



boxology

commentary by jamie lee rake

published 15 april 2007

tending the planet | volume 2 • number 14

Those of you who've been reading Rake On Music long enough will recall my mentioning a Web site about CD, LP, etc. box sets that I and my techie partner/friend have been working on for (too lengthy) a while.

In order to kickstart myself into providing content for that endeavor, and to get your input about what we're doing, you'll find fresh entries below for what we're calling Boxology.net (don't click that URL just yet!).

Let me know your opinion about other sites with which it might be beneficial for us to trade or find exposure, and whatever suggestions you might have for this hopefully unique amalgam of historicity, bloggishness and commerciality. Ideally, I'd like this site to be profitable enough to earn its keep on its bandwidth and build a house with a vault for my collection akin to that in the house of my fellow Wisconsinite and head of Record Research (the publishing house responsible for all those nifty books of Billboard chart standings and trivia), Joel Whitburn.

Thanks for the continued support, and here's hoping you enjoy!

•••

LORRAINE ELLISON

Sister Love: The Warner Brothers Recordings
(Rhino Handmade, 2006; 3 CDs)

The Act: When it comes to the dreaded one-hit wonder syndrome, Lorraine Ellison avoided it by one more time when it came to Billboard's R&B singles list—three, if you count another that made it into the '50s. Pop-wise, two 45s got her onto the chart, but neither cracked the Top 40.

None of the above, however, negates the power of her gospelly contralto. As for why she, with such astounding pipes, couldn't produce a legacy of greater renown, the 65 tracks comprising *Sister Soul: The Warner Brothers Recordings* make evident why that's something of a mystery.

Before finding her way to Warner Brothers, in the mid-1960s, Ellison recorded soul gospel with two family-based groups and solo, with varying degrees of recording success, on Savoy imprint Sharp Records and Columbia. The second of those family ensembles, The Golden Chords, were popular enough in Italy that they stayed for an extended tour after a festival appearance.

Arriving back in the U.S., Ellison's general market solo career began in earnest with a lone single on Mercury that made it, in late Fall of '65, to the upper 20s of the R&B chart. A year and a half later, Jerry Butler would hit bigger with it for the same label; but, hey, Ellison cowrote it. Though Dee Dee Warwick would record another Ellison original, Mercury suits had no clue what the vocal powerhouse they signed should record. So, on to Warner Brothers' Loma soul subsidiary she went.

That's where this collection starts. And what a start it has! OK, it's actually the B-side of her Warners debut that starts off the first disc. And, even so, "I Got My Baby Back" bounces in a Petula Clark-meets-Dionne Warwick effervescence that—who knows?—might have given Ellison the chart-topper she and her producers hoped the A-side would be.

That side, "Stay With Me", practically bleeds in beggingly desperate bravura. Borrowing the orchestra scheduled for a Frank Sinatra studio date couldn't have hurt, but Ellison's performance slays in its unadulterated emotional fervor. The song stopped just short of the R&B Top 10 and petered out in the mid-'60s as a pop chart entry. Sad? Plenty.

Not so sad as it was strange is that Ellison's Warner handlers thought that following such a uniquely soulful record with an album of loungey jazz/pop fit for Vegas revues (and the supper clubs, throughout the rest of the country, longing to ape them) was a sound strategy for breaking her into the sales stratosphere. Though it was part of Berry Gordy, Jr.'s tactic for some of his Motown acts to record the same kind of longplayers to ingratiate themselves to Euroamerican listeners, they're not rife with hits the size of the soul-to-pop chart stormers that effectively did the same job. But maybe it would do the trick for Ellison...?

Alas, no. But, artistically, it could have been a lot worse. Ellison's voice sells entirely-too-slick renditions of Sam Cooke, Pete Seeger, the Gershwins and assorted others' songs geared to cocktail sippers. "Stay With Me", shoehorned in among the bippitiness, had to have sounded gloriously out of place on the original LP, *Miss Lorraine Ellison/Heart & Soul*.

"Stay With Me" had accrued an underground sort of cachet among pop/rock cognesenti, such as Van Morrison and Laura Nyro. Bootleg 45s of it were going for \$5 each, a crazily high price for the late '60s (and still more than I'd pay for a new domestic 2-song 7-inch unless it comes with some especially enticing bonuses). That slow build of good will and admiration created enough steam for Warner to greenlight a second album, released in late Fall of '69.

