

Records: The Legendary Masters

As ever growing numbers of listeners discover that rock and roll has a history, the reissuing of classic recordings becomes of interest not merely to collectors and aficionados, but to the general audience as well. In the February 3rd issue of Rolling Stone, Charlie Gillett offered his assessment of Atlantic's Greatest Recordings Series. In this issue we are presenting separate commentaries on the four latest entries in United Artists' Legendary Masters Series.

This series has been functioning for several years and has already resulted in the reissues of classic blues and gospel, as well as early rock and roll classics. Regrettably, some of the reissues are themselves already out of print. Now, under the direction of Marty Cerf, the series has begun the documentation of rock and roll artists through the release of beautifully packaged, two-record sets, available at single album price. Hopefully, the release of this comprehensive vintage material by Eddie Cochran, Fats Domino, Jan and Dean, and Ricky Nelson is only the beginning of the extensive reissuing that needs to be done by all labels with a history in order to make available to listeners everywhere the rock and roll of the Fifties and early Sixties.

Eddie Cochran
Legendary Masters Series
United Artists UAS-9959

BY LESTER BANGS

Eddie Cochran is just a name now, a waft from the past on the lips of musty collectors, entry in books by rock historians like Charlie Gillett and Nik Cohn. But one look at the cover of this album, with Eddie in his archetypal guitar-madman pose, should tell you that he carved out a hefty piece of The Rock in his brief time before it was all snatched away in a well-timed auto accident that cut Albert Camus', almost felled Gene Vincent too, and was, according to legend, foreseen by Eddie in the last melancholy weeks of his life when he would retreat to his room and play records by his recently deceased friend Buddy Holly.

Eddie Cochran was a star, all right—he was an intensely dedicated musician who looked a lot like James Dean but placed his mastery of guitar above the leading of a flash lifestyle or even his singing, and even though it may be true that, like John Kennedy, he died just in time to ensure mythic status and escape a dreary descent into anonymity, it is certain that his big tour of Britain just before his death was a seminal turning point in the history of British rock. Eddie may have imitated Elvis vocally even more than a dozen or so other stalwarts of the day such as Conway Twitty, but his influence on pop consciousness of the magnitude of the Beatles and Who was deep and profound and can be heard with a recurrent *deja vu* feeling as much on this album as in their work.

Eddie Cochran understood to his marrow that rock & roll is not basically a musical style, still less an artform, but above all an attitude. Which is to say that if you carry yourself right, with the proper degree of punk insolence and maybe narcissistic vulnerability, walk like a man and talk like a tortured teen, you can dispense with a good deal of pretentious "originality" and become a star, and not only that but in the ensuing feedback of adulation and myth between yourself and your fans, you will become so convinced of your genius that you may actually become one. Or, as Terry Knight

says, you can be as concerned with musicianship as you want (and Eddie Cochran certainly was), but "music has nothing to do with it."

Venturing forth on the roller skates of such a proposition, we come to this beautifully packaged and annotated album, the cover of which I feel like hanging on the wall next to my pinup of Linda Ronstadt even if it is crusted with old dogshit, and even though I feel a certain ambivalence about the contents of the grooves. In their determination to issue classic, definitive packages at any cost, UA have ordained that every Legendary Masters album in the new series shall be a two-record set, even if the artist in question (and Cochran is the most flagrant example) didn't have that many albums out in the first place. Which means that here, in between the classics and some enthusiastic genre pieces that are lots of fun, you get some absolute dreck and one song repeated in a slightly different version with a different title a la Charlie Parker albums of the Fifties. It is a bit as if Elektra were to suddenly issue a three-record set called *The Stooges' Golden Year*. But, better too much than too little, especially when the price is cheap.

The ultimate classic of Eddie Cochran's career was "Summertime Blues," which cemented his basic thematic riff, the love- and inexperience-lorn teen hung up by himself and harassed by a malevolent adult power structure, and made use of the classic bass riff which recurs in many of the songs and was later picked up by the Who and the Music Explosion in "Little Bit o' Soul." "C'mon Everybody" utilized the same riff and theme, elaborating on the desperation inside his melancholy: "Well we'll really have a party but we gotta put a guard outside/If the folks come home I'm afraid they're gonna have my hide/There'd be no more movies for a week or two/No more runnin' round with the usual crew/Who cares! [and it's almost worth the price of the album just for the way he says those two words] C'mon everybody!"

