

albums



BOB DYLAN The Bootleg Series Volumes 1-3 (rare and unreleased 1961-1991) (Columbia)

It has often been said that Bob Dylan is a man of many masks. After this year's bizarre Grammy performance, many must have thought who was that masked man? In the 80s, Dylan devotees became Dylan apologists — for his lazy recordings, his perfunctory performances, his lousy voice and, of course, his flirtation with Christianity. New generations confronted with this legend who didn't have the grace to die dramatically, or at least fade away, wondered what all the fuss was about. *The Bootleg Series* answers all the questions. It strips away the masks and re-establishes his credibility.

In the arts of the 20th century there are only two people I can think of whose stature compares with Bob Dylan: Stravinsky and Picasso — all three astounded their peers with their precocious talent, and their early mastery of classic forms. All three were provocative, caused riots even. All three never stood still, kept changing their styles throughout lengthy careers and yet were always at the cutting edge of whatever form they chose. And none of them were wunderkind: all fulfilled their early promise.

On *The Bootleg Series* over 50 unreleased tracks, Bob Dylan stands naked. The recordings range from an early session in a New York hotel room to a slick *Oh Mercy* outtake. They follow all the stylistic shifts in his career, and collect many of the rarities Dylanologists have been reverently swapping for decades. Coffee bar folk nights: publishing demos: the unreleased live album from '64: sessions with the Band, the Rolling Thunder Revue, George Harrison and the Muscle Shoals crew rehearsals, outtakes and leftovers from all the albums. It gives box-set archaeology a

good name, not only because it re-assesses Dylan's career but because it is richly rewarding listening for its own sake.

Millions of words have been written about Dylan's way with words. And certainly, he deserved the adulation. Before he was anywhere near 25 he'd coined dozens of phrases that had entered the colloquial vocabulary. But there are so many unacknowledged facets to Dylan's talent. It's easy to forget just how funny he can be, in the early talking blues and shaggy dog stories, the apocalyptic nightmares and even the harrowing sagas from *Blood On The Tracks* or the chilling old testament scenarios. His comic timing is pure Charlie Chaplin by way of Woody Guthrie. Even in a song like the tortured 'Idiot Wind': "They say I shot a man named Gray, took his wife to It-ill-ay/She inherited a million bucks, and when she died it came to me/I can't help it... if I'm luck-y".

Take a verse out of any of the classic songs and it encapsulates all his talents. Besides his humour, there's his melodic sense: as hook-filled as Lennon-McCartney's but more creative with it. Add to that the passion and personality of his singing, which often recalls Hank Williams, or Robert Johnson, plus his idiosyncratic use of metre and phrasing — and you've got a ground-breaking artist to stand beside Charlie Parker. Many of his songs are capable of becoming standards for all to interpret, though some work for Dylan alone.

Dylan has often been criticised for his casualness in the studio, but that's a mixture of his perverse need for unpredictability and his old folkie attitude that every performance is a fresh statement. This interpretation is the core of Paul Williams' *Performing Artist* (Underwood Miller, 708 Westover Dr, Lancaster PA 17601, USA), the just-published analysis of Dylan's early work, an entertaining rave full of coherent insights.

But throwing caution to the wind is what rock 'n' roll has always been about (though not reviewing). Dylan's carefree attitude to recording has given us many of rock's most incendiary moments. He heard the Animals obliterate his version of 'Rising Sun', then hired the best musicians he could, told them to turn it up — and let it rip. The resulting noise brought a sardonic literacy to rock that made Chuck Berry and Smokey Robinson's adept penmanship look effete. It was a dandy's blues stomped out with Cuban heels, Ferlinghetti through a Fender Twin Reverb on 10.

The last time I got excited listening to Dylan, he was still an agnostic. But it wasn't turning Christian that put me off — no one had been born again like Dylan since St Paul, no glazed eyes and beatific grin for this iconoclast — although the hectoring damnation had a muddled concept of evil. Besides, I grew up on Mahalia, and Dylan had always used the Bible when it suited. Has anyone else ever kick-started a song "God said to Abraham, kill me your son/Abe said man, you must be



Overkill

putting me on/God said no, Abe said what? Where you want this killing done?/God said out on Highway... 61!"

