Time Passages not sublime passages

By Joel West

Take a few uninspired lyrics, fold in 20 minutes of instrumental solos, blend in 1 cup of alto sax, and homogenize well for 45 minutes. What you end up with is Al Stewart's latest album, Time Passages.

This is Stewart's first release of new material in two years. The success of Year of the Cat made his name a familiar one to radio listeners; consequently, he has a new label (Arista) and corresponding concert ticket prices. Unfortunately, the old talent Al Stewart seems stranded at Janis. What Arista has to offer us may sell a few more singles, but is likely to lose most of Stewart's old fans.

One of the main attractions of Al Stewart's records has been the quality of his lyrics. While many songwriters recite endless broken hearts or perverse sexual predications, Stewart wrote an entire album including the 20th century: Past, Present, and Future is a model in thematic unity. Similarly, the forlorn-pigeon-Love Chronicles (released in last year's The Early Years) is a highly personal approach to a common enough theme in pop music; the title track will never receive substantial airplay, due as much to its length (over 10 minutes) as its inclusion of one of the "Seven Deadly Words."

One of the two singles from the album, "Time Passages," starts the album out on a mundane note. A long song (6:59), it contains extensive instrumental filler; the remaining vocal passages say nothing. The pattern is repeated over and over again: 30 seconds of prelude, a long interlude, and a 45 second postlude; the overall impression is that the vocal material is the filler. This is a stark contrast to "On the Border" (from Year of the Cat), which opens with a powerful piano solo that leads into a story of gunrunning during the Spanish Civil War.

"The Palace of Versailles" is probably the oldest song on the album; Stewart introduced the song to concert audiences during his summer tour a year ago. Though there is a coherent idea to the number, it is subordinated to the instrumental passages: a long interlude plus an equally lengthy fade-out comprise more than half the song. Without a message, there's not much left to distinguish Al Stewart from countless other FM-oriented U.S. recording artists. His instrumental writing for keyboard and guitar are o.k., but his bass guitarist and drummer must be pretty bored by now. The sax, once a charming clashing to "Year of the Cat," loses its effect through overuse; he certainly didn't need to add a string section. Although Stewart's voice is somewhat better than Bob Dylan's, the image of Stewart as a Glasgow Dylan is not entirely inappropriate. Understandably, Al Stewart sought to break out of the mold of his past with this album, but in doing so, he cast himself in the mold of other, less creative rock musicians.

For those who have not entirely given up on Al Stewart, his current tour will bring him to Boston on November 5. Ticket prices are $8.50 and $7.50, and are available Mon.-Fri., 10am-4pm at the Music Hall, downtown.

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