"Something Else" is probably the cheeriest note struck here, a prototype of the conspicuous consumption car-girl equation exploited most recently by T. Rex, but far from the contrivance endemic to most latter-day treatments. He wrote it in collaboration with his girl friend. But the joy, as always, is shortlived—the remaining two classics here are Eddie C. at his darkest. "Twenty Flight Rock" with its obsession with numbers (cf. "Nervous Breakdown") comes off as a bleak tale of defeat anticipating "Get Off My Cloud" in a strange inverse manner by applying the logic of something like the Kinks' "You Can't Win" to its penthouse fantasy. The elevator to his girl's suite is broken, and there is a suggestion of impotence—"I'm too tired to rock" because of climbing all those stairs. All forms of technology seem to conspire against him: "Well they sent it to Chicago for repairs/Till it's a-fixed I'm a-usin' the stairs/ Hope they hurry before it's too late/I want my baby too much too wait/All this climbin' is gettin' me down/You'll find my corpse draped over a rail."

"Three Stars," if less psychologically malleable, is just as chillingly prophetic and twice as touching. A balladic chorus ("Gee, we're gonna miss you/Everybody sends their love") with rhyming spoken monologues in between, it forms a tribute and memorial to Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper, who died in a plane

crash not long before Eddie's own fatal accident. "Richie, you were just starting to realize your dreams / Everyone calls me a kid, but you were only 17." His voice starts to tremble in the Valens stanza, and by the end he's almost broken down in tears, the lyrics by one T. Dee managing en route to capture Buddy Holly in a few moving words that could apply equally to Eddie himself: "Buddy, I can still see you with that shy grin on your face/Seems like your hair was always a little messed up/Kinda out of place/Not many people actually knew you/Or understood how you felt..."

The genre pieces are rather uneven but consistently interesting, and often reflect an uncanny distillation of the Fifties American high school experience while generally maintaining the role of agonized loser beset by growing pains. "Little Lou" utilizes a Chuck Berry riff and: "Well the lunch bells are ringin'/It's time for us to eat/The gang keeps a-shovin'/Always steppin' on my feet/Oh, Little Lou/I saved a place in line for you," but the football hero walks her home in the end anyway. "Teenage Cutie," with its lyrics worthy of Kim Fowley, represents the victory of horniness, however shyly intoned, over mediocre setting, while "Pink Peggled Slacks" forms a bridge between Ray Charles' "It Should Have Been Me" and the Yard-



birds' and Animals' version of "Ain't Got You," with thematic material similar to the Coasters' "Shopping For Clothes." The one constant is frustration. "Skinny Jim" is a Penniman-Jerry Lee styled vote of support for the seemingly eternal proposition that rock & roll sexiness is almost exclusively ectomorphic, and "I'm Ready" features a Buddy Hollyish sense of sexual desperation ("The clouds are formin'/It's started to rain/Let's get married without a ring/I'm ready/Ready ready ready for you if you're ready ready for me") and proves that Eddie probably influenced Lonnie Donegan as much as he did the Beatles.


And speaking of pretty Limeys, you should know that Eddie's version of "Cut Across Shorty" cuts Rod Stewart's on *Gasoline Alley* and "Nervous Breakdown" shows unmistakably where the Who came from, also managing to sound a bit like Richie Valens except more tortured—it's one of those classic rock songs, running from before Nervous Norvus' "Transfusion" to the Kinks' "Complicated Life," about ending up at the doctor when what's really ailing is your spirit. "Latch On" is an Elvis vocal riding a cross between "Blue Suede Shoes" and "Rock Around the Clock," and another entry in the rock obsession with mathematical sequence as a metaphor for sex and jive, from "Clock" to the 1910 Fruitgum Company's "9, 10, Let's Do It Again." Except that Eddie

was hornier than most of the others in his own peer group and left the drug-eunuchs of the Sixties in the dust, conveying in his vocals and sometimes the lyrics a remarkable erotic tension. Though maybe that's only because he seemed so frustrated: "Sittin' in the Balcony" is Fifties schlock right up there with "Just A Walkin' in the Rain," except it's about copping a feel: "We may stop lovin' to watch Bugs Bunny/But he can't take the place of my honey!" And it ends with the total *deja vu* of a psychedelic smooch and wooden rhythmic clatter echoing away in space. And "Jeanie Jeanie Jeanie," for which Little Richard could sue if all great rock 'n' roll wasn't a series of magnificent bastardizations, charts social mores even more prophetically with, "First we hop/Then we bop/And then we swap!"

