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Earth, Wind & Fire blow in with new release, plus more essentials

Guitars galore, Britney Spears and one-hit wonders

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The only home game until October for USM's Golden Eagles is Saturday, followed by a brutal September road schedule, so I wish Coach Monken, his staff and the team a good, safe and successful effort. Meanwhile, this week's column is loaded with guitars and guitarists, kicking off with a DVD about the late, great Duane Allman. The second review features the major label debut from Paul Allen. My reviews concerning a 2011 Montreux concert DVD from Santana and McLaughlin, a two-CD Essential package from pop princess Britney Spears (without many guitars) and part one of a new series brings things to a close.

'Song of the South: Duane Allman and the Rise of the Allman Brothers,' (MVDvisual, HHHHH)

This July 30 DVD presents an excellent overview of the phenomenal guitarist who was responsible for Southern Rock getting on the map, although his unfortunate death in a motorcycle accident at age 24 prevented him from enjoying success for very long.

The program goes back to the beginning, or close to it, when Duane's dad was murdered and his Mom moved to Daytona Beach, Fla., when he was 4. Duane and brother Gregg (one year younger) were musical almost from the start; but Duane's interest was exclusive and intense. They played in various Florida bands until one of them, Hour Glass, was discovered and began a successful concert/frustrating studio experience in California. After that, Duane's studio work, including a wondrous performance on Wilson Pickett's "Hey Jude" cover, drew the notice of industry big wigs. From there came the beginnings of his musical "family."

Southern Rock/Allman Brothers fans need this program.

'Everywhere At Once,' Paul Allen and The Underthinkers (Legacy Recordings, HHHH)

This Aug. 6 CD is the first major-label release for guitarist/songwriter/philanthropist/technologist Paul Allen (yes, the Microsoft co-founder) and his band The Underthinkers (John Bohlinger/guitar, Doug Barnett/bass, Tim Pike/vocals). Matt Chamberlain drums on most tunes. All of the album's songs were written or co-written by Allen. Guests abound, with Heart's Ann and Nancy Wilson, Chrissie Hynde, Joe Walsh, Derek Trucks, Los Lobos' David Hidalgo (guitar on most songs) and Doyle Bramhall II, who produced the album with Justin Stanley.

Ann Wilson's vocal on "Straw Into Gold" kicks the album off with a bang. Other highlights include the slow "Rodeo" with Hynde singing; the sarcastic "Six Strings From Hell" with Walsh's vocals and slide guitar; Wendy Moten's singing, Ivan Neville's organ and Trucks' guitar make the gospel-flavored "Healing Hands" a winner. Fans of blues-based music will enjoy this album.

'Invitation To Illumination: Live At Montreux 2011,' Carlos Santana & John McLaughlin (Eagle Rock Entertainment, HHH)

This Aug. 20 DVD/Blu-ray/digital video release features master guitarists Santana and McLaughlin playing songs from their 1973 album "Love Devotion Surrender" along with other songs that have influenced them during their careers. Readers know that I enjoy the original Santana band, but not his jazz-fusion activities. Nothing here changes that opinion, though I recognize that these folks are excellent musicians.

Drums are handled by Dennis Chambers and Cindy Blackman Santana, with alternating bassists, another guitarist, a percussionist and two vocalists rounding out the crew. A shuffle called "Right Off,"