

Duly Noted Rock History Takes Flight With the Byrds

by Callum Beck

The Byrds are undoubtedly one of the top bands in the history of rock music. They first rose to fame on the strength of their superb cover version of Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man". Since then they have been one of the few acts to consistently do Dylan better than Dylan does himself. But their main strength has always lain in the singing, songwriting, and 12-string

guitar work of Roger (Jim) McGuinn. As McGuinn went, so usually went the Byrds. Fortunately McGuinn usually went pretty good, and most of the Byrds albums range from decent to great. Unfortunately, he also occasionally was not going so good, and a couple of the Byrds' L.P.'s, most notably their Reunion album, are pretty lacklustre and boring.

Their first four albums

are uneven; they sometimes reach the heights of brilliance but they also fall to the depths of obnoxious filler material. But their fifth album, The Byrds' Greatest Hits, is excellent straight through. It is drawn from the best material off their first four albums, and includes all of their big hits, like "Mr. Tambourine Man"; "Turn, Turn, Turn"; "Eight Miles High"; and "5D". But unlike most Greatest Hits

L.P.'s, which sound like the songs are forced in beside one another, it makes it as a unified album; the songs fit perfectly together, and flow easily into one another. An excellent L.P.

The next album they recorded, The Notorious Byrd Brothers, was one of the concept albums (i.e. it is not merely a collection of 12 separate songs, but there is a continuity from song to song; both the lyrics and the music of the different songs are held together by a central theme) that were so much in vogue in the sixties. Its lyrical theme is basically that people should live in harmony with the universe and other people, but it's of minor significance; it's the sound which makes the album great. The music is kind of weird and spacy, and quite complex. It is somewhat of a cross between Carole King and Sgt. Peppers, though it is really not much like anything else at all. Side one of the album is, along with side one of Simon and Garfunkel's Bookends, the most excellent, solid, thematically together side of music I've ever heard.

It will probably take a while to get used to this type of music but it is likely worth the time.

The next album the Byrds recorded was Sweetheart of the Rodeo. As its name implies, it is a country album. Gram Parsons joined the group at this time, and this is really his album. Parsons wrote "Hickory Wind", which is about the finest country tune I've ever heard. This album is just high quality country music (there is such a thing), though it has a few weak cuts. It is the third of the really good Byrds' L.P.'s, all of

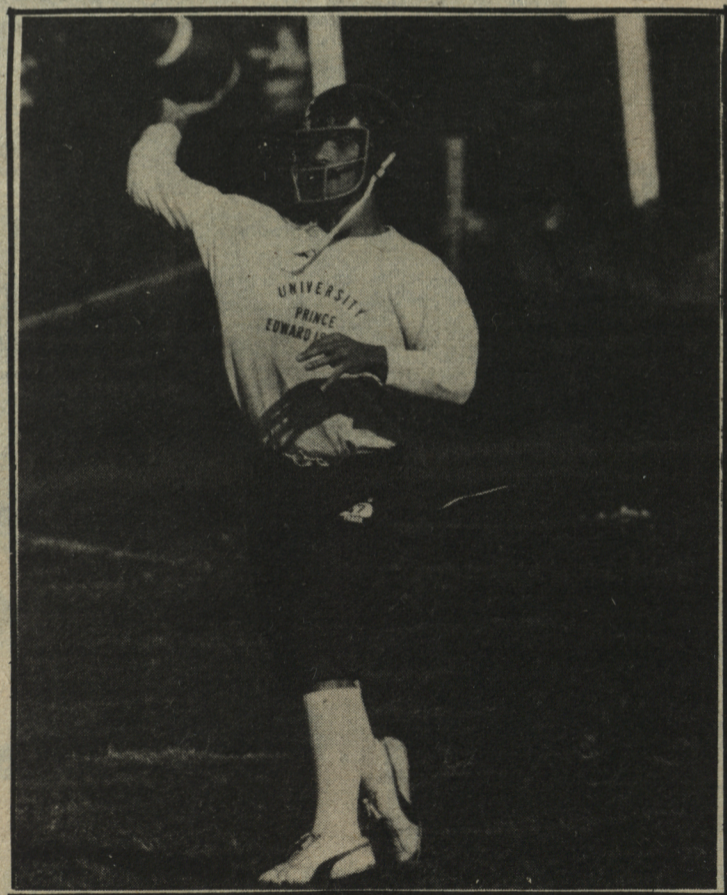
which, I would say, are worth paying full price for. (Notorious and their Greatest Hits are both among my ten favorite albums). The rest of their albums, with the exception of their Reunion L.P. are excellent buys if found in a deleted pile, where fortunately or unfortunately most can be found.

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