Named for her biggest hit to date, *Stay With Me* mines some of the titular track's über-drama

and fits Ellison's wild pipes into a variety of other emotions with creative ease. Still, her instrument was a wild thing that could seemingly, at best, be contained if not entirely controlled. The grinding momentum of "A Good Love" was a single a couple of years before the sophomore album's release. That's the track that made it to the 50s among R&B reports nationally and eked into the 80s as a pop entity (its B-side, "I'm Over You", was co-written by Al Kooper, the Blood, Sweat & Tears/Blues Project leader, whose discovery of The Golden Chords led to their lone, live LP for Columbia). Elsewhere, her takes on semi-gospel-themed contemporaneous material—including Carole King's "You've Got A Friend", first heard on a Warner Bros. UK best-of on Ellison; Johnny Nash's "Many Rivers To Cross"; and a previously unreleased rendition of *James Taylor's* "You've Got A Friend"—rival strong originals such as "Country Woman's Prayer" and "Do Better Than You're Doin'" (almost the reverse sentiment of "Stay With Me"). On that second project, Ellison also touched competely on her sacred side by remaking Cassietta George's "Walk Around Heaven", smoothly fitting the album's tenor. The set's title comes from the previousy unavailable "Sister Love", a danceable number summarizing Ellison's own gracious personality.

All that talent, and still not enough takers to elevate Ellison to a level commensurate to it. Though she died of ovarian cancer in 1983, she recorded 15 vocal-and-piano demos in '72 for a third album that never happened. Those songs comprise the third disc, here, and the lovelorn melancholy sentiments of many of its songs could as easily be taken as sublimation of her prior years of frustrated success as they could be exercises in heartbreak soul music.

Ellison spent her later years in local gigging and church work. She has remained well-remembered enough to have been the subject for the aforementioned English pressing compilation in '76 and a mid-'90s anthology on the now-defunct Ichiban label, the latter of which saw the initial release of her remakes of Van Morrison's "Caravan" and the Etta James/Rolling Stones chestnut "Time Is On My Side", found on disc two. Ellison certainly isn't the only oughtta'-been in any musical field about whom it's easy to wonder why they didn't makes a greater commercial impression. Even with indifferent or inadequate promotion, not enough say in selecting her own material and arrangements, and her nigh otherworldly, God-given instrument, *Sister Love* offers exhibit after exhibit of a rare gifting that could have stood to overcome those limitations.

The Packaging and Goodies: Thin catrdboard box with opening for a four-pocket/three-panel sleeve for the discs effusively appointed with pictures of Ellison. Box's front and back front of the multi-disc sleeve have shots of Ellison in a sumptuous golden suede (?) longcoat over brown&white floral-patterned dress with triangular beaded earrings and pearls (or so they appear; 'could be costume), with track listings for all three discs on back of box. Other panels of the sleeve show sepia-tone shots of what's presumably a Philadelphia street, a series of black and white test headshots of the singer, a filtered-looking photo of her in a nearly fistted left hand, bedazzling in various rings and bracelets, to her chin as she sports a ruffly, sleeveless red dress and long beaded earrings. Elsewhere are excerpts from articles (from trade press? newspapers?) about her and the Warner Brothers promotional biography for her self-titled album. Back of sleeve has full body shot of her in that red dress, all those funky accessories, and white high-heeled sandals.

The 32-page booklet may well exhaust the rest of whatever press shots of Ellison were released in her lifetime, what look to be original black and white photos taken for/during journalist David Nathan's mid-'70s magazine interview with her (upon which he relies for his essay, here) and more Philly street scenes. Nathan's essay captures Ellison's frustration at her limited commercial success and joyful spirit and gratitude for what fans she had regardless of not selling more records. Track listing and discographical information's in the back. Profile black and white headshot on the front, full-length back shot of her in that golden suede coat, walking up some rough-hewn steps to a brick building on the back cover.

Personal Connections: Although I, perhaps, heard some of her work on the R&B oldies show that used to air on a favorite non-commercial station of mine, I never consciously connected Ellison's name to her music.

However, after recently having seen an ad for this collection in collectors newspaper Goldmine, and upon the occasion of requesting Rhino's wondrous *What It Is!: Funky Soul and Rare Grooves* funk history box set for review in the Milwaukee-based alternative newsweekly for which I freelance, I thought I'd ask for what I could get from the label's Handmade division (for review in my "Rake On Music" column for *The Bohemian Aesthetic—eZine* on the Web site of my Los Angeles area singer/songwriter friend, Patsy Moore). I was able to acquire an advance of the Allan Shermam box Handmade released late the previous year, so what the hey, eh?

Asked, received, and, if it's not evident already, enjoyed discovering Ellison's work. So, there you go.

Pertinent Link: In lieu of an official Web site, the English again come to the rescue with the mighty SoulWalking.co.uk and Ellison's entry thereon. Hardcore collectors of R&B 45s from around Ellison's vintage will want to check out Nathan's own sales/history site for such music. Should you log on there, prepare to either salivate profusely and/or spend a wad of cash; soul salvation may be free, but classic soul *music*, seven inches at a time, will cost you.

•••

SUFJAN STEVENS

Songs for Christmas Singalong
(Asthmatic Kitty, 2006; 5 CDs)

The Act: If you're a close enough friend of indie-pop sensation Sufjan Stevens, you probably got all five of the CD EPs included in *Sufjan Stevens Presents Songs For Christmas Singalong* ((in Stereo Hi-Fi))—that's the full title—individually, during the years he recorded them for each Christmas season from 2001 to 2006.

