

BBC Review

They wear the tell-tale signs of the blues like a well-fitting curse.

[Alistair Lawrence](#) 2009-10-02

The point at which Jon Spencer truly crafted his own identity was with his [Blues Explosion](#) band. As the name suggests, their music was frequently loud, bombastic and loose limbed, as well as having the sense of adventure to strip to the bone and put themselves back together again, most notably with their Acme Plus remix album.

With Heavy Trash now on their third album, it can no longer be considered a side project. Spencer's collaboration with New York alt-rock veteran Matt Verta-Ray was always destined to be a slightly different beast, but still one that retains enough of his hangdog charm and swagger to delight critics and his pre-existing fanbase. Midnight Soul Serenade continues Spencer's ever-present trend of storytelling and effortlessly switching from upbeat moments that propel themselves with their own momentum to quieter, more introspective numbers where the vocals almost become a voiceover. The Pill barely registers a pulse, but carries enough ominous atmospherics under a squealing guitar line to sound like the opening number of a well-thumbed pulp fiction pot boiler turned into a musical. That's not to say that Midnight Soul Serenade sounds phoned in, though. Instead, each number is breezed through with laconic charm; they're still, in essence, singing the blues, but wear its tell-tale signs like a well-fitting curse.

What they do lack is the low-end rumble and foul-mouthed charm that Spencer is capable of howling out when the mood takes him. The return of John 'Speedo' Reis with The Night Marchers last year shared that common trait, so perhaps this is just what happens when bluesmen who understand punk rock grow older and wiser. Isolation isn't a [Joy Division](#) cover, preferring instead to be a strange mix of rousing and disorientating instead. It's no longer necessary to strap yourself in to keep pace with them, but there's enough strum und drang peeking around the edges for those who want to hark back in time for that kind of freewheeling hybrid guitar music. They're nothing if not true to themselves; the rest just seems to follow.