Country Roll* for sale at shows.

Through all of that, Hammer and Tong have developed a chemistry that's both liquid and incendiary. It's in full, graceful and raucous display on *Love is the Devil* entries like "Devil in My Soul" and "Too Many Cuts," where Tong plays like an old-timey Delta street musician and Hammer balances raw swagger with trim precision. And in "Falling," where Hammer plays a four-string cigar box guitar, they push the roots music envelope, crafting an elegant, otherworldly soundscape that transcends all limitations of genre.

"Right now too few people play this style of music," Hammer says of the Mississippi hill country blues that serves as Pork Chop Willie's true north. "It's so honest and emotional that we can't help but speak from our hearts when we're playing. Even when we're covering a song by one of the style's masters, the form is so open that we can make it our own. This music changed my life and put me more in touch with myself. I'd like to expose more people to it."

(Photo credit: David Sokol)

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