

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Music DVDs reviewed by Murray Bramwell

The arrival of the DVD has been rapid in Australia. We are well-known for our speedy take-up of new technology but the saturation of the market by the digital versatile disc has been particularly swift even by our standards. Probably it is due to the fact that DVD players, which cost upwards of seven hundred dollars three years ago, now cost less than a quarter of that now. And Dolby digital sound systems are also far more affordable than component stereo units of, say, twenty years ago. Essentially, for a couple of thousand dollars you can fill your living room with speakers and still have a fat sub-woofer behind the sofa.

Now the DVD player is genuinely multipurpose, playing CDs, CD-Rs, CD-RWs, VCDs, DVDs, MP3s - you name it, it can do it. Probably if you fed a beer coaster into one, it would play that too. And there is no need to buy a separate CD player any more - even an inexpensive DVD player will produce gratifyingly clear and rich sound.

So it is not surprising that an increasing amount of DVD program material is being released. Not just the ever-expanding back catalogue of movies and a burgeoning sell-through market which is challenging video rentals, but also the increasing availability of every kind of music. DVD is the perfect form for opera for instance - giving immaculate visual clarity matched by the richness of the soundtrack. It is also very well-suited to popular music and jazz.

For a time, music DVDs have offered fairly prosaic transfers of video material to disc with little in the way of enhancement and extra features. There have been notable exceptions however. The Eagles' reunion concert *Hell Freezes Over* (Warner Vision) which dates back to 1994 is still high on the Amazon.com lists for best DVD sound. Even if the Eagles aren't your cup of tequila sunrise, the density, clarity and volume of the DTS format is impressive and remains a benchmark.

Other fine examples exist. James Taylor's 1998 release *Live at the Beacon Theatre* (Sony) deserves honourable mention as does Roy Orbison's *Black and White Night* (Warner Vision) a year later. But more recently a number

of music DVDs have offered better and more. Increasingly, with discounting bringing prices down below twenty five dollars DVDs start to look like better value than a conventional music CD. If you were looking for a greatest hits package for instance, The Pretenders DVD (Warner Vision) which includes twenty clips and a forty five minute documentary has a running time of two hours, while the matching CD at a similar price has fewer tracks and, of course, no other extras.

Similarly, Cure fans pounced on a Greatest Hits DVD (Warner) which included additional acoustic tracks as well as a bunch of those hidden extras known as Easter eggs. Australian band Something for Kate's *A Diversion* (Sony) put together a collection of videos, live tracks and other materials which totalled more than three hours while David Bowie's *Best of Bowie* (EMI) is a double disc set which includes forty seven tracks with a running time of four hours eleven minutes.

But never mind the width what about the quality ? In the past six months or so there have been a number of releases which combine the highest standard of digital sound with quality, letterboxed vision. Alt. Country singer Gillian Welch is well known for her contribution to the highly successful soundtrack to the Coen Brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou ?* as well as to the spin off concert and documentary DVD *Down From the Mountain* made by Nick Doob, Chris Hegedus and the legendary D.A. Pennebaker.

Her not so recent CD *Time (The Revelator)* has now been augmented by a DVD entitled *The Revelator Collection*. (Acony) Consisting of three videos and nine live performances it is directed by Mark Seliger in elegant retro monochrome. Featuring Welch and her collaborator, the gifted guitarist David Rawlings, the anthology has a pleasing visual continuity with a sparkling audio quality. The titles include the jauntily phrased *My First Lover*, the title track, *April the 14th* and their signature tune *I Want to Sing that Rock and Roll*. Also added are previously unreleased performances of *Wichita, Billy* and Townes van Zant's *White Freightliner Blues*. This Revelator is a revelation.

I mentioned James Taylor earlier and now his latest concert length DVD *Pull Over* (Sony) merits attention. Smoothly filmed and in letterboxed format it captures performances from his tour in 2001, showcasing new material from last year's *October Road* album and ,over two hours and

twenty three songs, offering an extensive retrospective of his whole career. With an tight band including brass and horns and four back up singers, Taylor breathes new life into *Carolina in My Mind*, *Copperline*, *Fire and Rain* and others. The Carole King hit *You Got a Friend* is there , as is Taylor's own *Frozen Man*. The sound is large and lush and the visual style is appealingly low key. This is a DVD to add to your list.

Another live concert DVD worth checking out is Herbie Hancock's *Future2Future* (Sony) Like all Herbie Hancock projects it is technically ambitious and stylishly achieved. Ever at the leading edge - from his pioneering electric keyboards in the late sixties and seventies to his proto-hiphop experiments with *Rockit* in the 1980s - Hancock has assembled a band including drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, keyboardist and programmer Darrell Diaz, bassist Matthew Garrison, turntablist DJ Disk and trumpet player Wallace Roney.

The venue is The Knitting Factory in Los Angeles and in a full set running one hour forty four we can enjoy the visual and aural tones of a remarkable ensemble. Hancock is back to his funk and fusion repertoire with *Virtual Hornets*, *Chameleon* and a revamped *Rockit*. DJ Disk's dexterity is highlighted in duets with Hancock as well as with the Miles-inflected Wallace Roney. Carrington is superb on drums especially on the tribute *Tony Williams* and the extended twenty minute jam *Dolphin Dance*.

This DVD, produced by Zane Vella, is in DTS and Dolby digital format and includes MX multiangling which enables you, should you so wish, to home in soloists or stay in long shot. I'm not sure it's all that illuminating but, as ever, Herbie Hancock, still young at sixty three, is using every available opportunity to make it new and very cool.