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Review: The Beatles are coming to CD — again

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
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In honor of the 50th anniversary of The Beatles' arrival on American shores in February 1964, Capitol Records/Universal Music Group on Jan. 21 released "The U.S. Albums," a 13-CD set that contains all of The Beatles' albums that were unique to the U.S. market.

Several of these albums are being released on CD for the first time, and many of them contain unique American mixes of Beatles songs that are also making their CD debut.

Listening to these discs was a very enjoyable experience tinged with nostalgia.

I grew up with these U.S. versions of The Beatles' music, and I really enjoy the way some of the U.S. albums are sequenced, especially "Meet the Beatles," "The Beatles' Second Album" and the U.S. version of "Rubber Soul."

Personally, I was never that fond of the duophonic fake stereo sound on some of these albums, so these new CDs are the best of both worlds for me — unique U.S. track sequences and alternate mixes merged with the better sounding United Kingdom (UK) versions of The Beatles' music.

All of the U.S. Beatles albums, except "Magical Mystery Tour," were taken out of print in the late 1980s when The Beatles' catalog was released on CD and standardized for the world using the United Kingdom versions. Thus, these unique U.S. albums are something American fans have clamored to have released on CD.

For music fans who may not be old enough to remember, until 1967, The Beatles' albums that Capitol Records released in the United States were dramatically different from their UK counterparts.

Not only did Capitol albums have fewer songs due to the way publishing royalties were calculated in United States vs. Britain (UK albums generally had 14 songs, while U.S. albums had 11 or 12), they had some songs in duophonic sound (a Capitol Records process that gave mono songs a fuller, fake stereo sound) and contained alternate mixes of some songs that were exclusive to the U.S.

A lot of the earlier albums also were processed with equalization techniques that gave the music a punchier sound, usually by adding echo and compression to make them sound less dry than their UK counterparts.

Capitol's approach to marketing Beatles' music in America also focused on making sure all the band's hit singles were featured on the U.S. albums. In the UK, hit singles many times were available only on 45 rpm records and not on albums.

This unique approach to marketing Beatles' albums meant the U.S. had several more albums of Beatles music than the U.K. For example, by the end of 1965, Parlophone in the UK had released just six Beatles' albums. In America, however, those same songs were featured on 10 albums, including one documentary album and two soundtrack albums, all of which are featured in this set.

The albums included in this new release are "Meet the Beatles," "The Beatles' Second Album," "A Hard Day's Night (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)," "Something New," "The Beatles' Story," "Beatles '65," "The Early Beatles," "Beatles VI," "Help!" (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack), "Rubber Soul," "Yesterday and Today," "Revolver" and "Hey Jude."

For a limited time, all these albums will also be available to purchase separately except for "The Beatles' Story," which is exclusive to the box.

The box also comes with a 64-page booklet, and all of the albums are presented in mono and stereo, excluding "The Beatles' Story" and "Hey Jude," which are stereo only. The CDs come in mini album-style cardboard sleeves that replicate exactly how the albums looked when they were originally released, even including exact replicas of the inner sleeves that held the vinyl records.

The "Yesterday and Today" album reproduction goes so far as to have the original banned "butcher cover" photo (a photo of The Beatles holding doll parts while draped with raw meat) on the cover.

A sticker of the more familiar trunk cover is also provided so you can paste over the offending cover, much like Capitol Records did in 1966 when it recalled thousands of "butcher covers."

Instead of destroying them, Capitol pasted over it with a photo of The Beatles posing with an open trunk.

As for the sound of this new set, there's been a lot of buzz on various Websites and social media because Apple Corps Ltd., the record company founded by The Beatles, has made some alterations to the sound of these discs.

While the song lineup and covers are the same as the original U.S. albums, some of the sources used to make these discs have changed.

Apple has decided to replace some of the third- or fourth-generation tapes on some of the songs that Capitol had used to make these albums in the '60s with versions of the same songs taken from re-masters of The Beatles' UK albums released in 2009.

Apple has also gotten rid of all the duophonic (fake stereo) versions of some songs, and they also have replaced some of the fold-down mono songs (songs made from stereo tapes to sound mono) with true mono sources again from the 2009 re-masters.

While purists have complained Apple has destroyed the listening experience they remember from the original vinyl, in truth, the UK re-masters from 2009 sound very nice and are more in line with The Beatles' original artistic vision.

The Beatles were never that fond of Capitol Records' approach to presenting their music, and so the substitutions on some of the songs on this set makes sense.

Most of the alternate/unique U.S. mixes are present on these discs. As far as I could tell, about four alternate U.S. mixes are missing.

I sympathize with anyone who will be put off by these new changes but most of the unique Capitol albums were previously released on CD in 2004 and 2006 on "The Capitol Albums" Volumes 1 and 2. Those sets were taken unaltered from the U.S Capitol masters — fake stereo, added echo and all.

For me, the exquisitely done mini-album reproductions of the original sleeves coupled with having mono and stereo versions of these albums on the same CD, along with the beautiful booklet and nice sound, make this set a great purchase.

It's the perfect way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of The Beatles coming to America.

James Grant works for the Allen County Public Library, is a former librarian for The News-Sentinel and occasionally covers music for The News-Sentinel.