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America's Music Legacy: Rhythm + Blues

Directed by Kip Walton

Cube International / Century Home Video, 1983 / 2010

95 minutes, USD \$16.95

Cubeinternational.com

Qleap.co.uk

MVDvisual.com

This was a potentially very scary DVD for me to watch. I love early R+B, but from 1974 through 1985 (aka *the dreaded disco years*), R+B became a nightmare (ass it would again with the advent of hip-hop and rap). Fortunately, most of what is covered here is from the earlier incarnations of the sound, which it broke off from jazz in the 1940s. Perhaps that explains why many of the people here have passed on since its airing.

This release is actually two separate television shows (specials?), both taking place in a studio made to look like an intimate club (a perfect setting for this style). The first is hosted by actor Brock Peters (d. 2005), who has a deep, rich speaking voice (like James Earl Jones). Between musical acts he explains the history of Rhythm and Blues in short spurts, and one old film clip of Slim Gaillard. He is thankfully non-obtrusive, and his presence is actually a nice pace-setter.

The first artist is Brook Benton (d. 1988), who sings the metaphoric tune, "Boll Weevil" (about trying to find a home), and a bluesy "Thank You Pretty Baby." Let me add right here, that because these are two shows pasted together, to save time they edited out some songs, which remain listed on the cover; this quite frustrating. Benton's "Rainy Night in Georgia" is among those; a far superior tune to "Boll Weevil," it is not here. Surely there was enough time to put this on, since the cover states this is two hours, and it's actually 25 minutes shy of that.

He is followed by the ever-lovable native of Terre Haute, IN, Ben Scatman Crothers (d. 1986), of whom I've been a fan for years. You may know some of his acting work, such as the mailman on *Chico and the Man*, the guy who gets killed by Jack Nicholson in the last reel of *The Shining*, and the title character voice of *Hong Kong Phooey*, but he's been a musician (starting as a drummer) since the 1920s, eventually getting into guitar and said scat singing. Strumming a guitar uke style, he is obviously having fun with a rambunctious "Ain't She Sweet," the slow ballad "Mean Dog Blues" (which he co-wrote), and the Louis Armstrong styled "End of the Road." Scatman is always a joy to watch, even much younger as a drummer in the above-mentioned Gaillard clip.

Moving up to Motown, Mary Wells (d. 1992), one of the first artists to have a hit on the label and helped define the sound. She does her classic Smokey Robinson-penned "My Guy," and then a disco-ized "Gigolo" (this seems to be a kind of '80s trend: when I saw Martha Reeves play at Zappaz in Brooklyn during this period, she did the same treatment for "Dancing in the Streets"). I was not happy, especially since her "Two Lovers" is

listed by not presented.

After that disco terror, there came the polar opposite style in the form of O.C. Smith (d. 2001), who had a big hit with “Little Green Apples” (1968 song of the year). I would be hard pressed to call this R+B, but more like lame pop. While there is a slight pick-up with “Stormy Monday,” in which the band easily outshines Smith, he drags it right back down with the turgid Bobby Russell-penned “Honey (I Miss You)” (that Bobby Goldsboro had a bigger hit with, for some reason, perhaps a deal with the devil). Ironically, Russell also wrote “Little Green Apples.” Smith’s R+B-lite is not exactly exciting performing, rather looking like he phoned it in. Throughout, I kept thinking that it’s a shame they didn’t get Bill Withers to do “Ain’t No Sunshine,” a much better artist and song in the contemporary R+B genre.

There is a rise in spirit, though, when Sam Moore hits the stage. His version of “Soul Man” is as exciting as ever, even without Dave Prater. It’s definitely rousing, and a fine way to end the first program (though “I’ve Been Loving You” and “Hold On, I’m Coming” are, again, listed but not shown).

Without any announcement, the second program is started by a jump cut, and we are introduced to its host, Billy Eckstine (d. 1993), who, like Brock Peters, gives a bit of a history lesson between artists, showing a few b+w clips such as Louis Jordan and Amos Milburn. A singing contemporary of Sinatra, Eckstine actually gave blue eyes a close competitor, especially among the African-American demographic.

Eckstine starts out with a solid proto-rocker, “Little Mama,” the kind of song Elvis would take and add in his own spin. This only makes sense, as the first guest is Ruth Brown (d. 2006). There are some who will know her from her appearance in the original *Hairspray* film, but she is considered one of the first queens of rock and roll (though I would place her in the proto- area as well). She is so much fun to watch as she careens through her 1953 “5-10-15 More” and “Teardrops From My Eyes.” And as joyous as it is to see someone this present in their music, she is obviously having a blast as well.

To exemplify soul, they call in “the fifth Beatle,” Billy Preston. Like Brown, he is obviously having a good time, setting proverbial fire to his two-level keyboard electric organ. He starts off with a lengthy, raucous cover of the Gershwin brothers’ “Summertime” (from *Porgy and Bess*). While most of it is an instrumental, he jumps in about half-way through and plays the piece as “Bach would play it,” and then as Ray Charles would, including a vocal impression. Then he really gets down and goes through one of his bigger hits, “Will It Go Round in Circles.” Even I was singing along on parts (“...Let the bad guy win / Once in a while!”).

Getting back to more a traditional sound, Gloria Lynne sings the torchy “I Wish You Love,” and is then joined by Eckstine for a jazzy “Call Me Irresponsible,” a 1962 standard. While her voice is a bit rough in spots, one can see where she was coming from, and admire her work.

And speaking of irresponsible, the last act is Sheer Delight, a '80s post-disco girl group performing "Getting to the Good Part." Solid top-10 schlock, this type of material was handled so much better by the likes of Lady Flash. This is one time when I was just fine with a couple of songs that were listed on the cover but not performed.

To close the show, Eckstine commands the stage, and performs Duke Ellington's "Mr. Saturday Night" (which has the line "Don't get around much anymore"), "In My Solitude," and "I'm Beginning to See the Light." He finishes up with the slow boogie blues of "Jelly Jelly Blues."

So, mostly my fears were unwarranted, and this was actually a really nice collection. Yeah, there's more I would have liked to see, such as some of the artists I've mentioned, and others, such as Aretha, James Brown, and Curtis Mayfield, but I wouldn't be surprised if they show up on a later part of this collection.