McCartney’s live Wings, Queen’s Races Superb

By David B. Koerner
Wings Over America — Wings (Capitol)

Early last summer Capitol Records announced plans to release by Christmas a three-record set of live performances by the group’s two most recent pop singles, telling Paul McCartney and Wings, to be compiled from the group’s recent nationwide tour.

Not many people were more surprised than I when Wings Over America turned out to be the most impressive, exciting live album since Yes released the classic Yes albums four years ago.

From the opening track, one suspects that this album may be something special. “Venus and Mars/ Rock Show/Act,” a medley of Wings hits, is bright and vibrant, while the performance, though live, is unusually disciplined.

After “Spirits of Ancient Egypt” and “Maybe I’m Amazed” are mixed in with several less familiar tunes, McCartney really comes alive with reasonably faithful renditions of “Lady Madonna” and “The Long and Winding Road,” two classics he sings as a Beatle. The group finishes off the incredible first disc in style, bringing their audience to several ovations during “Live and Let Die,” the James Bond title song which became as popular as the movie.

Three and four could not be expected to hit the level of the previous two, but McCartney’s fellow musicians at least give a good account of themselves in moving smoothly through an assortment of lesser songs.

The Wings, besides the former Beatle, are Linda McCartney, keyboards; Denny Laine, electric and acoustic guitars; Jimmy McCullough, bass and other guitars; and Joe English, drums. In this album credit is also given to a four-member brass section.

The middle disc is highlighted by the mellow Beatles tune “Blackbird” and “Yesterday,” and topped off by the recent patriotic gem “Let Her Be Called America,” what the Man Said.

With side five the concert picks up its former fast pace, offering in succession four songs from the Wings’ most recent studio album, At the Speed of Sound.

“Let It Be,” the title song, “Silly Love Songs,” and “With a Little Luck” are newer songs, and the group’s two most recent pop singles, are played almost flippantly, as if to assure the audience that even the musicians don’t take the tunes seriously.

The final side begins with “Letting Go,” a fine rocker, then moves into “Band on the Run.” The climax of this song (“Well, the rain exploded with a mighty crash”), is also the climax of the album.

McCartney finishes with “Hi, Hi, Hi,” a lively hit, and “Silly,” a selection that, though forceful, is downbeat enough to make it clear that the end is at hand.

Wings Over America, according to Capitol, was painstakingly produced. McCartney himself going over the tape from each of the concerts in the tour. The fine performances and the excellent quality of the recording reflect hard work, both by the musicians and by the technicians.

With this album, McCartney tests aside his teenage idol image by putting out nearly three years of superb live rock. Perhaps he has finally found the finesse lacking since the breakup of the Beatles over six years ago.

A Day at the Races — Queen (Elektra)

In the beginning there was Brian May’s guitar; a brilliant instrument capable of almost earth-shaking pyrotechnics, but often sweet and lyrical. Its music was called Queen.

Of course, the magic of Brian May’s guitar alone was not Queen, which included the Fender bass of John Deacon, the drums of Roger Taylor, and the raspy voice of Freddie Mercury as well.

With time, that voice became polished, trained, and eventually quite skilled; so skilled, in fact, that on Queen’s fourth album — A Night at the Opera — the beauty and power of the voice matched that of the guitar.

Combined with the rhythm of Taylor’s percussion and the force of Deacon’s bass, “A Night at the Opera” became a rock landmark and a turning point for Queen, catapulting them to stardom.

Unfortunately, on A Day at the Races, Queen carried the changes just a bit too far. May’s venerated guitar faded into the distance, while Mercury’s vocals are overbearing.

What worked for moderation in the innovative “Bohemian Rhapsody” a year ago does not work in excess for “Somebody to Love,” the group’s first single off this album.

Three other cuts from A Day at the Races suffer from the Mercury malaise. In spirit of them, however, the album is terrific.

On the first side, ballads called “Long Away” and “You and I” come on well balanced among the different sounds, creating the effect Queen achieved with hard-driving tunes like “Killin’ Queen” and “You’re My Best Friend.”

On the flip, following the aforementioned single, the sound improves with each track. “White Man” and “Show,” a pretty Roger Taylor song, are fantastic, but once again, Queen saves the best for last. “Teo Torriatte (Let us Cling Together),” is easily the best cut on the disc.

This is a powerful, moving ballad with two chorus repetitions sung in Japanese. The rhythmic beauty of the Japanese lyrics nicely offsets the raw force of May’s guitar riffs, and the effect of the entire song is one of love and hope (“Let us cling together as the years go by ...”)

The warmth and beauty of this last song are powerful enough to find a place for the album in anyone’s heart. In fact, the record as a whole is the best Queen has produced to date, but I can’t help wondering what could have been, and what should have been.

Mendelssohn 4th: triumph for Davis, BSO

By William Lasser
Mendelssohn Italian Symphony — Colin Davis, Boston Symphony Orchestra (Philips)

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy composed the Italian Symphony (No. 4 in A) in the early 1830’s. It is in a classic among early Romantic symphonies, remarkably tuneful and simple, yet with the clear touch of the master at every step.

Mendelssohn began working on the symphony while in Italy (hence the name) and the music reflects the composer’s impressions of that country. He described the work, while it was still in its early stages, as “the merriest piece I have yet composed, especially the last movement.”

The thematic material in the fourth movement is taken directly from Italian dance tunes.

All of the joy and vibrance which the composer — and countless millions of music-lovers — have recognized in this masterpiece are captured in an outstanding performance by Colin Davis and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Davis, who is principal guest conductor of that group as well as music director of the Royal Opera at Covent Garden, England, has come into his own in the past few years with definitive recordings of Handel’s Messiah and Mozart’s Cosi Fan Tutti. Now, he shows that he is equally proficient with the early Romantic Period.

Mendelssohn’s rendition is a return to what might be called classical Romanticism, in which the works of composers such as Mendelssohn are played more like Mozart than like Brahms. The rhythm is regular and crisp; the loud passages are loud and the soft passages are soft; the endings are neat and concise.

The quality of the recording is excellent, allowing the full flavor of Davis’s control but powerful orchestra to present itself. The conductor keeps the entire constant under his command; in the final movement this allows him to increase the intensity of the music gradually and effortlessly, leading to a stirring finale. One misses only the expected surge of applause and emotion which would be heard if the work were played before a live audience.

Along with the Italian symphony, Davis plays on the same record excerpts of the incidental music, by the same composer, to A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Davis seems less comfortable with this work, at least in the first few excerpts, although he soon regains his form, concluding with a fine performance of the Wedding March.

There can be no complaints about a conductor who is beginning to emerge as one of the world’s finest. His expertise, which previously had included the Baroque and Classical eras, clearly now includes Mendelssohn and the early Romantics as well. Davis is a talent of unmeasurable potential.