

GenEc DVD Review

Tuesday, December 21, 2010

"America's Music Legacy" 4 DVD's, sold separately (MVD)

MVD has recently embarked on a reissue project involving a series of DVD's under the heading "America's Music Legacy". Eight volumes are now available, in a concert format featuring a variety of artists within specific categories, originally taped as a series of television specials during the 1980's. Since there is no real thematic link between the discs, and they are sold separately, I'll review the first batch of four now, and the others at a later date. They are in no particular order, so I'll simply review them in the order I viewed them.

"America's Music Legacy: Rock 'n Roll" strikes me as the most problematical of the four. If you're a purist looking for a serious-minded, hard-core rock'n'roll concert, you might find this disappointing. But if you want a fairly typical lineup of an oldies-for-nostalgia-purposes variety show, then you're more likely to be satisfied. I confess I was a bit turned off right from the start by the simple fact that Fabian, one of the most sorry excuses for a "rock'n'roll" star ever concocted, is the host. The original title of the show seems to have been "Fabian's Good Time Rock'n'Roll". Alas, as host and star, he is allowed to "sing", something he never was able to do, particularly in the pre-autotuning era. Actually, I've always found him to be a personable, ingratiating sort, but he never did carry a tune in his entire life. Still, he makes for a likable enough host.

The performers are a mix of 50's and pre-Beatles-60's, running the gamut from rockabilly to doo-wop to the twist to girl groups to pop. The Coasters' arrangements are a bit looser and rhythmically modernized compared to the originals, but quite agreeable nonetheless. Lou Christie has a few intonation problems, but was still hitting the falsetto notes, perhaps even more fully than in the old days. His Vegas-style showmanship may be a bit overdone, but the crowd loves it. Leslie Gore, on the other hand, sounds a bit frenetic, as if she can't get through her set fast enough. She is a much stronger performer than she shows here. The duet between Christie and Gore on "Since I Don't Have You", on the other hand, is one of the highlights of the set, as if the pressure to reproduce their hits for the nostalgia crowd is off, and they feel relaxed enough to just flat-out sing. Chubby Checker is another performer who is trapped by his old hits, but darn it, he can entertain with the best. In a medley of other people's hits, he doesn't exactly make you forget the originals, but he brings his own personality and years of experience into play to

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Tom Bingham

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make them sound fresh.

The Crystals' backgrounds sound a bit thin when divorced from the Spector wall of sound, but their singing and stage presence is decent. I do miss Darlene Love's lead voice, though, on "He's Sure The Boy I Love". The Diamonds (down to three singers, none of whom look familiar) are bolstered by a solid lead singer (unidentified). Little Anthony performs solo, sans Imperials, but fortunately sounds essentially the same as he always has, one of the premier singers of pop-r&b, whether solo or with group. Another of the true artists in this set, Bo Diddley, is in fine fettle, but the backing band - which has been quite good throughout the rest of the show - seems to be hemming him in, so that he never really catches fire. Still, even second-level Bo is better than no Bo at all. Overall, an inconsistent, yet by no means bad DVD. Less fussy admirers of the artists than me will no doubt enjoy it.

"America's Music Legacy: Gospel", is hosted by the non-singing Levar Burton, who introduces a wide variety of gospel artists, mostly black, but some white; mostly contemporary (by 1983 standards), but some traditional; soloists, small groups, choirs. Burton makes the indisputable, yet often glossed-over observation that gospel music is influenced by blues, jazz, r&b, country, and rock, and all those influences are on display in varying degrees throughout the concert. By 1983, 70's superstar Andrae Crouch was not considered as cutting-edge as he had been a decade earlier, but the funk rhythm section and blues-drenched guitar solo are perfect illustrations of what Burton was saying. But then, Crouch's lead vocal and the responses of the chorus are straight out of gospel music's past, thus making it easy to understand how the artist was able to command so much crossover attention in the 1970's. An updated variation on the male quartet tradition is represented by the Winans (the original quartet, before family members joined in). The slick, smooth quartet is closer to the Gamble/Huff school of 70's-soul vocal groups than to, say, the Swan Silvertones, but they're quite good in their own way.