The rest ranges from solid R&B workouts like "Milk Cow Blues," which cuts just about any white punk blues belter alive today and represents a Bo Diddley macho-malevolent strut as opposed to the Kinks' churning vat of rage which was a closed, ultimately self-flagellating system—Eddie actually laughs when he says, "Tried everything baby/To get along with you"; to misbegotten and anemic borderline rockabilly and C&W efforts, often with other people singing lead; to the real weirdies like "Cotton Picker," which was featured in a movie called *Un-*

tamed Youth, whose a capella intro is the real roots of both Kim Fowley and Wild Man Fischer, and contains a reference to the film *The Seven-Year Itch* and the lines: "You can make me sing/Make-a me dance/Make me rock right outa my pants/But you ain't gonna make a cotton picker outa me." Or a version of "Hallelujah I Love Her So" with strings tacked on, which sort of works because the massed violins are almost as shrill as a distorted guitar. Or, weirdest of all, the "Fourth Man Theme," based loosely on the famous movie theme "The Third Man," which puts one in mind simultaneously of Jeff Beck's version of "Love Is Blue" and the strange alleys Fifties rockers sometimes found themselves in when they attempted in their utter ingenuousness to go Arty, cf. Richie Valens' melodramatic rendition of "Malaguena" on the *Live at Pacoima Jr. High School* album which, I am informed, is scheduled to be part of a future Legendary Masters reissue.

So very much of this music is derivative in the extreme that some snobs have been heard to remark that excepting "Summertime Blues" Eddie Cochran served up almost nothing but garbage. That is nothing but a short-sighted canard, because even if only a third at most of the music he produced in his tragically brief journey was enduring and profound, the rest is almost to a hot lick spirited, socially redeeming and, most of all, a lot



of fun. To carp about lack of originality in such a case, or perhaps in any case at all, is a bit like the Kinks suing the Doors for "stealing" the melody of "Hello, I Love You" from "All Day and All of the Night," when everybody knows that the latter song and most of the Kinks' early hits came directly from "Louie Louie." And anyway, as I said at the beginning, Eddie Cochran's greatness hardly had much to do with the role, assumed all too readily by many rockers today, of stylistic innovator. This is going to make some people mad, but in a very real way Eddie was the Mark Farner of his day. Or, as Kenny Kaye put it in his fine, supafine liner notes: "Maybe, as you're reading his story, you'll think that what he did wasn't so special, that any other kid with a guitar could have done the same, even down to you or me. But that's only because he was you or me, and any other kid with a guitar could have had the chance if he'd wanted, simple as that."

Fats Domino
Legendary Masters Series
United Artists UAS-9958

BY CHARLIE GILLET

Fats goes to college, all his big hits and more, decked out in a double album that has a 12-page insert of pictures, information, analysis, and biographies of the people who supplied the analysis.

That last item is a bit distracting—is the sleeve note writer worth a page of documentation? But it's the only obvious flaw in an attractive package that is properly respectful of one of the master entertainers of the Fifties. The other flaws show up only if you look too hard.

The music on the album was made to be heard in stretches of under three minutes, mixed in with other 45s on the radio, in juke boxes, or shuffled out of the pile at home. So it's impressive that all four sides of the album can be played one after the other and neither fade into the wallpaper nor drive the listener crazy. All the way through, Fats Domino is right there, no matter what the material or the arrangement, being himself, impassive, good-natured, doggedly dedicated to having a good time and determined that you do too.

And that's really all there is to it, a magical formula that was infallibly successful for more than ten years. Formula? Well, not in the sense that Fats set out to make a fortune and saw a way to do it. But for the record company, Imperial, owned by Lew Chudd, it was a formula, which had never-changing ingredients: a simple song, Fats singing and playing piano, an arrangement by Dave Bartholomew, played by the men in Fats' touring band plus a couple of extra New Orleans session men, and a tenor sax solo from Herb Hardesty. The

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