Yes, math geniuses, that leaves one year without a corresponding Christmas EP. That was '04,

when he was preoccupied with the making of what is, so far, his grand masterwork, *Illinoise*, the second of his proposed series of concept albums for each of these United States.

A quintuple-disc set of 42 standard and original Christmas songs and hymns? Ten times as many full-length albums dedicated to the U.S.A. (he's already released another disc of outtakes from *Illinoise*, so you might want to think twice before holding your breath for the other 48)? Who *is* this ambitious workaholic, and why should anyone care?

For readers who haven't read the U.S. pop music press of the last few years, Stevens is the soft-spoken fellow who came up through the overtly Christian, not-quite inscrutably zany Danielson Familie collective of post-punky, near-anarchic folky anti-pop to refine some of their aesthetic touchstones to more narratively-structured, orchestrally-informed music that, at the time of this writing, is slowly worming its way into a more massive listenership.

Christmas roughly parallels Stevens' artistic development throughout his non-holiday offerings. From his '01 Yuletide CD, *Noel*, to '06's *Peace*, Stevens moves from strength to strength, building from his own guitar and banjo playing to arrangements that rival the most complex of what's permissible as popular music.

At the heart of Stevens' approach is an earnest folkiness that vies with his interest in gentle repetitions of systemic classical music by Phillip Glass and similarly inclined composers.

That humor, however, contrasts with Stevens' bittersweet poignancy—be it in his readings of more Christological carols and hymns ("Holy Holy Holy", "Amazing Grace") or songs of personal reminiscence, such as "It's Chrstmas! Let's be Glad!" and "That Was The Worst Christmas Ever!"

Elsewhere, his surfeit of keyboards, brass, and percussion lend accompaniment to instrumentals. Vocal-free performances can also come from one or two instruments or just Stevens and his piano.

Through both his remakes of Yuletide standards and his own songwriting, Stevens' Christianity is evident, but never forced. It would be easy to chide the contemporary Christian music community for not embracing such creativity as Stevens', but it may be just as well that he works unencumbered by the expectations and labels that greater acceptance from the cCm business might bring. Instead, for those with ears to hear, the good Lord can speak through him. For everyone else, he still makes some enthralling tuneage.

The Packaging and Goodies: The goodies are almost reason enough to buy it, but don't let me get ahead of myself.

Front of stout, square, one-piece box is adorned with crayon (or colored pencil?) drawing of Christmas tree topped by a tan star surrounded by a yellow circle of light. Tree's brown stem on red stand leans a smidge to the right, like the Tower of Pisa. It's all on a tannish ground with light blue background, unlike the front of the 40-page booklet, whereupon a similar but small tree about as festively bedecked (star atop the pine unilluminated) sits on what must be water or ice (it's blue) and a tan sky. 'Indoor tree?

Box back has our man Suf' looking to his right in white, short-sleeved, button-down shirt, diagonally-stripped (clip-on?) tie, black belt and pants and standing between a Christmas tree and art deco-ish, mid-backed chair of light wood against a wall covered with a lightly woody wallpaper and complementarily-themed painting between his head and the tree's peak. Picture is faded like an old snapshot, which is probably the point. Names of each EP and their numbered track listings are to the left, in black type.

Each EP's sleeve is coded by a different animal scene on its thin, white-backed cardboard sleeve. For *Noel*, it's a reindeer bust in profile; Hark!: A wide-eyed owl with a blue and yellow songbird on the left and pink and yellow one on the right (we know they're songbirds because musical notes are shown emanating from their beaks), all on an evergreen branch; Ding! Dong!: A male cardinal (the red one with the tuft on its head) on a sparser-needled branch than the owl and cohort; Joy: What I'm guessing is a turtle dove in full profile, looking upward and to the right on a non-deciduous (those are the needle-bearers, right?) branch; *Peace*: Almost sorrowful-looking lion in Santa hat lying next to little white lamb cuddled on right front leonine paw (see Isaiah 11:6). Aforementioned illustrations look to be made with oil paints or crayons and, most especially, the owl and friends and lion and lamb resemble patterns for stained glass art. A sheet of stickers with each image adds to the fun. (Collectors with young'uns who like stickers should probably beware, however PG-rated, at-worst, Stevens' Yule-ish tuneage is, unless you just don't mind sacrificing collectibility to keep your anklebiters appeased).

Booklet, titled Songbook and Other Stuff, proffers confessional essays and/or short stories by Stevens and fiction writer Rick Moody, close-up photo of the top of the same tree with which Stevens poses on the back of the box (cute lil' blonde angel in green, orange and white robe on top), credits for every aspect of the songs and their packaging, cartoons by Tom Eaton, another wax crayon or colored pencil drawing of a skinny Santa (or elf?; 'has a white beard and same kind of hat) on ice skates and lime green pants shooting orange lightning bolts (or fire?) out of orbs on his hands about as pale yellow as his skin, chordal charts for every song with vocals, another (less faded-looking) pic of Suf'ster in short-sleeved white shirt, posing against the same background from the box back (only closer up) and wearing a more colorful diagonally-stripped tie with Christmas stocking pin on his shirt. He's holding an inflatable Santa toy next to the tree and painting.

