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A Hendrix treasure-trove; more America's Music Legacy DVDs

This week's column begins with a highly-anticipated Jimi Hendrix set that follows his "transformation from R&B sideman to world's most electrifying guitarist."

Three more volumes of MVD's series about America's Music Legacy come next.

'West Coast Seattle Boy -- The Jimi Hendrix Anthology,' (Experience Hendrix LLC/Legacy, HHHHH)

This massive collection (four CDs and one DVD) was released Nov. 16 and arrived shortly thereafter, but it's taken some time to listen, view and form a printable opinion. I decided to "experience" the DVD first, a new 90-minute documentary directed by Grammy Award-winner Bob Smeaton. There's great performance footage from Jimi's prime time, arranged around his own words from postcards and letters read by Bootsy Collins. The film is loaded with background information on Jimi's early life, his time in the 101st Airborne, and his travels around the USA as a backing musician for The Isley Brothers, Little Richard and others.

Disc one begins in 1964 and ends in 1969, and represents Hendrix's earliest commercial recordings. Highlights include the Isley's frantic "Testify," Don Covay's best-selling "Mercy, Mercy" and a rare slow one from Little Richard, "I Don't Know What You Got But It's Got Me."

Disc two of the package focuses on 1967-1968 and Jimi's breakout sessions with Mitch Mitchell on drums and Noel Redding on bass as the Jimi Hendrix Experience. All songs are previously unreleased recordings or previously unreleased alternate takes. Highlights include a slightly longer "Fire;" instrumental tracks of "Are You Experienced" and others; an alternate run at "Love or Confusion;" a live version of "The Wind Cries Mary" and a different look at "Castles Made of Sand."

The third disc revisits 1968-1969, which was a pivotal period for Hendrix as he explored new directions onstage and in the studio. Highlights include the organ-driven "Hear My Freedom," the piano-featuring "Messenger," an individualistic jam on "Hound Dog Blues" and previously unreleased original live mixes of "Star Spangled Banner" and "Purple Haze."

Disc four opens with a New Year's Eve 1969 performance of "Stone Free" captured at Fillmore East and closes with a previously unheard recording of Jimi alone focusing on the future in his Greenwich Village apartment in 1970. Highlights include the aforementioned Band of Gypsys (Buddy Miles/drums, backing vocals and Billy Cox/bass) expansion of "Stone Free;" the funkified "Burning Desire;" "Everlasting First," recorded with Arthur Lee of Love; an extremely different "Bolero" plus "Hey Baby (New Rising Sun)" before things wind up.

Hendrix fans, freaks and completists need to get this one immediately.

'America's Music Legacy: Blues,' Various Artists (Quantum Leap/MVDvisual, HHHH)

These three Dec. 7 DVDs, along with a fourth volume about Dixieland Jazz, are further installments of a series filmed 1983-85 by 20th Century Home Entertainment. The blues program is hosted by Brock Peters, and it features performances by B.B. King, Buddy Guy and many others. The highlights include B.B. King's three-song set plus his duet with Linda Hopkins on "Every Day I Have the Blues," Joe Williams' salacious "Tell Me Where to Scratch" and vintage film clips of Count Basie, Jimmy Rushing, Bessie Smith, Big Joe Turner and Mamie Smith. Audio quality varies widely, but this is a cool show for blues lovers.

'America's Music Legacy: Folk,' Various Artists (Quantum Leap/MVDvisual, HHH1/2)

The folk program is hosted by Theodore Bikel and features performances by childhood favorite Burl Ives, Doc Watson, Leadbelly and more. The highlights are film clips of Ives, Leadbelly and The Limelites; a medley of classic folk songs ("Old Kentucky Home," "Swanee River," "Camptown Races," "Dixieland" and more) from New Christy Minstrels; Hoyt Axton's "Greenback Dollar;" plus Doc Watson's "Fix Me a Pallet" and "I Got the Blues."

Audio on this one is even spottier, probably because of mostly acoustic instruments; but folk fans will love it.

'America's Music Legacy: Soul,' Various Artists (Quantum Leap/MVDvisual, HHHH)

The soul program is hosted by Leon Isaac Kennedy and features performances by James Brown, Ben E. King, Otis Redding and others. The highlights include Brown's short set, which unfortunately leaves out his best songs; Ben E. King's two standout songs ("Stand by Me" and "I Who Have Nothing"); Tyrone Davis' "Turn Back the Hands of Time;" all the Gladys Knight/Pips songs (including "Neither One of Us," "Midnight Train to Georgia" and more); and Otis Redding's version of "Satisfaction."

Audio is variable again, but lovers of classic soul music will love this show, especially the closing "jam" on "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" featuring Gladys, The Pips, Freda Payne, Rufus Thomas and Carla Thomas. Get all these volumes if possible for your favorite American Music lover.

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