Worst Of The Best Of

Every Christmas season sends the record industry into a reactionary spiral, which results in lists of "Greatest Hits" and "Best Of." Given the current depressed state of the economy, it's no surprise that this past holiday season saw even more of such releases than usual. I just couldn't let the 1982 record year get into full swing without taking a few stabs at 1981's crop of compilations.

Several of these fall squarely into the "greatest hits" category, including Queen's Greatest Hits on Elektra, Chicago's Greatest Hits Volume II on Columbia and The Best of the Allman Brothers on Polydor. In all cases, these records covered the group's American hits quite well. However, it's important to note that a "greatest hits" collection is not necessarily the "best" of a group. The Queen collection, for example, totally ignored their second album simply because it yielded no American hits. Because of this narrow focus, these albums serve primarily as a replacement for burnt-out singles and do not really provide adequate introductions to a group.

Several other collections also purported to include the greatest hits of a group. But failed due to the inclusion of "collector's versions." This is one answer to the age-old problem of how to get a fan to buy a hits package if he or she already has all the original albums. This technique may secure the collector, but it fails to satisfy the more run-of-the-mill fan. Someone who buys a greatest hits album expects to get the hit versions, not remakes (as on The Best of Blondie on Chrysalis) or rerecordings (as on Pink Floyd's A Collection of Great Dance Songs on Columbia). Probably the height of idiocy is Atlantic's Classic For Collection, which gives buyers the group's two less-known songs in live versions on a free single, but ignores the originals.

Even worse are greatest hits compilations which simply miss major hits. Change Your World on RCA contains mostly AOR hits, but shortchanges Heroes and Lodger, two of Bowie's most-played albums. The song "Heroes" in particular certainly belongs on any collection of his recent material. A truly pathetic example of cookie-cutter anthologizing is Houligans, a double set which pretends to cover the Who's career on Decca and MCA. The Who's career prior to 1970 was well covered by an earlier collection, Mystery Theater: Big and Bonnie. Instead of simply covering the Who's career since that time, Houligans chooses a random song off MB, Quadrophenia and Saturdays. The rest of the collection is mostly singles, some of which were true hits. However, Houligans does not include the Who's best-known song "Won't Get Fooled Again"? I'm sure somebody somewhere was sued over this, but I can't figure it out.

Fortunately, there were a few bright spots in the crop. Great Gorillas on Epic pretty much covered everything you'd ever want to hear by Ted Nugent. Swansong's Best of Peter Edmonds gives a fine introduction to Edmund's solo career, mostly via FM hits. And even Houligans had a saving grace — the inclusion of three early '70s Who singles previously unavailable in album form.

Compilation albums are a fact of life which serve a purpose during periods of sagging album sales or creative lull. Such releases should either provide rare cuts for the collector or genuine hits for the radio fan. Mixing these two almost always produces bad results. The singles fan who gets unexpected versions and the collector who has to buy an entire album of songs he already has to get one previously unreleased cut both get annoyed. Poorly selected compilation albums only encourage home taping of friends' albums, a practice which the record industry claims to deplore. Somebody should get with it.

Tom Anderson

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