

MUSIC

RAY OF LIGHT Madonna • Warner Bros.

After years of selling herself with sex, Madonna has reinvented herself and turned to more substantive topics on her first studio album in several years.

Those fans expecting the carefree, energy-infused, breath-filled tracks often associated with Madonna will be disappointed, as the singer never ventures to her old playground. The electronica-laden songs are a testament to both her newfound role as a mother and her personal growth as a woman entering into maturity.

The result is a glorious journey into a complex and challenging landscape of captivating music that is as mesmerizing as it is emotionally engaging. It's also her strongest work to date.



Madonna

Delving into the world of electronic music with the help of producer and techno wizard William Orbit, Madonna mixes varied styles of drum and bass, trip hop, ambient grooves and mystifying sounds with her recognizable vocals on a canvas of vivid colors and textures.

Her endearing and moving lyrics show sides

of the singer that haven't been exposed before: a daughter who lost her mother at an early age, a woman entering her 40s who is suddenly enjoying motherhood for the first time, and a vulnerable woman experiencing a spiritual and emotional transformation.

The delightful title track revels in its candor of sins and flaws, while "Little Star" glows with her newfound role as a mother. Mixed in between the two are songs with a biting sense of realism and poignancy—death and birth, sin and salvation, friends and lovers. Even her role as a superstar is questioned and examined under her careful eye.

Buoyed by her rigorous coaching during the *Evita* sessions, her growth is clearly evident. Her voice is richer and fuller than it's ever been. And if ever her future as the reigning Queen of Pop had been questioned, this album should squelch those thoughts for a long time to come.

MOTOWN 40 FOREVER Various artists • Motown

The Motown label celebrates its 40th anniversary with this two-disc compilation. Featuring 40 hits from the 1960s to today, the compilation is a who's who of the hit makers from the Motown stable.

It is a difficult sell, though. While its intentions are good, and the selections trace the growth of Motown from the early years with the Marvelettes to the current year with Boyz II Men, the Motown sound has changed significantly in 40 years—and not always for the best.

How do you compare Martha Reeves and the Vandellas at the conclusion of Disc 1 with the first track of Disc 2, Rick James' "Super Freak"? Or the magic harmony of the Supremes singing "Someday We'll Be

Together" with Boyz II Men's "I'll Make Love to You"?

For many, the Motown sound is all about Disc 1, an imperial, standout collection of 21 brilliant Motown tracks from 1961 to 1973, with "Please Mr. Postman" by the Marvelettes, "My Guy" by Mary Wells, "Stop! In the Name

of Love" by the Supremes, "My Cherie Amour" by Stevie Wonder and "ABC" by the Jackson Five, among others.

Disc 2, on the other hand, is a throwaway featuring mostly songs from the mid-80s to today. Except for a few exceptions—Lionel Richie's "All Night Long (All Night)," Diana Ross' "I'm Coming Out" and Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On"—there is little to celebrate or gyrate. Johnny Gill's "Rub You the Right Way" rubs the wrong way. There's even a Sean "Puffy" Combs remix of the Jackson Five's classic "I Want You Back" that'll make you want the original back.

There's enough to cherish here to make it an enjoyable experience, but you may be better off finding a Motown collection celebrating the 20th anniversary.

MELROSE PLACE JAZZ Various artists • Windham Hill

The ratings for *Melrose Place* may be going down, but the show's keen attention to musical perfection hasn't been affected, as witnessed by this brilliant new collection. Inspired by the music heard in *Melrose Place*'s fictional Upstairs Jazz Club, this disc leaves the drama behind and serves up a healthy helping of warm, inviting and intoxicating jazz favorites sung by today's most talented vocalists, including Etta James, Diana Krall and Lisa Fischer.

Leading off with a fun, brassy version of the "Melrose Theme" (oh, how it brings back memories of the day Amanda came to town), the music glides easily to James' magnificent rendition of the Gershwin classic "The Man I Love" (if this doesn't melt your heart, nothing will). And it only gets better from there: Krall turns in a passionate performance with "I Don't Know Enough About You," and Fischer's seductive "Way Past Goodbye" pulls at the heartstrings.

Other performers include the Rippingtons, Tom Scott, Don Grusin, Jim Brickman, the Braxton Brothers, Johnny Reno and Ricky Peterson, to name a few.

The real stand out here, however, is Tuck and Patti's exquisite "Takes My Breath Away." The underappreciated husband and wife team shine on this tune, which showcases Patti's rich, smoky voice.



Aretha Franklin

A ROSE IS STILL A ROSE Aretha Franklin • Arista

On her first studio album in nearly seven years, the Queen of Soul once again comes out smelling like a rose. With the help of some of today's top songwriters and producers, Franklin's vocal prowess displays more strength and richness than it has in a long time. While retaining her trademark R&B sound, Franklin aims for a hipper, more contemporary sound on the new opus and achieves it with blossoming results.

The title track, written by Fugees front woman Lauryn Hill, is an emotionally-charged tune about moving on after a breakup; the song allows the singer strut her stuff—with far more justice and success than her remake of "Respect" for the disappointing *Blues Brothers* sequel—and all the while put the man who has done her wrong in his place. Her heartfelt delivery brings you closer to her pain, but also soothes it away.

Franklin doesn't leave everything to the new breed. She also turns to longtime collaborator Michael Narada Walden for help. On the latter's "How Many Times," Franklin looks inward to pull out a wallop. This biting track about a woman who is demanding that her man treat her better ends with the sharp retort "You're wrong and you know it."

■ JEFFREY L. NEWMAN is a New York-based writer who can be reached via e-mail at editorjeff@aol.com.

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