Accompanying poster has, on one side, a 23-panel Eaton' 'toon strip, "It Was The Worst Christmas Ever!" (SPOILER ALERT!) wherein Evil Sister Winter casts a depressive spell over Santa that's only broken by the chocolate depictions of himself otherwise fed by Elvin the elf to reindeer (who apparently get diarrhea from them), but only Mrs. Claus brought up Stevens, whose singing didn't do the trick, as didn't the song stylings of the Danielson Familie, The Mormon Tabernacle Choir, or Live-Aid (sic; and wasn't it *Band Aid* who did "Do They Know It's

Christmas?" Oh, well...). Poster's other side has photographically realistic painting of Stevens in Santa cap by that tree and inflatable St. Nick surrounded by black-haired wife with pageboy cut in red dress holding a toddler in red snowflake pattern top and five-or-so-year-old (girl?) in matching cap as dad's, all against the same wall and picture near same tree as pictured previously.

Oh, yeah...Hark! also has a Quicktime Eaton cartoon video for "Put the Lights on the Tree", which I'm sure is wa ycool, but I've not watched it as of this writing. And each disc looks like a toy vinyl recordlike those which gave sound to a Mattel telephone I had as a child.

Personal Connections: Instead of the copy of *Seven Swans*, Stevens' third (or so) album I was supposed to review for one of my freelance gigs, I received, from Asthmatic Kitty (or whomever was doing publicity for it), the first in Stevens' proposed series of U.S. states' concept albums, *Suffjan Stevens Presents Greetings from Michigan, The Great Lake State*. 'Enjoyed it, but ended up being beaten by someone else for the review of Stevens' breakthrough to general market indieground recognition.

Ditto for *Suffjan Stevens Invites You to: Come on, Feel the Illinois*, for a review in the same publication where I was originally supposed to review its immediate predecessor. I did, however, get a CD of it for an online mag for which I freelance. And, bless me, it was a copy with the front insert depicting Superman among the array of characters fictional and non-associated with the Land of Lincoln (in case I need to explain, Supermam/Clark Kent lives in Metropolis, and there's a *Metropolis, II.*, wherein resides a Superman museum...or something like that) before the lawyers for Superman's publisher, DC Comics, put the cease and desist kibosh on the unauthorized use of Krypton's favorite son's image. If the first pressing LP version of *IL* includes the same verboten imagery, I'd love to have it but won't pay the probably astronomical online auction price for it until the site you're reading right now puts me in a considerably higher tax bracket.

I should've asked—and maybe could've gotten on—the guest list for Stevens' only 2006 Wisconsin concert. The review of it that I read in a daily paper had me going "Aww, crap!", much like an unsuccessful attempt to get in on Roxy Music's Chicago reunion gig earlier in the '00s. 'Not that I'm going to explore any connections Stevens has with Bryan Ferry's band, but the feeling of regret was similar (the difference being that I actually *tried* to get in to see RM).

As of now, every Christian friend to whom I told of my purchase of this box set didn't know who Stevens is before I hipped him/her. Neither had they, most likely, ever heard of *any* of the Danielson-related acts, I'd guess, before I also brought up Daniel Smith's undertakings. Those people I consider friends/good acquaintances/professional cohorts in the Xian book and music market, I'm glad to say, have at least heard *of* him.

Pertinent Link: Asthmatic Kitty's site; Once there, go to Stevens' subsite for everything about him he wants you to know and eerything *by* him he'd like you to buy. He limits that to his music. The latter includes everything he's done, except for the original version of one of his pre-

Swans longplayers.



GARTH BROOKS

The Limited Series

(Capitol, 1998; 6 CDs)

The Act: Maybe *now* it's different. But back in 1998, when he reissued his first six albums in *The Limited Series*—multi-platinum-certified sellers, all—Garth Brooks must not have cared what his audience knew about him and the rise to fame he rode in order to become the biggest selling male recording artist in U.S. history.

How else to explain the complete lack of historical/biographical liner notes in so elaborate a package devoted to the work of an artist who was, by no means, through with his hitmaking streak at the time of its release? Plenty of pictures of the boyishly roundfaced singer prone to wearing extremely wide-brimmed cowboy hats and the most geometrically stylized Western-cut shirts probably ever committed to the front insert of a CD jewelcase, yes. But any fan wanting more than Brooks' sort of biblical thank you/dedication on the inside front page of the lyrics (and pictures!) booklet—for instance, an account of just how and why Brooks became the cultural juggernaut and bane of country music traditionalists that he, by that time, had become—is crap out of luck.

