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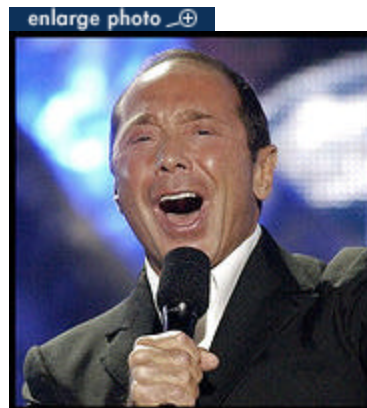
By Matt Schudel
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, July 13, 2005; Page C01

At first, I thought "Rock Swings" was a joke. After all, what could be more square than '50s teen idol and "My Way" composer Paul Anka doing songs by Van Halen, Nirvana and Billy Idol in a big-band format, with trumpets, strings and the full old-man treatment?

Then I listened to it. It took about four beats of Anka's tough, swaggering version of Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" to knock the smirk right off my face. Borrowing the exuberant flavor of Quincy Jones's mid-'60s arrangement of "The Best Is Yet to Come" for Frank Sinatra, Anka and his chief arranger, Randy Kerber, earn the right to strut.

As a jazz geek who has paid zero attention to pop music since, oh, about 1985, I can't judge how closely Anka's songs follow the originals. (I'd heard of exactly three of the 14 songs before.) But with Anka's old-school nightclub voice front and center, it's as if a lost Sinatra recording had been retrieved from some forgotten vault. Anka, who will turn 64 this month, even recorded it at the Capitol studio in Los Angeles where Sinatra did much of his greatest work in the 1950s.

The result is both a surprise hit and an album of terrific musicmaking that far exceeds anything you might expect. It's



Paul Anka's "Rock Swings" puts modern songs in a style that transcends kitsch. (By Kevoork Djansezian -- Associated Press)

RECORDINGS

Audio: Paul Anka's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit'

Audio: Paul Anka's 'Blackhole Sun'

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so fresh and different -- simultaneously old-fashioned and daringly new -- that you can't help marveling at the talent and chutzpah that made it happen.

The album has a nice mix of ballads and up-tempo swingers that might scarcely be recognizable to people who know the originals by the Pet Shop Boys, Spandau Ballet, Soundgarden and the rest. There are no electric guitars or keyboards powering Michael Jackson's "The Way You Make Me Feel," Oasis's "Wonderwall" or Van Halen's exhilarating "Jump." Instead, the sensibility here is pure big-band swing, with jazz rhythms ringing off the high-hat, a fat-sounding acoustic bass, textured sax sections purring out rich countermelodies and brash trumpets and trombones spiking the harmonic punch.

The two most surprising tracks are probably Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and "Blackhole Sun" by Soundgarden. Despite "Teen Spirit's" weird stream-of-consciousness lyrics ("a mulatto, an albino, a mosquito, my libido"), Anka and arranger John Clayton transform the grunge anthem into a jaunty finger-snapper. And after a moody intro, "Blackhole Sun" seems to be channeling Count Basie.

Anka performs R.E.M.'s ballad "Everybody Hurts" as the voice of experience, reimagines Billy Idol's "Eyes Without a Face" with a lush, almost overripe beauty, and invigorates Lionel Richie's "Hello" with an insinuating mystery that almost makes it sound like a James Bond theme. About the only thing that doesn't work is Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven," which is too close to the original.

Besides the integrity of Anka's concept, the other thing this album reveals, of course, is that beneath all the guitars, gimmicks and attitude, a lot of great tunes are still being written. It wouldn't surprise me if "Rock Swings" became a one-of-a-kind classic. It's a lot more than kitschy retro fun: It's smart, serious, inspired and, in its way, fearlessly hip.

Visit <http://www.washingtonpost.com/style> to listen to audio clips from Paul Anka's new CD, "Rock Swings."

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