

someone looking like Barry from *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet* became bigger than Bruce? Not too long ago, it was Randy who was getting the superlatives and the mass crossover audience with his neo-traditional country.

Both Travis and Brooks share the same play-it-safe attitude to country; they wouldn't do anything to offend their grandmothers because they buy records too. Travis's first volume of greatest hits stays within the country tradition of brevity: the CD is only 36 minutes long. And every moment is sumptuously produced, tastefully played, sweetly sung—and soporific. 'On the Other Hand' and '1982' come from his excellent 1986 debut *Storms of Life*, which introduced Travis as a new, wrinkle-free George Jones with a voice like mulled wine. Unfortunately since then the recipe has never wavered and, like mulled wine, it quickly becomes tacky and sickening. After a couple of hits, you've had enough; that's true for his albums, and also for this compilation.

New Zealand's Randy Travis is Brendan Dugan, who's been doing what he does do well for over two decades now. On his new album he covers all the bases: country rock, soft pop, ballads, honky tonk, even gospel. His baritone, like the playing of his band of local all-stars, is flawless—and a little lacking in character. Most of the songs are by former Underdog, now jingle maestro Murray Grindlay. A commendable idea, but despite the variety of styles they seem to have been composed in a job lot, which means it's hard work finding a standout other than the bizarre 'Once in a Lifetime Lady' or the gospel parody 'Tighten up the Bible Belt'. But Richie Pickett's 'Honky Tonk Heroes' takes some well-worn mythology to the Bay of Plenty, and has the bite to lift it out of wallpaper territory. Still, everything here

could stand alongside anything on FM Country's playlist with pride, and with his new ponytail, Brendan wouldn't be out of place on the country music awards, either.

CHRIS BOURKE

THE BEACH BOYS
California Gold
(Capitol)

The Beach Boys must be the most repackaged group in pop history. While their first LP was released in 1962, the hits compilations began appearing a mere four years later. And ever since the band left Capitol records at the end of the 60s the label has been regularly reshuffling their back catalogue.

What makes this latest, 40-track edition an improvement over most is that finally the tracks have been digitally remastered. So instead of CD clarity rendering the sound harsh and brittle—as it was on, say, the *20 Greatest Hits Vols I and II*—there's a depth and resonance which makes you want to hear the songs all over again.

California Gold also includes a few comparatively recent releases, notably the hit 'Kokomo' from the *Cocktail* movie soundtrack. Accordingly some old standbys such as 'Catch A Wave', 'Girl Don't Tell Me' and 'Hawaii' have been dropped. I guess the new stuff is a sensible marketing ploy but the old stuff is better music.

PETER THOMSON

ETTA JAMES
The Right Time (Elektra)

She may look like Queen Latifah on the cover, but the big voice of Etta James has been leaving soul fans stunned for nearly 30 years. Her versions of 'I'd Rather Go Blind', 'Security' and 'Tell Mama' are R&B classics, but her albums have never had the consistency of her high energy live shows. For *The Right Time* she brings legendary producer Jerry Wexler out of retirement, along with southern heroes such as

Steve Cropper and Roger Hawkins.

As you'd expect, the result has the retro sound of the neo-traditional blues label Malaco. Modern keyboards are absent, and the groove is warm, loose and sweaty (mostly propelled by drummer Steve Ferrone). A few of the covers are a bit obvious ('Love and Happiness', 'Ninety-nine and a Half', 'Nighttime is the Right Time') and rocked up, so it's more satisfying when Etta gets sensitive on the ballads by Malaco songwriter George Jackson. Allen Toussaint's 'Give It Up' is a duet with Steve Winwood, but James smoothes the weak white blues of the former boy-wonder. On the Hayes/Porter classic 'You're Taking Up Another Man's Place' she shows how to age with style; Steve Cropper provides some stinging guitar and James's stately vocal simply demands respect. Inconsistent but incomparable.

CHRIS BOURKE

BELINDA CARLISLE
The Best of Belinda Volume One (Virgin)
MARGARET URLICH
Chameleon Dreams (Columbia)

When a vocalist leaves a group to launch a solo career there's often a conscious distancing from the old context. The musical strategy may remain pretty close to the prior format—must take the punters with you—but the packaging gets a makeover.

Yet when Belinda Carlisle left the Gogos not only did she jettison the band's whole punkish-but-cheerful demeanour, she vigorously pursued a shopping-mall pop success in sound as well as image. Her cheekbones may have been enhanced but the music wasn't.

Now here's a 15-track *Best Of* for our delectation. What's it like? Well, the 30-second TV advert which features the hook lines from three or four songs is not far from being the equivalent

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