If the absence of any analytical verbiage was designed to let the music do the talking, it already *had*—tens of millions of times over at retailers and in country radio ratings audience impressions. *The Limited Series* repackaged the original versions of this sextet of Brooks' first albums (with one extra track apiece) in a run of 2,000,000 sets. If memory serves further, Brooks' college major was business administration. 'Surprised?

His prevalence throughout the mediascape and debatable influence upon the business and artistry of the genre he represented made it easy to be snarky about Brooks. I recall a letter from the editrix of *Country Music Magazine*, who'd just come off a gig editing a Christian music magazine for which I'd written, telling of how Brooks' publicist would send press releases about him nearly every day. It seemed not to be enough for him to make history; he wanted the immediate thrill of the headlines, too.

Amid the hype, however, was music that all those people bought and paid to see performed live (he released a double-CD concert set around the same time as this package). What, then, succeeded like Brooks' success?

With about a decade's worth of hindsight, Brooks doesn't seem quite as evil as I—and, perhaps, many music critics—made him out to be. Calculatedly populist in what, even then, seemed

overtly crass and aspirational of broadening his and country's territory like Jabez on a bender, he nevertheless was never without redeeming musicality on any given album.

One could, however, argue that Brooks' batting average went down as his celebrity rose. The first single from his self-titled debut streamlined the regrets and ruminations of the mid-'70s Texas Outlaw singers who preceded Brooks in expanding country's appeal to rockers, and "Much Too Young (Too Feel This Damn Old)" upped the ante on Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson by giving props to then-cult cowboy singer Chris Ledoux. Even at this early stage, however, his yearnings beyond the occasional "Hee Haw" appearance rears its head on "The Dance". That said, it's, defendably, a classic, and the footage of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., et al in the song's video lends it a gravitas beyond what could otherwise be taken as an especially astute reflection on the dissolution of a romance. Elsewhere, the tension between Brooks' ambition and tradition are reflected on numbers including "Uptown Downtown Good Ol' Boy" (the bonus track) and "I've Got A Good Thing Going". He does right by swinging two-step and forthright balladry on "Not Counting You" and "If Tomorrow Never Comes", respectively, as well.

If "The Dance" didn't seal Brooks' superstardom, then "I've Got Friends In Low Places", from his sophomore set, *No Fences*, did. His biggest charting crossover hit to pop radio (apart from his stint as potential movie character Chris Gaines) has been his remake of "Hard Luck Woman" by his inspirations in showmanship, Kiss, but press from the time indicates that some Southern Top 40 stations took offense at playing the tempo-changing tune about a hellraiser who crashes his ex's wedding. And, as with Bing Crosby giving a more mournful spin on "Just A Gigolo" than Louis Jordan or David Lee Roth, Mark Chesnutt originally gave the song a less rousing, more maudlin read.

Brooks broached his first controversy with country media on this album, too, with "The Thunder Rolls". The clip of the tune about a wife's revenge was deemed too grim and negative for at least one music video outlet (though it would become a fave of MTV's "Beavis and Butthead", not much later). Converse to his brave expansion of country's discussion of domesticity, "Two Of A Kind, Workin' on a Full House", goes for the glib to give Brooks another chart-topper and prove that he can mine trad' country tropes crummily as he can be good at it.

Brooks added another feather to his big, sleek hat, the following year, as the good will he'd cultivated over the previous two years culminated as his first #1 pop album chart debut—*Ropin' the Wind*. If Nashville's insistence on introducing a new crop of country stars in '89 abetted his initial success, Billboard's introduction of the SoundScan computerized point-of-purchase tallying system to compile its sales charts birthed this milestone for Brooks. Perhaps not coincidentally, *Ropin'* likewise introduced his era of generically dull album covers.

As went his sartorial and graphic senses, so went some of his song selection. "What's She Doing Now?" sounds like the token classic heartbreak song, and another big single, amidst miscues and infuriations. If I recall the story rightly, not only Brooks' already abiding love for Billy Joel's music, but accidentally receiving a record club selection containing the original version, persuaded him to remake The Piano Man's "Shameless"—admittedly, with one of his more

enthusiastic vocals. And though a rural Oklahoman such as Brooks would have firsthand knowledge of the subject matter sung of therein, "Rodeo" doesn't sound as sincere a tribute to the sport of roping and riding rambunctious broncos and bulls as the best on the subject by his hero, Ledoux. Beyond those hits? On "In Lonesome Dove", Brooks aspires to the kind of Western cowboy saga Marty Robbins sang so sweetly, but with a far less sturdy lyric as, say, "El Paso", and opener "Against the Grain" cinches his peculiar pop-crossover-almost-exclusively-on-country-radio modus operandi.

