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Anka swingin' to Nirvana? Smells like midlife spirit

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On "Rock Swings," old-school entertainer Paul Anka has a go at latter-day tunes by Nirvana, R.E.M. and Bon Jovi, among other unlikely sources.

And more, much more than this, Anka does them his way.

"A great song is a great song," he says during a recent telephone interview from Las Vegas.

Anka wasn't performing there -- just catching his breath between appearances to promote his new album. It boasts big-band arrangements of hits by the likes of Oasis ("Wonderwall"), Van Halen ("Jump") and Billy Idol ("Eyes Without a Face").

The CD entered Billboard's album chart at No. 120, the highest chart debut in nearly three decades for Anka. He scored his last Top 10 single in 1975 with the Kodak jingle "Times of Your Life."

"Rock Swings" is a gas, pussycat, if you can get over the hump of "Why?"

"It's really, Why not?" " says Anka, 63. "Swing hasn't gone out of style. If you look around, you still see the interest today, even among a younger demographic."

Now we get it: This must be his version of that album Pat Boone put out a few years ago, the one with the kitschy covers of "Crazy Train" and "Stairway to Heaven." Right?

No! No! No!

"Pat did a whole sendup," Anka says. "He wore the leather. From the get-go, it was humorous.

"This is a totally serious project, from my point of view. The message is: Let these songs live in another fashion.

"We got the best studio -- Capitol Studios [in Los Angeles], where Sinatra did his things, where I did my things.

"Look at the musicians involved. There's nothing humorous about this."

The album's supporting cast includes Grammy-winning recording engineer Al Schmitt and veteran arrangers John Clayton, Randy Kerber and Patrick Williams.

Anka, a Canadian of Lebanese descent, was a teen idol in the 1950s. His No. 1 smash "Diana" was the first of more than 30 Top 40 hits.

He returned to the top of the charts in the '70s with "(You're) Having My Baby."

As a songwriter, his credits include Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" theme and one of Frank Sinatra's signature tunes, "My Way," which Anka adapted from a French song.

He neatly ties past and present together on his new disc's opening cut, a brassy romp through Bon Jovi's "It's My Life."

"Frank said it, I did it my way," Anka sings.

With Rod Stewart and other rockers having their way lately with the Great American Songbook, does "Rock Swings" represent Anka's revenge?

"It's not revenge," he says. "It's the other side of the coin."

If Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols could snarl "My Way," perhaps turnabout is fair play as the velveteen-voiced Anka croons everything from R.E.M.'s "Everybody Hurts" to Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun."

The latter song was a snap to record, Anka says.

"I decided on starting it as a ballad and then swinging it, because both treatments work," he says. "It's a wonderful song with a great lyric."

Of the 14 tracks on "Rock Swings," the Cure's "Lovecats" was the trickiest to pull off.

Anka says.

He also took stabs at U2's "One," Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" and ex-Clevelander Marc Cohn's "Walking in Memphis." Anka couldn't get those tunes to swing to his satisfaction, however, so they didn't make the final cut.

On the other hand, he couldn't be happier with his finger-snapping, martini-guzzling take on Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit."

Ex-Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl recently relayed his approval for Anka's retro-flavored update of the grunge anthem.

"He was blown away by it," Anka says. "He totally respects what we've done with it."

In other words: Here we are now -- entertain us, Daddy-O.

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