

# 'Best-of' format is best bet for the good but not great

Albums trace the highs and a few not-so-highs of 3 successful rockers.

By Jerry Spangler  
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**HOWARD JONES:** "The Best of Howard Jones" (Elektra). ★★½  
**TOM PETTY & THE HEARTBREAKERS:** "Greatest Hits" (MCA). ★★★  
**BRYAN ADAMS:** "So Far So Good" (A&M Records). ★★

For artists like Bob Dylan and Neil Young, putting a greatest hits package together is like trying to condense Encyclopedia Britannica into last month's Reader's Digest. It's simply impossible to hit all the high points.

For other artists, the "best of" format offers the most concise way to chronicle careers that range from mediocrity to occasional brilliance.

Recent releases by Howard Jones, Tom Petty and Bryan Adams certainly fall into the latter category. Good but not great, all three songwriters enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success in the 1980s, while all three also suffered from albums that were inconsistent at best.

So what better way to capsule their careers than in a best-of package? Probably none.

• **HOWARD JONES** took the pop music world by storm in the mid-1980s with a series of positive-thinking technopop singles that



Howard Jones

stood in decided contrast to the heavy-handed metal mania and punk, as well as the meaningless drivel of technopop wizards more infatuated by the sounds of synthesizers than what their music had to say.

While sometimes dismissed as a lightweight songwriter, Jones nonetheless garnered a following that has swelled and waned with the popularity of his hit singles. Which makes this an excellent documentary of Jones' 10-year career.

"The Best of Howard Jones" is a relatively complete 18-song compilation of good and mediocre pop-rock tunes spanning Jones' entire career, from the 1983 breakthroughs "What Is Love" and "New Song" to last year's "I.G.Y.," a Donald Fagen tune recorded for



Tom Petty, left, with "Heartbreakers" Mike Campbell, Stan Lynch, Ron Blair and Benmont Tench.



Bryan Adams

the "best of" package.

What makes this best-of collection enjoyable is that it actually reflects the better tunes in Jones

repertoire, both the top 10 hits and a few of the obscure fan favorites. But considering the mediocrity laced throughout the 18 songs on this collection, it is also evident that the "best of" Howard Jones could have been whittled down to 12 or 13 songs.

Among the best of this best-of package are the hits "Things Can Only Get Better," "Like to Get to Know You Well," "Life in One Day," "Look Mama" and "No One Is to Blame." Throw in the lesser-known tracks like "Hide and Seek," "Pearl in the Shell" and "The Prisoner" and you have a package of basic essentials to satisfy any Howard Jones cravings.

• **TOM PETTY** may have begun his musical sojourn as a clone of Roger McGuinn and the Byrds, but as his "Greatest Hits" package attests he has since emerged as one

of the brightest singer-songwriters of the past decade, although still largely derivative of other artists.

"Greatest Hits" chronicles most — but not all — of the high points in Petty's career, beginning with "Breakdown" in 1977. The package includes 16 Petty hits and two new songs — the Dylanesque "Mary Jane's Last Dance" and a cover of Thunderclap Newman's "Something in the Air."

Both new songs illustrate the good and bad of Petty's up-and-down career. "Mary Jane" is a seductively simple blues rocker spiced with harmonica and lost-in-America lyrics that is as good as anything he's ever done. "Something in the Air," meanwhile, is a

carbon-copy of the original, and while enjoyable in a guilty-pleasure sort of way it is nonetheless uninspired.

Where this package succeeds — and perhaps fails — is as a chronicle of Petty's songwriting evolution. Early hits like "Listen to Her Heart," "Refugee" and "Don't Do Me Like That" are formula rockers with nice melodic hooks to ensure radio airplay. But most of the early tunes lacked the lyrical depth and social melancholy characterized by later songs like "Learning to Fly" and "Free Falling."

If "Greatest Hits" has a weakness it would be its focus on the "hits" rather than the best of Tom Petty. For example, there is nothing from the sensational "Let me Up (I've Had Enough)" album, probably because the moody tone of that album made it unpalatable for radio audiences and no hit sin-

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# RECORDS

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gles tickled the cash registers.

More puzzling is the absence of Petty's work with Stevie Nicks ("Stop Draggin' My Heart Around" and "Needles and Pins") and the Traveling Wilburys. And some of his lesser hits are missing altogether.

In short, "Greatest Hits" is a better-than-average collection of classic rock tunes with a great new song, but it could have been a whole lot better. Given Petty's growing stature as a rock icon, this would have been a perfect opportunity for a two-disc compilation of 25 to 30 songs that demonstrated the breadth and depth of Petty's musical evolution.

● **BRYAN ADAMS** is, at first blush, a

cookie-cutter rocker, delivering rock hit after rock hit that conform to a tried and true formula. A closer inspection of Adams' singles, as chronicled on "So Far So Good," reveals a songwriter who has matured far beyond the ham-fisted rock ballads that defined his early work.

The 14 songs included here cover most of Adams' career, from 1983's "Cuts Like a Knife" and "Straight From the Heart" to "Please Forgive Me," a new single recorded for the best-of compilation.

Unfortunately, the singles are not delivered in chronological order, nor are there liner notes with interesting tidbits about the songs or their perch in Billboard's chart history. Of course, you can get all that info by sending \$12 more to the Make-Bryan-Adams-Even-Richer club in Vancouver.

"So Far So Good" contains a number of

forgotten gems that should be — but for some as-yet-unexplained reason are not — staples on classic rock radio. There's "It's Only Love," a duet with Tina Turner, the romantic pop ballad "Do I Have to Say the Words?" and the '60s-ish "This Time."

Adams' label, A&M, is probably kicking itself at not having squeezed the song "All For Love" into the package. "All For Love," which teams Adams with Rod Stewart and Sting on the theme from the latest movie take on the "The Three Musketeers," would probably have propelled "So Far So Good" to the top of Billboard's Top 200 album chart.

"All For Love" was itself No. 1 on the hit singles list for three weeks in January and early February. As things stand, "So Far" clawed its way to No. 6 on the album chart and generated another top 10 single for him, "Please Forgive Me."

Of course, the package includes all of the big Bryan Adams hits, including "Summer of '69," "(Everything I Do) I Do It For You," "Somebody," "Heaven" and "Cuts Like a Knife."

While there are chronological gaps here and there, the lesser hits will be missed only by the hardest-core fans. In fact, Adams has done an exceptional job of selecting a variety of his very best tunes that will appeal to most fans, from power ballads to arena rockers.

Surprisingly perhaps, Adams' songs hold up well with the passage of time, a reminder that pop music could be enjoyable even during the musically fragmented 1980s. For new fans and old alike, "So Far So Good" is a sure-hit winner.

**RATINGS:** four stars (★★★★), excellent; three stars (★★★), good; two stars (★★), fair; one star (★), poor, with ½ representing a higher, intermediate grade.