The Chase came next, in '92, with thematic ambition and unexpected—it be dare said—weirdness. Country radio was, by now, indubitably open-minded enough to Brooks' agenda to make the soul gospel-infused "We Shall Be Free" another smash, if not a Top 10; lyrics about peace and freedom (naturally) among people believing as they want to believe and loving who they want to love sounds like Unitarian-Universalist hymnody as much as it does a public nod of acceptance to his lesbian sister. The presence of contemporary Christian singers Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith in the song's video might speak more to those artists' pop crossover appeal than to whatever else on their theological/doctrinal parts.

As for anyone loving whomever s/he wants, "That Summer" sounds like the older woman/virginal boy precursor to Deana Carter's more tender reversal of that equation on "Strawberry Wine". Stranger than that and the aforementioned kinda-hymn, however, may be Brooks' assaying two songs in a row better known by other acts. He achieved enough of his own brand of neo-countryopolitan notoriety, by then, to try his hand at "Walking After Midnight", even if it won't make anyone forget Patsy Cline's definitive sultriness. And if '70s Southern boogie rock was the twin taproot alongside the Jennings/Nelson/et al Outlaw movement to the Country Class of '89's refashioning of the music's sensibilities, Brooks could have remade worse than Little Feat's "Dixie Chicken". Thank goodness he didn't have a hankering for Molly Hatchet, but still too bad Feat's Lowell George met his eternal reward some years before.

In '93, like clockwork, Brooks tweaked his artistic formula just so on *In Pieces*; his graphics team keeps him in no more than two colors again, but design elements become more obscure. The jewelcase back's crossword puzzle-esque track listing is, at once, minimally plain and a pain in the keister.

Many of the liveliest of this collection's songs sound like the artist's recognition of the time's country dance club scene, and wordily-titled recognitions at that. The more typically midtempo "American Honky-Tonk Bar Association" and more hyperkinetic "Ain't Going Down (Til the Sun Comes Up)" also distinguish themselves with lyrics passing from the sublime silly to the outright ridiculous. I'm not sure I want to know what the second song's "going 'round the world in a pickup truck" is about, but my guess is it's uncomfortable and/or otherwise deleterious. The exception to utter danciness in the upper end of beats per minute. "Calling Baton Rouge" demonstrates Brooks' way around fokier influences.

Turning down the tempo and keeping the bombast high as ever, "The Red Strokes" faired better in Europe as a pop hit than as a country chart entry in Brooks' homeland. It's, however, fine as a

tribute to Elton John and similar pop-rockers at their most overblown, made all the more evident in its video, where Brooks, in a white tuxedo, and seated at a piano of the same color, is flooded by a tsunami of crimson paint. Country? Not by much, but an engagingly emotive exercise in ostentatiousness, all the same. He goes for a comparable level of drama on "The Night I Called the Old Man Out" and, more inspirationally, on "Standing Outside the Fire". The latter's video benefits from scenes of Special Olympics athletes doing their handicapped thing.

Two parenthetical points: (1) Seeing as I've had cerebral palsy on my left side the majority of my life and know handicap personally, please don't give me any "handicapable" political correctness; (2) Brooks' songs have been the subject of a few memorable music videos, but none are collected, here. DVDs weren't yet around, and adding a VHS to *Limited* would have made it a fairly intimidating—or, at least, bulky—package.

The last of the albums, *Fresh Horses*, possesses, arguably, the most cryptic title and *inarguably* the creepiest cover—a blue-tinted close-up of a human eye with the reflection of Our Garth taking up the space between the bridge of the nose and the pupil. Huh!??!

I'm supposing even the staunchest of Brooks' fan base had something of the same reaction, as the album only debuted and peaked at a then-uncharacteristic #2, popwise. Like the five which preceded it, however (and the first of his two or three Christmas albums, not included in this group), the workings of an unapologetically commercial, peculiarly creative recording artist make it worth a listen.

Not his biggest hit in the least, a hyperdrive reworking of Aerosmith's "The Fever" likely led to a good many trip-ups by less agile dancers. And it could be Brooks' most primal vocal on a single. "She's Every Woman" exemplified him at his most '70s folk rock singer-songwriterly, thereby justifying a fair share of the critical avalanche he withstood. Though of roughly the same vibe, "The Beaches Of Cheyenne" mines ghostly mystery effectively enough.

If "That Ol' Wind" is Brooks at his most faux trad' country, "It's Midnight, Cinderella" does his roots far better justice. And even though the span between his late '80s launch and the release of this album is nothing compared to the longevity of some country acts who were active chart entities even then and since (George Strait, for instance), the whirlwind his career had been made nostalgia allowable on "The Old Stuff". As for the bonus track, Brooks gives Bob Dylan's "To Make You Feel My Love" an apt minimalism that could have made it an adult contemporary radio biggie. Recording a Dylan song certainly shows good taste, but it's no more country than what Brooks did for Billy Joel or Aerosmith.

