

New Music: Donovan, The Cream

Mixed Mead-Ear

1968

a review of
The Cream, "Wheels of Fire" (ATCO)
and
Donovan, "In Concert" (Epic)

The Cream

I can remember when I was young, thinking how nothing in the music world ever stayed constant. Later in my life I was to be proven wrong. Cream had nothing to do with it, unfortunately, as nothing in the world would give me greater pleasure than to admit that they were the group!

But just supposing I had thought Cream to be the group: then "Wheels of Fire" is the combination of genius and musical sewerage necessary to plunge me to the depths of confusion. By now we are all sick of being told which groups the trio used to play with; who were the main musicians responsible for each members musical transition and how each is the world's best. Let us turn to the evidence before us; i.e. "Wheels of Fire."

There are three major factors which combine to wreck what should have been a monster double album. I list them in order of importance:

(1) Felix Pappalardi, the "Brilliant" producer, who took the fiercest combination in the world and turned it into the Monkees of hard-rock. Consequently the two albums in this set, one Cream and one Cream and producer, could and possibly were made by two totally different groups. The only outstanding cut on the studio album is "As You Said", by Jack Bruce, who (so he told me) was left 100% to his own devices for this cut. The rest sound, and are, machine-made.

(2) Martin Sharp—look at the inside cover—Martin Sharp was responsible.

(3) Approximately 3-1/2 million people who turned modest, almost shy Eric Clapton into a mound of walking ego his own god. The same people dragged Ginger back to heroin—I'm sure his wife and children will be grateful for that. They also made Jack turn against everything he ever had in the way of trust in his fellow men. Being the least easily swayed and the more dedicated musician of the three explains why Jack was given total freedom in the studio.

Because of what I have just said, I am not going to even review the studio album. The live album demonstrates in parts excellently what Cream used to sound like before the adoration they received from music starved American audiences.

Side three begins brilliantly with “Crossroads”. Eric Clapton may get somewhat lost in “psyche” occasionally, but this cut is kept 100% old—vintage hard and very personal. Virtually completely 12 bar blues, it’s impact and skill shows through far better than in some of Eric’s numbers—packed with power but containing little virtuosity, originality or taste.

“Crossroads” is the reason why Jerry Garcia or Mike Bloomfield will never, I’m afraid, make anything of themselves as artists other than that which they have already proved themselves to be—loud, tasteless and ill-mannered with the minimum talent necessary to become gods to the so-called “young hip”.

Second and last cut on side three is “Spoonful”. This, I at first thought to be somewhat bad as it is generally considered “Eric’s number”, along with “Steppin’ Out”, and Eric doesn’t really do as well as he can do.

Upon hearing it a few times I realised, as most people will, that it is actually a showcase for Jack Bruce as a bass player.

And what excellent bass playing it is too; not just the general five note runs, but beautiful leads and sometimes chords combine to show just how good a musician Jack is. “Train-time” is on side four to show the same thing—not how good a harp player he is, although he can dwarf many of the supposed “bests”. He is by no means the world’s greatest but how excellent he is as an all-around musician.

Side four is actually why I would buy “Wheels of Fire”. I don’t know if you like drum solos. Some people regard them as just a lot of noise, which most of them are, but “Toad”—I mean, how does one review “Toad”—I adore drum solos good ones—and always will just for the pleasure of hearing so many rhythms synchronized to perfect combinations of mood and synthetic sound patterns.

Therefore I am biased already. Yet even if I loathed drum solos to the extent of scorn, I would have to retain some respect for “Toad” as a monument to how well an instrument can and should be played. To my mind Joe Morello, ex-Dave Brubeck and the world’s finest, would be hard pressed to better this particular cut.

And that is why I would be confused with this album. Sides one through four slowly show the depths, and pinnacles to which Cream swept in their short and varied career. They should, with the talent that they had, have been the group. Maybe some tomorrow they may be.

Donovan, “In Concert” (Epic)

Well, now that we have a new Donovan album with us, aren’t we all happy? Of course we are. Even though nearly all of the cuts have been released before, we are very eager to pay 4 or 5 dollars more for all that lovely applause, and that adorable announcer at the opening who tells us of Donovan’s rain-ceasing powers. Let us not forget Mr. LEITCH Sr., who comes, with several words, free, with each copy of the album.

“Isle of Islay” always was a beautiful song. As was “Young Girl Blues” before the jazz version that Donovan obviously performs live nowadays (created in a freak nightmare that Donovan had one night).

“There is a Mountain,” a bad song in it’s original form, is one of the few unchanged cuts, and it could well be improved upon.

“Celeste” always reminds me of the kind of song that Paul Anka would sing very badly and get a hit with, with Kevin Greenwood reviewing it as an “excellent piece of music with nonsensical lyrics”. I found it always as neither good nor bad, but passably inferior when recorded live. “The Fat Angel” is Donovan’s hippiest song, complete with love and everything.

“Guinevere” ends side one prettily but somewhat indelicately, following “The Fat Angel” with the impression that the recording engineers had not wanted to end the side up-tempo so they played with their machines and jammed “Guinevere” in at the end.

Side two opens with Donovan speaking, setting the scene for “Widow With Shawl” (which deserves a place on the album, an honor unfortunately granted also to “Preachin’ Love”). Donovan cannot sing jazz, or any jazz-derivative, and I wish he’d stop trying.

“Lullabye of Spring” is a new one to me. To be candid, upon first hearing it did not inspire me to rush out and buy the album. After hearing it a few times I liked it maybe a little better, but still not to the point of infatuation.

“Writer in the Sun” is good—always was, and I’m glad to see it unchanged.

“Pebble and the Man” is exactly as Donovan describes it—“a pretty little song”. I like it, I hope it too remains unchanged.

I am not going to bother reviewing the last two tracks on side two. They are both excessively bad in every aspect.

Epic has paid it's usual lack of attention to the album cover, although the recording isn't so bad for a live album. And that is the new Donovan album. Aside from my own feelings of Donovan (which are quite good), I generally like his songs and feel that this album is strictly a production release to earn 'money for the corporation.

After I finished listening to the album, a young lady came into the store where I work and asked me which was the best Donovan album to buy. I sold her “Like It Is.”

fifth Estate

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