No, it was the voice itself that lost me — many of the songs still have the edge. But his unique instrument, that inimitable, malleable whine had become a ragged wreck, ravaged after years of abuse. Untrained singing takes its toll, combined with smoking, alcohol, whatever else plus the never-ending tour.

Of the three discs, it's the middle period that I keep going back to, from the early electric years, when you can hear Dylan re-inventing rock 'n' roll on the spot, through to the blistering self-exposure of *Blood On The Tracks*. But there's something in this set from every period to stimulate a reappraisal, be it for unreconstructed Guthrie-ites or latter day Infidels. So here's a document for those once enthralled by Dylan who later became bored. Maybe a bit much for the uninitiated — for them, any of the dozen seminal albums, or the *Bioglyph* set would be preferable — but not only for closet Dylanologists either. After all, it's brought it all back home for this doubting thomas.
CHRIS BOURKE

OVERKILL Horrorscope (Megaforce/Atlantic)

After the excellent *Years Of Decay*, Overkill established themselves as one of the premier East Coast metal groups. However, the departure of guitarist and main songwriter Bobby Gustafson threw a spanner in the works and the group have fought hard to get a stable new line up and record a new platter. The result is very impressive.

True to their roots, Overkill have remained exceedingly heavy. Songs like 'Coma' and 'Infectious' are not for the weak at heart. This machine brings the ugliness of the streets of New York to the musical page and the outcome is pleasingly brutal.

Overkill have the advantage of an excellent production quality from the ever consistent Megaforce group, who are responsible for Anthrax and Testament amongst others. The double

bass drum fury of Sid Falck is particularly impressive, as is the harmonious bass guitar of Mr DD Verni. Altogether a very precise musical outfit. If you are sick of wimpy radio metal and crave a taste of what metal should be like then check out *Horrorscope*. As they say, it's a nice day... for a funeral!
LUKE CASEY

TRANSVISION VAMP Little Magnets Versus the Bubble of Babble (MCA)

Cute album title, shame about the songs. Well not quite but close. There's little evidence here of those trashy pop anthems I first fell for, nothing with the same full-tilt gleeful thrash of 'I Want Your Love'. This album's first single, 'I Just Wanna B With U' makes a pretty good noise but most of the rest blurs across various shades of grey in slow to mid-tempo. And with James's vocals frequently amounting to little beyond a breathy semi-speak, several tracks veer into tedium. 'Ain't No Rules', for example, has a likeable groove but lacks the in-your-face swagger its lyric seems to demand.

Maybe it's all because Transvision Vamp take themselves so seriously these days — at least Wendy James does and she seems designated spokesperson. On 'Don't Believe the Type' she ridicules the (male) press but in such an uninspired manner she sounds more tired than angry.

Transvision Vamp have always rejoiced in their magpie approach to originality but this time even the game of influence/ripoff spotting isn't enough to maintain interest. It's a sad comment when their cover of an old second-division Dylan song, 'Crawl Out Your Window', sounds fresher than nearly all the other tracks.
PETER THOMSON

TOM JONES Carrying A Torch (Chrysalis)

In which the former glove-cutter from Pontypridd teams up with the ex-window cleaner from Belfast. But the idea of Tom Jones being produced by Van Morrison isn't nearly as incongruous as the former's duet with

the Art of Noise, or the latter's with Cliff Richard. Both emerged as white soul men during the early 60s beat boom, Jones emulating Otis Redding, while Morrison's hero was Ray Charles. On *Carrying A Torch* Van produces four of his own songs for Jones, and they seriously outclass anything else on the album.

It's bizarre listening to Jones belt out what are so obviously the recent works of Morrison. All the trademarks are there: the swinging horns, cooing backing vocals, delicate piano and "why why why" repetitions. Jones eases into the album with the title track, a slow big ballad. Immediately apparent is the big, bally voice of the hunk of spunk — it's testosterone rampant. The other three tracks reflect the various moods of Van: contentment ('Some Peace of Mind', 'I'm Not Feeling It Anymore') and making out ('It Must Be You'). With its chugalug rhythm and throwaway sax hook, 'I'm Not Feeling It' would have made a killer duet, though Jones can't quite turn clichés into poetry as Morrison can.