Brooks managed another #1 pop appearance with this box and would later top himself when his live album sold over a million copies in its first week at retail. A couple more non-Christmas studio albums would follow before his early 21st century retirement. If perhaps not singlehandedly, he was, without question, at the forefront of commercial country's '90s popularity surge. Ironically enough, he also acted as a unifying object of derision for the nascent alt-country

community. His commercial impact is unassailable. After re-emerging from retirement after Ledoux's death and his own negotiation with mega-retail chain Wal-Mart to be the exclusive seller of his music (and the CD/DVD sextuple-disc box that came after), as well as another #1 single, his longterm artistic impact has yet to be seen.

But *The Limited Series* documents a wild ride of unprecedented good fortune by a guy who wasn't entirely undeserving of it.

The Packaging and Goodies: Black, thick longbox box, cover shot of Brooks in light blue, or really shadowy white, wide-rimmed cowboy hat and Western shirt with what must be darker pants, as his hand can't be seen in the nearly silhouette three-quarters profile pose. Box title in simple upper-case font against what looks like a little silver tag for a license of some sort with Brooks' name in larger white version of same font at about the bottom of his chest, with front CD panels of each album compiled running chronologically top-to-bottom on the right side of box front. Only slightly less awkward visually than it is to describe verbally.

Back of box has same six CD cover reproductions larger and on left side going down in order of release with track listings in white, upper-case font against black background. Note that every album had 11 songs before this reissue, anyway.

Cover shot of the accompanying 62-page, box-shaped booklet features another graphically messy montage, this time of each album cover arranged in an overlapping circular arrangement, over which is silvery-embossed Brooks' lower-case "g" logo (the one he's used on concert stages and over which he got into a legal tussle with rapper Warren G, whose own emblem couldn't help but look similar) and silvery circle around all that, against a white background. Brooks' name in black below all that montage in the same font as on the front, and the license tag-looking detail of the box's title, again in silvery embossing against white. Same tag insignia is reproduced on the single-panel insert in the jewelcase of each disc and top of each disc, which, otherwise, resembles the previously separately sold editions of each CD.

Therefore, instead of any kind of biographical or socio-musicological essays explaining Brooks' ability to sell tens of millions of CDs and help to radically change manifold aspect of the business and artistry of commercial country music, the booklet provides the lyrics and details of production, instrumentalists, background vocalists, studio, etc. that would have gone in the jewelcase fronts of each individual CD. Festooning it all is a scad of pictures of varying sizes, apparently taken from photo sessions for each album's respective layout—mostly in color, mostly with Brooks wearing a hat (and, mostly, of cowboy fashion). That is, save for the inside back page loaded with Brooks' thank-you's, and the front two inside pages of a longview shot of Brooks in a forest on a horse (presumably his own haymuncher, Crackerjack), with the singer's dedicatory blurb on the lower right corner. Therein, he remarks about one of his associates' saying that grace is God giving us what we don't deserve and mercy being when He withholds what we *do* deserve, and how his own life is wrapped up by that very statement.

And how.

Personal Connections: 'Heard Brooks' first single on one of the rare summer mornings in '89 that I was able to attentively listen to American Country Countdown; for whatever reason, I made it a point to remember his name and that of Clint Black, whose premiere single was simultaneously on Billboard's country Top 40.

During the year between the first and second albums, I was in school, out in another state, and didn't listen to much country. That Fall, however, I recall "Low Places" and "Unanswered Prayers" being back-to-back country #1's. I liked the former more than the latter (which, if you think about it, doesn't make much sense theologically, but that's not the major basis for my dislike of it). It got tiresome, however, when "Friends" became the template for country-music related skits at a business meeting and seeker-sensitive-ish church I attended for Saturday casual services before joining the one I still attend on Sundays.

I consciously heard "The Dance", then, as a slightly backdated oldie, disliked it at first, but have grown to appreciate Brooks' seeming sincerity about it in interviews and the song's not-quite self-important potency—at least, in Brooks' rendition—beyond being about a boy-girl love lost.

Ropin''s release, around the time of Billboard's introduction of SoundScan, was what cinched New/Young/Whatever Country as the Big Thing for grunge-resistant commercial radio listeners. Brooks' introduction on the pop/general album chart—even, perhaps, with some professional assistance (not that I'm accusing anyone nor giving a crap, really)—was a huge deal for the Nash Vegas country music establishment, of course. And something about the increasing simplicity in the lines of his wardrobe and what I perceived as the smugness of his countenance turned me off to him and country radio as a whole. I still watched country videos on what was then cable's The Nashville Network, but that was about my limit for consciously exposing myself to the music. The idea of a country singer remaking Bill Joel held no appeal, and compounding the lameness of "Rodeo" was a Sunday strip of the baby-centric newspaper comic "Marvin" working the song into a typically pathetic gag.

One of my cousins (on my stepfather's side) received a copy of *The Chase* for Christmas at a family holiday get-together (back when they were still giving presents to the minors at such functions).

