

Over the past three decades, Paul Simon has maintained an unmatched level of both artistic and commercial success, and with the exception of his occasional reunions with Art Garfunkel (which he is currently in the midst of), his career is free of nostalgic wheel-spinning. Simon's music has now been anthologized onto a three-disc set, *Paul Simon 1964-1993*, and in light of his current musical,

now seems as good a time as any to analyze this astonishing songwriter's work.

Simon's Simon and Garfunkel work is forever marred by its sugariness, and is now mainly valued as nostalgia. Nonetheless, *The Definitive Simon and Garfunkel* (5) and *Greatest Hits* (4) are essential albums; *Definitive*, which includes all of *Greatest Hits*' tracks and then some, is preferable. Only a few of Simon and Garfunkel's songs match up to Simon's solo work, notably "The Sound of Silence," "Mrs. Robinson," "El Condor Pasa" (a formative song in its experimentation with exotic instrumentation) and, of course, "Bridge Over Troubled Waters," with its overwhelmingly glorious climax. But much of the time S & G were too silly ("The 59th Street Bridge Song (Feelin' Groovy)," "I am a Rock") or too pompous; melodramatic epics like "America" and "The Boxer" are tuneful, but don't connect like "Bridge." Simon's singing was less animated and blander at this point; his r&b roots had yet to be heard.

The experimentation of "El Condor Pasa" and "Bridge" set the stage for Simon's 1972 self-titled solo debut (5), in which he added tropical sounds to songs like "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard," "Mother and Child Reunion" and "Duncan." The album is his sparest, least cute and strongest, with warmer, more natural production than S & G's sometimes trebly, massively overdubbed wall of sound. *There Goes Rhymin' Simon* (5), on the other hand, with its strong gospel, blues, and New Orleans influences, is intensely American. Simon's propensity for pleasant, lightweight trifles became apparent here with songs like "St. Judy's Comet" and "Was a Sunny Day" or very nearly half of his next album, 1975's *Still Crazy After All These Years* (5). Despite the padding, both albums are classics due to the strength of Simon's perfectly realized, intensely memorable singles: "Kodachrome," "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" and "Loves Me Like a Rock" among them. Both *Rhymin'* and *Still Crazy* are highly crafted but never sterile works where the towering highs easily carry you through the featherweight filler.

One-Trick Pony (3), the soundtrack to Simon's 1980 film, was mellow and bland, but it did have "Late in the Evening" and "Ace in the Hole." A slight improvement was 1982's *Hearts and Bones* (4), though it remains Simon's least commercially successful effort, probably only because it lacks a hit single to hook it. Simon experi-

ments with song structures as he hasn't since the late days of Simon and Garfunkel, the sound is intricately detailed and the delicate title track is one of his finest songs, but the album has an eighties-style, cold, professional sheen to it. Still, *Hearts and Bones*, unlike *Still Crazy or Rhymin'* is consistent, without the extremes of distinctly inspired and distinctly uninspired songs.

1986's *Graceland* (4.5) returned Simon to the top of the charts along with some controversy because of his use of South African musicians at a time when the area was off-limits to Western performers. The album is Simon's most consistent ever but rather overrated: the inhumanly perfect electric drums are a source of endless aggravation and there is a certain coldness and artificiality to it, belying the naturalness of its source. Still, the songs are phenomenal. Simon's most recent effort, 1990's *The Rhythm of the Saints* (4) jettisons the phoney drums in favour of compelling Brazilian percussion. Nowhere near so immediately gratifying as *Graceland*, the melodies do ultimately sink in, but in the past Simon might have amalgamated two or three of these songs into one. He does have a tendency to degenerate into grooves, as on *One-Trick Pony*, and while the rhythms are enthralling, the album's lack of overt melodicism, Simon's real strength, is a little wearing. "The Obvious Child," "Proof" and "The Coast" do provide some accessibility, though.

Since Simon only releases a new album every four or five years, stop-gap collections and live albums are fairly frequent. The latest is the three-CD set, *Paul Simon 1964-1993* (5), which covers the territory from a very early 1957 Simon and Garfunkel single right up to a new track, "Thelma."

Programmed in approximate chronological order, Disc One starts out with a laughably bad early track by Simon, "Leaves That Are Green," before moving into the Simon and Garfunkel stuff. Only eight songs are included, but the four essentials are here. The demo of "Bridge" actually makes the studio version seem all the more transcendent. Also on Disc One is a Tom and Jerry single, the very Everly Brothers-like "Hey Schoolgirl," recorded by Simon and Garfunkel at the age of 16. It's strictly a curio. The rest of the disc is early solo material.

Disc Two covers from around '73 to '82. The live version of "Still Crazy After All These Years," with its impassioned sax solo, may actually surpass the original. The songs could be more fetchingly ordered: bland, rather dated tracks like "Have a Good Time," "Jonah" and "How the Heart Approaches What it Yearns" lead into the melodic overload of "50 Ways," "Slip Slidin' Away" and "Late in the Evening."

Evidently Simon takes great pride in his recent music: Disc Three is strictly stuff from his last two albums, plus an understated, plaintive live version of "The Sound of Silence" and the lone new song, "Thelma," a *Rhythm*-styled track, more of a groove than a song. Once again, some shuffling might've helped it flow a little better. The *Graceland* and *Rhythm* material is segregated when perhaps interspersing the more buoyant *Graceland* tracks with the more atmospheric *Rhythm* ones might have produced something greater than the sum of its parts.

The big question with a box is always, "Is all the good stuff here?" Simon's output is quite small so it would be hard to miss; except for *One-Trick Pony* and *Hearts and Bones*, the bulk of the material from his other five solo albums is covered. Certainly a big miss, though, is *One-Trick Pony*'s "Ace in the Hole." The gospel version of "Bridge Over Troubled Waters" from *Live Rhymin'* might have been a nice addition too, though there are already two versions of the song here, as might have "Stranded in a Limousine," a track from the deleted *Greatest Hits Etc.* which is unavailable on CD. The set's booklet is fawning but informative.

Paul Simon 1964-1993 is pricey, up around a hundred bucks, but if you plan on owning the entire Simon catalogue, doing it in this one fell swoop will save you money in the end. And with Christmas on the way, you may want to hit-up a loved one for it.

Simon in Three Easy Steps

The legendary songwriter releases a new boxed set by Kirby Ferguson