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Music review: New John Lennon vinyl box set brings back his music in all its glory

By James Grant of The News-Sentinel
Thursday, June 11, 2015 - 12:01 am

Imagine there's no ... vinyl?

Luckily, John Lennon/Beatles fans and vinyl buffs don't have to contend with that scenario.

On Tuesday, Capitol Records released a 9-LP, 180-gram vinyl box set entitled simply "Lennon," which includes all eight studio albums that Lennon recorded and released after he left the Beatles.

The set is being created from the original analog masters made and supervised by Lennon himself when he originally recorded the albums 1970-1980 and retails for around \$199.99 (\$179.99 on Amazon).

The albums will also be available to purchase separately beginning this August.

Sean Magee from Abbey Road Studios, who also worked on the recent Beatles stereo and mono CD and vinyl box sets, cut this new vinyl collection from the 24bit/96k HD digital transfers used in 2010 to make the CD version of this set, which was entitled "John Lennon Signature Box."

"Lennon" will include the following landmark albums: "John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band," "Imagine," "Sometime in New York City" (a two-LP set done with Yoko Ono), "Mind Games," "Walls and Bridges," "Rock 'n' Roll," "Double Fantasy" and "Milk and Honey" (the last two albums also with Ono).

In the early 2000s, Ono released most of Lennon's albums in remixed form, which, while making the albums clearer and less cluttered-sounding, took away some of the sonic characteristics that made these albums what they were.

This new vinyl set will fortunately feature these albums in their original glory, with all mixes created by Lennon himself. The set also includes lovingly created replicas of the first edition United Kingdom versions of these LPs, including all jackets, inner sleeves, posters and labels, which look just as they did when these albums first came out.

While some Lennon aficionados may be angered that this new vinyl set isn't being made totally in the analog realm like last year's vinyl set "The Beatles in Mono," they should not be disappointed with how this set sounds.

From the mournful bell that opens the song "Mother" on the "John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band" LP to the more cheerful chime that welcomes the song "(Just Like) Starting Over" from 1980's "Double Fantasy," the new vinyl versions of these albums sound great.

While Lennon's original mixes tend to sound muddled at times due to his love of the "Wall of Sound"-type of production originated by Phil Spector, who co-produced some of these albums, these new LPs compare quite favorably to the original vinyl pressings.

"John Lennon/ Plastic Ono Band" in particular still retains all of its harrowing aural punch, with Ringo Starr's drumming bounding out of the speakers and highlighting the album's stark production.

My personal favorite, "Walls and Bridges" from 1974, also sounds quite wonderful.

The bass sounds especially nice on this version of the album, and the smooth, clean and crisp sound really makes this album a joyful listen.

The final two albums, "Double Fantasy" and "Milk and Honey," which both contain material from Lennon's last studio sessions in 1980, benefit most from the vinyl format, as the 2010 CD versions of these albums were mastered a bit loud.

The sound on the new vinyl versions of the two albums is less harsh and easier on the ears, thus making these versions preferable to their CD counterparts.

One major mistake of note: On the "Rock 'n' Roll" album, the song "Sweet Little Sixteen" appears twice on Side 1, while the song "You Can't Catch Me" is missing. I'm sure this will be rectified later or in replacement pressings, but this is a glaring mistake.

Though the collector in me is slightly amused, it is unfortunate.

The only other drawback to this set is that it doesn't contain the bonus material of singles, demos and unreleased music that was present on the "John Lennon Signature Box," the CD version of this set.

At the price point for this new collection, it would have made the set a better value if it had included the bonus material.



More Information

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For more information, go to: <http://johnlennonmusic.com>.

Nevertheless, Lennon's unique voice and perspective are all over the music in this collection.

In this day of the Internet, ISIS and gay rights, Lennon's activist voice would certainly find its way into the cultural landscape and, while missed, his message of perseverance for change can be enjoyed in abundance on this new set.

Vinyl fans new and old will find a lot to admire — from the lovely looking jackets and the nice, rigid, white slipcase that holds the collection to the great-sounding albums.

The time is ripe to rediscover some of Lennon's most powerful music in the format in which it was originally released and loved.