At my mom's side Christmas get-together, the younger of my two half-sisters said something about liking "American Honky Tonk Bar Association" the same year *In Pieces* came out. While half-hating to admit it (and despite its sometimes idiotic lyrics), I liked the groove of "Ain't Going Down 'Til the Sun Comes Up". I'd asked someone at Brooks' label about the possibility of a remix of the song for the linedancing nightclubs popular at the time, and I believe I was told that Brooks didn't sanction remixes of his material. Or at least that there wouldn't be one of *that* ditty. Around the same time, I had a Garth Brooks concert-attending downline in Milwaukee.

On the way to or from buying my stepdad a bolo tie at a Western wear shop, the year of *Fresh Horses'* issue, I'd heard Brooks' remake of Aerosmith's "The Fever" on the radio, enjoyed the way it's just about wrong enough to be right, but was only slightly surprised to see it become one of his few non-Top 20 country hits. It was wild even for him. About as wild as the cover for the album from which it was culled is unsettling.

Pertinent Link: The man has no official Web presence (the back page of the booklet only lists an official sales site, and that's no longer active). However, I wouldn't be the only one to steer you in the direction of PlanetGarth.com for a thorough, passionate spot rife with most anything you'd want to know or see (within reason and civility) in the way of Brooks' life, career, and music.

•••

CAMPER VAN BEETHOVEN

Cigarettes & Carrot Juice: The Santa Cruz Years
(Cooking Vinyl [U.K.], 2002; 5 CDs)

The Act: The cultural isolation of attending university in Santa Cruz, California; the do-it-yourself after-effects of punk rock's subcultural explosion; and a love for ethnically diverse musics—especially Eastern European—make for Camper Van Beethoven's humorously snarky multi-culti alt-rock, probably influential in ways I could more fathom were I to ponder them further, and probably not easily duplicated. Even if it were that influential. Which it probably is.

Their first album, *Telephone Free Landslide Victory*, on the extremely indie Independent Project Records, set the mold for future releases with the above-mentioned elements coalescing into music funny as it was brainy as it was catchy as it was in-jokey. "Take The Skinheads Bowling", with its black and white video on overexposed film stock (as I recall), was the closest thing to a hit for CVB, I think, ever, although "We're A Bad Trip" and a Balkanesque remake of Black Flag's "Wasted" contend for most memorable song on the CD.

The other four albums included in the quintuple-disc, 82-track *Cigarettes & Carrot Juice: The Santa Cruz Years* follow suit with similar intent and execution as different international musical influences mingle throughout and the production values remain amiably raw. The (faux?) English fanfare opening the final, live album of the set breaks from the otherwise mostly Soviet Bloc influence throughout the previous four albums.

Possibly as influential as R.E.M., in terms of validating indie rock M.O. and aesthetics—if not reaching those Georgians' sales plaque and radio play heights—this pre-2000's reunion music holds up as well for the present as it reminds of a pre-Internet era where "being" indie took more effort and was a more radical lifestyle departure from the times' rock'n'roll norm.

The Packaging and Goodies: Fittingly orange box (check the name) with folding cover, just over

CD sleeve proportions. Gold embossed lettering in casually cursive font with abstract lion face (?) cartoon in middle, band name above and title below. Back continues the embossed lettering and hieroglyphic-like doodles next to each album title.

For song titles, check the individual album sleeves replicating the original LP cover graphics in miniature form on glossy, thin cardboard with sharp color separation for their size. Booklet of 16 pages, fitting snugly into box, comes illustrated by color, black and white, and differently filtered band pics running through an essay by Richard Von Busack and Dr. Jill Stauffer of *h2so4 Magazine* with Kacey Carmissi. Combined, they place CVB in context of alt-rock's '80 origins and their local scene.

Personal Connections: I must have heard "Take The Skinheads Bowling" on college/non-commercial radio around the time of its release and whenever it was that "Weird Al" Yankovic had his Al TV program on MTV, I saw the video.

Such was that tune's novelty appeal that it reached my at-the-time-fellow comic book geek (I don't think he'd mind that appellation) friend Rob, who asked me to purchase the TFLV LP on one of my record shopping rounds, while I was visiting him at his place in Madison. Though I liked them at the time, too, I was more interested in the Savage Republic longplayers on the same label (at least one of which I bought used).

As for songs from the other albums, here, I know I must have heard some of them on the same kinds of stations where I heard the first one. 'Just can't tell you where nor when. And I'm pretty certain I never played them in my stints as a college radio DJ.

Listening to the music collected for this set, however, I'm liking it more—enough to where I semi-regret not having embraced more as a collegiate jockey playing music nobody on the floor of my dorm liked (or so it seemed). I don't know how the *!#@! I scratched the fifth disc by the second time I listened to it, though. *Ach!*

Pertinent Link: Where else but CamperVanBeethoven.com for news, tour dates, pictures, the band's official bootleg trading (note the not "selling") policy, community/forum board, tablature, sales of those albums still in print, and more?

Copyright © 2007 The Bohemian Aesthetic/Jamie Lee Rake. All rights reserved.