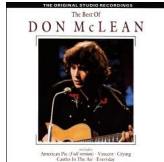


Don McLean - The Best of Don McLean (1991)

Written by bluelover

Tuesday, 13 October 2009 15:11 - Last Updated Wednesday, 04 January 2017 14:49

Don McLean - The Best of Don McLean (1991)



1 American Pie 8:32 2 Castles in the Air (1981 Version) 3:41 3 Dreidel 3:46 4 Winterwood 3:11 5 Everyday 2:26 6 Sister Fatima 2:33 7 Empty Chairs 3:26 8 Birthday Song 2:37 9 Wonderful Baby 2:04 10 La La I Love You 3:46 11 Vincent 4:01 12 Crossroads 3:39 13 And I Love You So 4:16 14 Fool's Paradise 4:05 15 If We Try 3:34 16 Mountains of Mourne 4:29 17 Grave 3:12 18 Respectable 2:28 19 Going for the Gold 2:43 20 Crying 3:40

There are a lot of Don McLean compilations out there, as you can see on McLean's artist page here on rym. It's hard to be sure which one is the best, since most of them don't currently have track listings... But this is the one I have, and I find it hard to believe there could be a better one. It's certainly better than the other comp that has the same title, which contains only 10 tracks. Don't confuse them! This is the one you want.

'American Pie' is pretty remarkable, of course. It's got serious staying power. Epic song. Enough said. The songs I want to highlight on the album, though, are the quiet ones that completely surprise you with their emotional power.

'And I Love You So' reliably brings a lump to my throat. It helps that I can relate to its lyric. But there are other songs here that I can't personally relate to in any conscious way, but which have the same effect. I can really see why someone was inspired to write 'Killing Me Softly With His Song' about McLean. He's a remarkable lyricist, composer and guitar player too. His delivery makes you hear the words as if they were yours, even if they're foreign to your experience or outlook. So, for example, the protagonist of 'Empty Chairs' frankly seems like a bit of jerk. The chorus goes, "And I wonder if you know / That I never understood / That although you said you'd go / Until you did I never thought you would". Somebody just wasn't listening, right? But the song is beautiful and it makes me feel sorry for the guy despite the fact that it seems like he might've had it coming. Ditto for 'Castles in the Air': the protagonist is quite definitely a jerk (he

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can't face up to his girlfriend himself, so he asks a buddy to tell her on his behalf that he's leaving her; oh, and it's because "I need a country woman for my wife" -- what the hell kind of excuse is that?) but again, the song itself is so gorgeously sung by McLean that I can't resist it. He makes you feel like you could feel that way yourself.

The well-known 'Vincent' falls into the same category. I was made to sing this song a lot when I was in a choir at primary school, well before I could properly appreciate it. (Sidenote: why the f*** would they have a bunch of 10-year-olds singing a song about a tortured painter who offed himself? Something odd there. I've remarked elsewhere that 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' seems like a poor choice in retrospect too. Oh well, back to the Don McLean compilation...) Happily, that repeated exposure to 'Vincent' hasn't killed the song for me, and again, its emotional power reliably sneaks up on me nowadays. "Frameless heads on nameless walls..."

'The Grave' is a Vietnam protest song which builds to a shattering crescendo two-thirds of the way through, where the soldier protagonist, crouching terrified in his trench under intense enemy fire, attempts to bury himself in the earth for protection -- and thus quite literally digs his own grave.

McLean often ends his songs in a way you don't see coming. 'Sister Fatima', 'Crossroads', and 'The Grave' all have this feature. They all end in a chord that is unexpected and even (at least in the case of 'Crossroads') notably dissonant. 'The Birthday Song' does something sort of similar, but in a more upbeat way, and McLean's lyric also joins in the fun, comically noting that he learned this birthday song from the person he's addressing even though she "can't even sing"!

McLean is just as skilled when he's interpreting the songs of others. 'Mountains of Mourne' is my favorite. A gentle song with touches of humor (and even mild sarcasm), in the form of a letter to his love from an Irishman who has gone to London for work.

I should mention 'Going for the Gold', which is the only time the compilation steps seriously outside the boundaries of folk rock. It's a straight-ahead rocker, complete with some nifty electric slide guitar. Apparently this great track is hard to find. The liner notes say it was on a 1989 compilation that was released only in Europe. Another reason to choose this compilation!

In short, this is a brilliant showcase for a superb singer-songwriter. It's criminal that most people

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know McLean just for 'American Pie'. This compilation is very much worth your money if you can find it. ---craggyair, rateyourmusic.com

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