U2's latest album, "Rattle and Hum," is far from their best

By DEBBY LEVINSON

U2 is one of the few bands that can consistently give outstanding live performances. They never panders to their audience, and always avoid embarrassing rock posturing while still delivering a powerful political message. New live songs and several studio cuts collected from last year's "Joshua Tree" tour have been assembled into "Rattle and Hum," the soundtrack from U2's forthcoming movie of the same name. The double album "Rattle and Hum" is U2's first recorded work in a year and a half, and unfortunately, disappointing compared to their earlier efforts.

"Rattle and Hum" opens with a live version of the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" that lead singer Bono claims to "steal back" from Charles Manson. Sadly, the song's driving guitar and Bono's slightly off-key vocals detract from an otherwise promising beginning. U2 could have taken cues from Hisker Dick's thrash-punk recording of this song and speeded it up a little; at the end, but by then it's too late to matter. Far better than this awful song is a duet with blues master B.B. King on "When Love Comes to Town," King's best work in years. His vocals are soulful and his guitar tight and cutting. Bono even does a passable impression of King to help produce one of "Rattle and Hum's" catchiest songs.

"Heartland," a Brian Eno/Daniel Lanois effort that would have been at home on U2's "Unforgettable Fire," follows "When Love Comes to Town." It's almost upstaged, though, by the band's subtly vicious "God Particle II," a tribute to John Lennon that bitterly indict's controversial Lennon biographer Albert Goldman.

"When Love Comes to Town" is an uneven collection of songs, not U2's worst effort but still far from their best.