There are clips of some of the great gospel stars of the past, Mahalia Jackson and the Clara Ward singers, as well as a live performance by Ward alumna Marion Williams. But even the late, great Williams does a song with a calypso-style beat. Modern (1980's standards) gospel choir style, in which a wailing soloist and choral responses are sung over a secular-influenced background, is represented by Doug Miller and his rousing choral ensemble. Walter Hawkins, who left his brother Edward Hawkins' singer to achieve a more permanent fame (though Walter died this past year) fronts a somewhat thin-sounding, yet fully intense vocal group. By contrast, Sandra Crouch (twin sister of Andrae) harkens back to an earlier era in the choir sub-genre.

Wintley Phipps (name misspelled on the DVD case), now known primarily as a preacher and educator, represents a classically-trained baritone style mixed with a modern-gospel ballad-singer approach.

Burton's comparison of Phipps to Paul Robeson strikes me as hyperbolic, but he is more than acceptable at what he does. The Chambers Family Singers is an expanded edition of the psychedelic-era band The Chambers Brothers, with added family members. I'm afraid I found this larger group to be bland and uninspired. Linda Hopkins, whose career has wavered between gospel, blues, r&b, and Broadway, is heard in a more traditional vein here. The purity of her singing blends with a showbiz sheen which puts her in a category beyond her early mentors.

White gospel has never attracted critical attention to the degree that black gospel has. Nonetheless, the DVD tries to strike a bit of balance, by presenting two groupings of white performers. The Archers, a family singing trio, represent the adult-contemporary variety of CCM (Contemporary Christian Music), coming off as a sort of uptempo, jazzy, religious version of Manhattan Transfer. With a change of lyrics, these folks might have had pop potential, if that's what they wanted. An older country-gospel style is sampled on the first song by the husband/wife duo of singer Reba Rambo and pianist Dony McGuire. McGuire sings their second song, which he tabs "Tap 40 Christian".

In all, the gospel volume of this series get high marks for variety and choice of artists. As with almost any anthology, few people will enjoy everything to an equal extent, but I feel safe in recommending it to fans and curiosity seekers alike.

"America's Music Legacy: Country and Western" is also a mostly well-chosen, variety-filled set, including some top-notch performances by a number of people. It was filmed at Knotts Berry Farm in 1981, with DJ-turned producer Gene Weed (a long-time Dick Clark associate) as the host. 1981 was a time when the Nashville scene - having become accustomed in the 1970's to country-tinged pop singers such as Kenny Rogers and Olivia Newton-John - was becoming progressively slicker and more pop-conscious. Nevertheless, many of the excesses critics and detractors find in present-day Nashville music were still some years away. Thus, we have a mixture of the modern and the traditional, which a few artists (such as Moe Bandy) having stylistic influences in both camps.

Two stars of the that era, little heard from these days, get things rolling. Sylvia (no longer in show business) sounded much smoother on her studio recordings, but those viewers who remember "Drifter" and "Matador" (her biggest hit, "Nobody", came out a year later) will enjoy her offerings. Razy Bailey is now more active as a studio owner than a performer, and is far removed from the days when he was churning out one #1 hit after another. His soft-rock approach helped make it possible for today's cosmopolitan country stars to replace him. Hearing this 1981 set almost 30 years later, he sounds a bit old-fashioned now, but comes off as an entertaining "old pro".

The term "country and western" has rarely been used in recent decades, at least not by those in the know. But its use in the title of this DVD is justified by the presence of one of the great unsung movie "singing cowboy" heroes of country music's past, Eddie Dean (1907-1999). In addition to his acting, Dean co-wrote one of the enduring honky-tonk laments, "One Has My Name" ("the other has my heart") and the narrative tribute to deceased country artists, "Hillbilly Heaven" (later covered with great success by fellow singing cowboy, Tex Ritter). He was well into his mid-70's by the time this was filmed, but his voice was still strong and controlled. His presence is definitely one of the highlights of the disc. Doug Kershaw first hit the scene in the mid-1950's, as half of the Cajun-country brother duo, Rusty and Doug. By the 1970's, Kershaw was a t.v. talk-show celebrity having added a rock'n'roll flair to the Cajun and country roots. The more he appeared on t.v., the more he relied on demented facial expressions and dance moves to live up to his "wild man" image, and America eventually tired of his antics. Perhaps it's simply that I haven't seen his shtick in a while, but he comes off as more of a showman than a crackpot in this set, in a performance which reminds me why I once found him so exciting.

