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[Next Story >](#)

Sun, sand and songs

A round up of recent rock 'n' roll DVDs

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It won't be long until gift lists and holiday recordings appear in this space; so let's look at some mostly music-related DVDs some readers may want to give, receive or bypass this season.

'The Great Pretender,' Freddie Mercury (Eagle Rock Entertainment, HHHH)

This Sept. 25 DVD/Blu-Ray/digital video presents the late Freddie Mercury, lead singer of Queen. But it is primarily concerned with his work outside the band. It was created by the same people responsible for the "Queen: Days Of Our Lives" documentary reviewed a while back, and includes lots of previously unreleased material, such as a piece of the unreleased Freddie/Michael Jackson song "There Must Be More to Life Than This."

Highlights include the joy in Freddie's collaboration with Spanish soprano Montserrat Caballe, the interviews with Queen's Roger Taylor and Brian May and other collaborators, plus archival videos. Freddie was the first rock star to die of AIDS, and he brought that horrible disease into public view. His fans will enjoy this program and its bonus content almost as much as the concert film mentioned below.

'Classic Albums -- So,' Peter Gabriel (Eagle Rock Entertainment, HHHHH)

This Oct. 22 DVD/Blu-Ray/digital video release applies the "Classic Albums Series" treatment to Peter Gabriel's fifth solo album, which was released in 1986. It was his first solo album that was not just called "Peter Gabriel."

Those albums had a few radio-friendly songs, such as "Solsbury Hill," "Shock the Monkey," "Games Without Frontiers" and "Biko." But this new album would throw commercial floodgates open with "Sledgehammer," "Big Time," "In Your Eyes" and more.

The elements that make up all the presentations in this series are quadrupled here, with Peter, co-producer Daniel Lanois, bassist Tony Levin, drummers Manu Katche and Jerry Marotta, singer Kate Bush, engineer Kevin Killen and many more folks who worked on either the album or its ground-breaking videos speaking their piece. Lanois and Killen help Gabriel dial up and present different tracks from the album, which was state-of-the-art in 1986, and still stands up sonically today.

Sound/recording geeks and Peter Gabriel fans will all enjoy this one.

'Live In Indonesia At Java Rockin' Land,' Stryper (MVDvisual, HHH 1/2)

Stryper (Michael Sweet: guitar/lead vocals, Robert Sweet: drums, Oz Fox: guitar/ vocals and Timothy Gaines: bass/vocals) is the original band playing Christian "praise music" with elements of heavy metal/hard rock. This Oct. 23 DVD shows them filmed in Indonesia in front of an enthusiastic crowd. The lead/harmony vocals are great; the guitars occasionally approach a Thin Lizzy level of dual delight. The band name and striped color scheme that once included glammy stage wear comes from the Bible (King James version, Isaiah 53:5): "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed."

Highlights include the anthemic "To Hell With the Devil," a propulsive "The Way," the harmony-laden "Reach Out," and Michael Sweet's sometimes-stratospheric voice. Fans of rocking Christian music will want to check these forefathers of the genre.

'Hungarian Rhapsody --Queen Live In Budapest,' (Eagle Rock Entertainment, HHHH 1/2)

This Nov. 6 release comes in many forms: the two-CD/DVD package considered here plus single DVD, single Blu-Ray, and more. This massive stadium show was originally filmed in 1986, and has been re-mastered in high-definition/surround sound. It is also part of the final tour with lead singer Freddie Mercury, who sings powerfully and performs with boundless enthusiasm. Drummer Roger Taylor plays with combined strength and subtlety; guitarist Brian May applies his unique and matchless style; bassist John Deacon anchors the on-stage action with aplomb, and the backing vocals are superb. Spike Edney provides keyboards, extra vocals and rhythm guitar as needed. Newer songs occasionally take the place of old favorites.

Highlights include the opener, "One Vision," which segues into "Tie Your Mother Down" and two other vintage tunes. "Now I'm Here" is amazing before an acoustic segment breaks into a spirited "Tutti Frutti," which heads down the home stretch through "Hammer To Fall."

Queen fans and curious folks will want this one, which also includes "A Magic Year" documentary chronicling the year between their historic Live Aid show and this one.

'The Rolling Stones-Under Review 1975-1983,' (Chrome Dreams/MVDvisual, HHHH)

This Nov. 20 DVD release subtitled "The Ronnie Wood Years Part 1," kicks off with how The Rolling Stones were affected by the resignation of the young guitar whiz who had revived them several years before, Mick Taylor. It then details how the last two albums with Taylor, "Goats Head Soup" and "It's Only Rock n' Roll" were not very well received by critics or fans. I know that Rory Gallagher's name could be added to the list of guitarists approached to replace Taylor; but in the end, the decision to add Wood as permanent guitarist after he served on their 1975 tour was a no-brainer for the band given his friendship with Keith Richards and ability to get along with the rest.

Fans will enjoy this one a lot, as well as the others in this series.

Ricky Flake, a former punk rocker and current music fan, lives in Biloxi. Reach him at rickyflake@bellsouth.net

[Back to Top](#)
[< Previous Story](#)