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MUSIC

Icon game

Keeping score with Ms. Ciccone and Ms. LaPierre

BY JIM RADOSTA

AMERICAN LIFE

Madonna • Maverick/Warner Bros. Records

No wonder the gays love Madonna. The 44-year-old, who's got image manipulation down to a science, has taken on many faces that are familiar to queers: social outcast ("Papa Don't Preach"), religious heretic (the "Like a Prayer" video), kinky deviant (the Sex book) and musical diva (*Evita*).

So, will we be able to relate to her latest incarnation—exhausted expatriate celebrity searching for the meaning of life? Let's get to the bottom of this.

American Life finds Madonna in a conflicted, introspective mood, questioning religion in the gospel-tinged "Nothing Fails" but, just two tracks later, tenderly begging, "Jesus Christ will you look at me" in the acoustic "X-Static Process." The instant dance floor classic "Hollywood" bemoans commercialism ("Music stations always play the same song"), while the gritty "I'm So Stupid" blasts conformity ("I used to live in a tiny bubble, and I wanted to be like all the pretty people"). In "Mother and Father" she even analyzes her daddy issues.

(One track seems particularly out of place amid all this inner exploration: "Die Another Day," the title song to last year's Pierce Brosnan/Halle Berry film. As far as James Bond themes go, the icy experiment falls somewhere between Sheryl Crow's forgetful "Tomorrow Never Dies" and Lulu's annoying "The Man with the Golden Gun.")

Madonna opens and closes the album with blunt confessions about the emptiness of fame, which might seem like a frivolous topic in the post-9/11 world but, for us noncelebs, could represent society's growing discontent with the rat race. In the rap-fueled title track Mo' admits she's become disenchanted by the American dream: "Somehow I forgot just what I did it for and why I wanted more." She closes on a mellow note with "Easy Ride," singing, "I want the good life but...what I want is to work for it." This is pretty intimate stuff coming from somebody who constantly insists to interviewers, "I have no regrets."

So let's recap: interested in self-improvement, wants to leave the United States, attracted to Guy Ritchie. Yeah, I can still relate.

THE VERY BEST OF CHER

Cher • Rhino Records

Take a good look at the *Billboard* albums chart because, if you keep your eyes peeled, you might observe, "One of these things is not like the other." That thing would be Cher—back on top with yet another hits collection—lost among Kelly Clarkson and



Lizzie Maguire music marketed to kids young enough to be her granddaughter.

Oh, and a few notches away you'll spot Celine Dion, fresh from her much-ballyhooed "retirement" at age 31. Some broads are made of tougher material, and Cher is one of them. (The precise chemical makeup of that material, however, remains uncertain.)

I must admit I'm not old enough to have experienced the early part of her 38 years (!) in the spotlight, so I lack any firsthand appreciation of her "Gypsies, Tramps & Thieves" phase. (A phase in which, as far as I can tell, she converted to Native American.) I didn't become familiar with the former Mrs. Bono until the late 1980s, when she staged an impressive comeback after a nine-year hiatus. (To jog your memory, this is when she used dental floss for panties and performed a duet with that Chicago singer who has a strange underbite.)

Cher again disappeared from the airwaves for most of the 1990s but inexplicably experienced a career high four years ago with the No. 1 single "Believe," uttering inane, computer-altered vocals like "Maybe I'm too good for you!" You go, girl.

This is when she adopted her current persona as an ageless disco queen who, apparently, is bald. (I noticed most of her ever-present wigs are platinum blond, perhaps to remind her of good record sales.)

Unfortunately, Cher's output since 1999 has been as nonpliant as the plastic product she calls skin. Mostly overproduced remixes, her latest tunes have been unchallenging and unremarkable.

As a result, this collection is a bit of a disappointment, concentrating 13 of its 21 tracks on material recorded since 1987. Missing in action are two Top 10 hits—1967's "You Better Sit Down Kids" and 1972's "Way of Love"—as well as most of the Sonny & Cher classics, only two of which make the cut.

Also absent are oddball rarities. For example, did you know she beat Dionne Warwick to the punch in recording the title song to the Michael Caine film *Alfie*? Hey, I did my research: Cher's version hit the charts in August 1966, nine months before her future infomercial competitor did.

It sure is easy to pick on Chastity's mom, but I must give credit where it's due. *The Very Best* contains some singles that belong in every collection: the disco-flavored "Take Me Home," the shamelessly bombastic "I Found Someone" and the blissful "The Shoop Shoop Song (It's in His Kiss)." **J**