So there's an EP here for Morrison devotees. The rest of the album is generic '90s MOR by journeyman songwriters. It's the sort of stuff Bunny Walters might put out if produced by TVNZ's hackmeisters — and that's not a put-down of Bunny, one of Jones's most accomplished students, along with Elvis Presley in the Vegas years.
CHRIS BOURKE

WHIRLPOOL Chapterhouse (Dedicated)

Chapterhouse are the tighter than air pop group that badly dressed House of Love copyists Ride would so dearly love to be. They're vaguely post Valentine but they very wisely don't attempt the purity even of Slowdive's guitar white-out; they're more like a kind of castrated Cocteau Twins choir (and lo and behold, one song is called 'Treasure' and another is produced by Robin Guthrie). This doesn't mean that the music's not guitar centred (scented) just that instead of a deluge of unimaginable noise there are quite recognisably played sounds coated in studio produced permafrost. "Real music" lovers would despise it, which is, of course, a major recommendation in itself. Dance beats and cartoon sixties harmonies slip in and out of focus, but somehow conventional rock dynamics never take hold. The really strange thing, though, is that Chapterhouse are actually quite popular in Britain at the moment. Could it be that the sadly opiate-less masses are finally learning to keep their feet in the clouds?
MATTHEW HYLAND

CHER Love Hurts (Geffen)

Slapped onto the album sleeve is a sticker proclaiming "includes bonus track 'The Shoop Shoop Song'". Just as well because it's the only decent thing here. Now I love the great Betty Everett's 1964 original but I've gotta concede Cher's version has it whipped. The bright tempo, classy choral backup

and punchy production are pop perfect.

So how come Cher can triumph on this remake and yet sink so completely on the other? Her rendition of the much covered title track is undoubtedly the most heavy-handed I've ever encountered. The rest of the album consists of one big bombast after another. It's the sort of stuff middle America seems to find particularly wonderful in huge concert conditions. Personally, the idea of hearing this stuff live — and so even more ponderously performed — comes close to my idea of musical torture.

As an actress Cher has shown herself capable of finely controlled dramatic and comedic skill. Yet as a singer she insists on floundering in mawkish melodrama. Good grief, this album even lacks the good-humoured camp of her Las Vegas-era cabaret.

Two final observations: 1) 'A World Without Heroes' was apparently co-written by Lou Reed and Gene Simmons. It's every bit as bad as your worst expectations. 2) I emphasise 'apparently' because the album liner notes are printed in a design so pretentious and tortuous you'll end up visiting an optician if you try reading them.
PETER THOMSON

DOUG KERSHAW The Best Of (Warner Bros) CHRIS LEDOUX Radio and Rodeo Hits (Capitol) JOHNNY CASH 20 Golden Greats (EMI)

Being a country boy at heart, I was most pleased to wander through this selection of tunesmiths, all good ole boys with none of these whining 'Bob Dylan stole my glory' singer/songwriters in sight. First up was Doug Kershaw who isn't really country at all, he's a mainstream Cajun type, and frankly there's better stuff around. Leave this for the middle aged white professional types who pack out any concerts by these types so they can demonstrate their complete lack of rhythm, and hunt out the gutsier stuff. Then to Chris LeDoux, who is a rodeo champion and about as cowboy as it gets. I like this better, it's got cheesy lyrics, spoken intros and lots of songs about horses, women and the hard life. Outside of one excursion into rock-out guitars and keyboards it's all traditional sounding stuff, and Mr LeDoux has a nice rich mellifluous voice, not dissimilar to Jerry Jeff Walker's.

Last comes the best, the Man in Black himself. Don't be fooled by the cover, which is cheaper than my pickup lines, and almost as unsuccessful, the grooves within are all quality. This is the classic late fifties Sun stuff and it's all great in one way or another, from the hits to the lesser known gems. Let's face it, this guy can appear on stage with Kris Kristofferson and still be cooler than you or I could ever hope to be, so give up and enjoy this. There's none of this "New Country" guys with ponytails doodly" within miles of Johnny Cash, just pure class and genius.
KIRK GEE

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