Patti Page is thought of as more of an old-line 1950's pop star than a country singer, though both country and big-band swing influences have always been part of her bag of vocal style. Of course, her signature song, "Tennessee Waltz" had originally been a country song (Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart), and Page recorded pop-country for Shelby Singleton's Plantation label in the 1970's. Even so, her set comes off rather too nightclubby for a country special. But vocally she still had "it" nearly 20 years after her last hit. I enjoyed her performances, they just seem out of place in this context. Moe Bandy was billed as a honky-tonk throwback in his heyday, but a song such as "Bandy the Rodeo Clown", despite its obvious cowboy lyrics, could belong in the same category as some of Glen Campbell's crossover hits. But though he lacked much of the nasal twang associated with honky-tonk, he was indeed proficient at the genre, as witnessed by "Take Me Back To Yesterday Once More". Terry Gregory was being touted as an up-and-comer at the time this show was originally aired, but I have to confess I barely remember her. She's a polished enough entertainer, but she doesn't strike me as distinctive enough to break through into the upper echelons of show business.

Besides Eddie Dean, the two highlights of the disc come late in the set. Jerry Lee Lewis came to rock'n'roll with obvious country roots (plus gospel and boogie-woogie, of course), and made his late-60's comeback as a neo-honky-tonk singer/pianist. But he has worked within and combined so many genres that it's hard to predict what you're going to hear at any Jerry Lee performance. The Jerry Lee presented on this disc is primarily the one-of-a-kind rocker with the pumpin' piano (as it was once billed), drawing more from gospel and boogie-woogie perhaps than country. He looks healthy and sounds very much at ease, with a cool intensity that elevates a so-so song

such as "I'm Rockin' My Life Away" until it sounds like a near-classic. This is first-class Jerry Lee Lewis, well worth the price of admission. By the way, to the song list on the case, add "You Can Have Her". Ricky Skaggs came out of bluegrass, became a Nashville superstar, then retreated back to the worlds of bluegrass and gospel. His set on this DVD captures him at the height of his country-music stardom. He's backed by a solid band that is as capable as its leader in both tear-stained honky-tonk ("You May See me Walking", "I'm Crying My Heart Out Over You") and country-rock ("Get Your Heart Broke"). I didn't realize until now how much I miss THIS Ricky Skaggs.

In sum, this is a fine collection which should please anyone who was listening to country music back in the 1980's, and provide a few entertaining lessons for current fans who never bothered with country music until Rascal Flatts and Carrie Underwood came long.

The last disc under review at this time, "America's Music Legacy: Rhythm & Blues" illustrates the somewhat ambiguous nature of that designation. Essentially, rhythm & blues is not a evolving style of music, but an overall term which incorporates almost any type of music popular among mass numbers of African-American listeners since the mid-1940's. Co-host Brock Peters (who emcees the first half; Billy Eckstine takes over the second segment) is quick to acknowledge that fact, but refers to as r&b as "urbanized blues", which can be justified, though it only goes so far. R&b can mean anything from the jazz-inflected blues style of the 1940's, through a variety of nightclub styles, with stops along the way in doo-wop, soul music, Motown, funk, disco (sometimes), all the way to hip-hop. As with the other volumes in this series, this disc surveys a number of musical approaches to the variety of sounds labeled at various times as "rhythm and blues".

