

JUST ABOUT AS GOOD AS IT GETS

Now comprising 21 double CDs re-presenting memorable * overlooked * revelatory * do we really need to be reminded nuggets from the roots of US & UK rock and British jazz, Smith&Co's *Just About As Good As It Get* series continues to live up to its cheeky tagline. Astutely compiled, authoritatively annotated, smartly remastered and competitively priced, these releases also look the business - cunningly designed to appeal to the collectors' instinct that beats in the heart of many a music nut, so if you buy one or two you almost feel compelled to get the lot.

Here I must insert a personal caveat. Whether there was ever such a thing as Great British Rock n Roll before Cliff Richard's *Move It* in 1958 is a contentious issue, and four doubles of Great British Skiffle is perhaps over-egging the pudding. We'll get back to that.

First, speaking of Harry Webb (*Sir Cliff* to you and me) this new, comprehensive roundup of his 1958-59 studio and live recordings should be an ear-opener for the younger tykes amongst you. Elvis he wasn't; nevertheless, when teenage Cliff hit the fan the Great British knicker was soaked to the crutch and we had a credible homespun rocker for... oh, at least a couple of years, throbbing in this 70-tracker. The only persuasive argument for him now being a knight of the realm.

Prior to Cliff, and not dismissing Tommy Steele entirely as a chirpy cockney bounder, Britain's liveliest post-war musical movement was skiffle - originally a coterie of UK jazzers paying tribute (in earnest and with a sense of fun in equal measure) to American roots music. Lonnie Donegan was catapulted to the forefront by the international success of *Rock Island Line*. Although he occasionally later dabbled in music-hall repertoire, Smith&Co's two volumes of his 50s recordings reaffirm that he was a convincing and influential interpreter of early Americana. Without Mr Donegan, several thousand Brits, some of whom went on to become superstars, would never have had the balls to go for it.

The series also includes a volume apiece by renowned UK jazzmen Ken Colyer, Chris Barber, Humphrey Lyttelton and Acker Bilk plus a Best Of various jazzers, none of which I'm qualified to review. However, an elderly passerby wearing a fedora and demob suit assures me that they're all reet-o-rootie compilations.

Rockabilly was the music of young white, mainly rural, American wannabees who generally recorded in the southern states and California in the wake of Elvis Presley's spectacular breakthrough. Some of them became internationally famous, the majority are only remembered and honoured by the hardcore rock n roll fraternity. Most of them cut tracks, albeit sometimes just a handful, of dynamic energy. I sincerely suggest you need Smith&Co's four volumes of rockabilly in your life. During the 70s rockabilly was revived by a generation of Brits who might have become punks had they not discovered a more enduring and life-enhancing slap in the face of anything stuffy.

For one reason or another (death, scandal, religion, military service, Tin Pan Alley) the 50s rock n roll originators were temporarily sidelined and there was a brief period when instrumental recordings became the feistiest sound around. Smith&Co's two volumes showcase the principal twangers, honkers, pounders, pluckers and thumpers to resounding effect.

All the above get my vote. So what of the other eight volumes? I'm warming to the four of skiffle, they reveal an intriguing underside to the UK 50s club scene that was only patchily acknowledged by mainstream media at the time. In hindsight, these are perhaps important retrospectives. Start with Vol 1 and, if captivated, work forwards.

Re. early UK attempts to rock n roll, I'd recommend starting with Vol 4, by which time it wasn't all embarrassing, and if you've got the gumption, work backwards. Maybe I'm being unnecessarily harsh. Some of us grew up with this stuff in bemused adolescence and survived. Think of it as a challenge, a surreal adventure tripping back into a different time and space. Go on, I dare you. Truth be told, this *is* just about as good as it got.

Cliff White

- SCCD 1122 Great British Skiffle 1948-56
- SCCD 1123 Lonnie Donegan – The Original Skiffle Recordings 1953-56
- SCCD 1124 Great British Rock ‘n Roll 1948-56
- SCCD 1125 Rockabilly – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1140 Chris Barber – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1141 Ken Colyer – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1142 Humphrey Lyttleton – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1143 Great British Traditional Jazz – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1144 Acker Bilk&His Paramount Jazz Band – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1145 Great Rockabilly – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 2
- SCCD 1146 Great British Rock ‘n Roll – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 2
- SCCD 1147 Great British Skiffle – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 2
- SCCD 1170 Great Rockabilly – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 3
- SCCD 1171 Greatest British Rock ‘n Roll – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 3
- SCCD 1172 Great British Skiffle Vol. 3
- SCCD 1173 Great Rock ‘n Roll Instrumentals
- SCCD 1188 Great British Rock ‘n Roll Instrumentals
- SCCD 1189 Great Rock ‘n Roll Instrumentals Vol. 2
- SCCD 1190 Lonnie Donegan – Just About As Good As It Gets Vol. 2
- SCCD 1191 Great British Rock ‘n Roll Vol. 4
- SCCD 1192 Great British Skiffle Vol. 4
- SCCD 1193 Cliff Richard – Just About As Good As It Gets
- SCCD 1197 Great Rockabilly Vol. 4