Brook Benton gets us started with his biggest (though hardly best) hit, "Boll Weevil", a novelty song with a very serious back-story, as well as 1959 hit, "Thank You Pretty Baby". Mary Wells, with blond wig, represents Motown two decades after her hit days, with a saucy version of "My Guy". She also shines on a funky, post-Motown song called "Gigolo" (her last hit, #2 on the disco charts in 1981, complete with rap midsection), which makes me wonder why Wells had so little success after leaving Motown. O.C. Smith adds a touch of country-pop with two Bobby Russell songs, his biggest hit, "Little Green Apples" and a soulful version of "Honey" which I personally find far superior to Bobby Goldsboro's smash. Sam Moore is heard here after the break-up of the Sam and Dave duo (after which Dave Prater went out on the road with another Sam). I have never understod why Sam Moore's recording career post-David has met with such spotty success, as Moore had by far the more distinctive voice and style of the duo. Frankly, I don't even miss Dave on "Soul Man" and "Hold I'm Coming". Peters introduces a film clip of r&b forerunner Slim Gaillard, from the days when Scatman Crothers was his drummer. Crothers himself comes out with a tenor guitar (or is it a baritone uke?), to do

a jazzy vaudeville set, reminding us that his career went all the way back to the mid-1920's. Though known by this time primarily as an actor (t.v.'s "Chico and the Man" and the movie "The Shining", among many other roles), Crothers was still an ingratiating performer in his later years.

Billy Eckstine rivalled Nat "King" Cole as the ultimate black popular entertainer of his day (1940's and well into the 50's, after which he maintained a steady, though less spectacular career). He could boast of bona fides in jazz, blues, r&b, and mainstream-pop ballads. He wraps his warm, tremulous baritone around a couple songs from his big-band blues career, with such songs as "Jelly Jelly" and "Little Mama". He also does a Duke Ellington medley, in which the song "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" is misidentified on the case as "Mr. Saturday Night", which would seem to be a mishearing of the song's opening line, "Missed the Saturday dance". Eckstein also introduces clips of a couple of his pioneering contemporaries, Louis Jordan, who brought his lighthearted blend of jazz and blues to a mass audience before the term r&b was even coined, and club singer-pianist Amos Milburn, doing one of his biggest hits, "Bad Bad Whiskey". Eckstine also uses an old clip to introduce Ruth Brown, who offers a rollicking version of her classic "5--10-15 Hours" and a jazz reading of "Teardrops From My Eyes". Don't know who the sax soloist is behind Ms. Brown, but he has the Texas tenor sound down pat. I could use an entire DVD of Ruth Brown!

Billy Preston goes back to the pre-rock church-organ style of his pre-Beatles collaborations with a mostly instrumental, gospel-meets-Baroque-meets Ray Charles interpretation of "Summertime". Eckstine also connects "Will It Go Round in Circles" to gospel music, which I find tenuous, but it's a nice version of the #1 hit. The host talks about doo-wop - someone should have told him that the Ravens and the Orioles pre-dated the Larks - but no actual doo-wop is presented. The soft-jazz/pop vocal style of the r&b balladeer is represented by Gloria Lynne, with her 1964 hit "I Wish You Love", as well as a duet with Eckstine. An unknown (to me) vocal trio named Sheer Delight is intended to relate the Motown influence to the music of the 1980's, but I find them to be quite nondescript.

Several songs listed on the DVD case are missing from the program itself, which is a bit over 90 minutes, rather than two hours as stated. While I would have loved to hear Brook Benton sing "Rainy Night in Georgia", I can't say I feel bad missing out on another Sheer Delight song. The notes on the performers (a bonus feature common to all the DVD's in this series) misses the fact that Billy Preston and Ruth Brown both died in 2006, so this may have been prepared before that year. In all, a good concert, perhaps not a great one, but with much worth seeing and hearing.

I'll be back with reviews of the next four discs in the "America's Music Legacy" series once I have them all (I'm missing one at the moment).

1/19/2011

GenEc DVD Review: "America's Music L...

But for now, this should give you some ideas for any last-minute Christmas shopping you may need to do for the music-lovers on your list!

Posted by Tom Bingham at **1:01 PM**

Labels: **America's, country, gospel, Legacy, music, rhythm and blues, rock'n'roll**

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