



Al Stewart: A Reticent Recording Artist

Larry Jaffee, *Record Collector*, February 2006

AL STEWART'S four-decade career recently was capsulated by a 5-CD boxed set *Just Yesterday* from EMI. His first four UK albums on CBS never were released in the U.S. with sideman help the likes of Jimmy Page, Richard Thompson and Rick Wakeman. But his next three albums, including the vastly successful 1976 album *Year of the Cat* on the U.S. indie Janus permanently placed Stewart in the annals of pop music.

Stewart continued his chart success with his next label, Arista Records, with *Time Passages*, but thereafter the hits stop coming and he was once again a recording nomad, trying his luck with various short-lived U.S. and U.K. independent labels, including Passport, Enigma, Mesa, Permanent (sic), and Miramar. His history with labels is something out of Spinal Tap.

Besides the boxed set, Stewart had a criminally overlooked album in 2005, *A Beach Full of Shells*, on U.S. indie label Appleseed, his first studio release since 2000's *Down in the Cellar*.

"They (labels) tend to come and go sometimes before I even can get a record out," said Stewart in a telephone interview, citing Miramar going bankrupt just as it was to release *Down in the Cellar*. A fellow wine connoisseur helped underwrite the recording of *A Beach Full of Shells*, which was licensed by Appleseed. Nevertheless, Stewart remains an FM radio staple, and a day does not go by without some U.S. station playing 'Year of the Cat,' 'Time Passages' and 'Song on the Radio'.

Through the foresight of a former manager, Stewart owns the masters to his back catalog, which now is in the capable auspices of Rhino in the U.S. and EMI in the U.K. as a result of five-year licensing deals with the musician – an arrangement that he admitted is advantageous for him. Warner reissue label Rhino in 2004 released remastered versions of his two best-selling albums and detailed liner notes, as well as a greatest hits CD. And EMI has kept in print virtually his entire back catalog, as well as regularly issuing compilations in Europe.

"I've never made much money from my records. What I like to do is perform live. It's my reason for being in this business," said Stewart, who recently turned 60 and regularly plays gigs on both sides of the Atlantic. An independently produced DVD, *Live at Grace Cathedral* of a November 2001 concert he gave in San Francisco in a majestic church setting quickly sold out its run of 1,000 units following a U.K. tour. "The nature of the business is that people want some sort of keepsake at the end of the show, or you need to put out a record every now and then to give you some sort of legitimacy," said Stewart, who gave his blessing to the DVD, but seems somewhat ambivalent about its low-budget production. "I don't think of it as a proper DVD. I've seen DVDs that have been technically well produced," he said, citing AIX Records' *Guitar Noir* by Laurence Juber, who has produced three of Stewart's albums (including the forthcoming one) and has occasionally performed with him. *Live At Grace Cathedral* is "basically someone aiming a camera at the show. As such, it's a nice home movie."

Neville Judd, who runs the fan club, co-produced the DVD and occasionally serves as Stewart's tour manager. Having paid the

necessary music publishing royalties for the DVD, Judd is now contemplating a retail distribution deal for the DVD. As a way to reward Stewart's loyal followers, his active fan club of approximately 4,500 individuals recently received by mail and e-mail a catalogue of unreleased performances, live and in the studio, available for purchase. A couple hundred double CD-Rs were sold on a British tour for £20 apiece, also serving as the "keepsake" mentioned by Stewart, who's "not real big on preserving things, but I know lots of people are. I like art to be somewhat ephemeral in nature. But if they enjoy it, I don't mind it at all."

Judd duplicates the CD-Rs one at a time off his computer. He views the mail order catalog mainly as a payback to the fans and not necessarily a money-making venture. The CDs help pay for the running of the fan club, which is free to members. Most of all, it's time-consuming given the manual nature of the duplication.

"We know of 120 hardcore fans who will buy everything that we offer," said Judd, the author of Stewart's official biography, subtitled *The True Life Adventures of a Folk Rock Troubadour* which was published by Helter Skelter, in both hard cover and paper versions. Stewart's own record collecting habits are somewhat tame, although he's searching for a CD reissue of a favourite combo while he was a teen, The Dowlands (Britain's answer to the Everly Brothers), and it's driving him mad.

Of Stewart's back catalog, there are a few titles that seem to be perfect for Rhino Handmade, the Internet-only imprint that reissues limited CD editions up to 5,000 units of rare albums, based on a recent visit to the Gemm.com (Global Electronic Music Marketplace) auction/clearinghouse website for music collectors. Among GEMM's hundreds of listings for the musician include: Stewart's first album in 1967, *Bedsitter Images* for \$242.17; a now out-of-print, Razor & Tie U.S. reissue CD of his 1980 album *24 Carrots* is selling for \$123.99; a 1982 Spanish pressing of his *Love Chronicles*, which was proclaimed in Britain as the Best Folk Album of 1969 by U.K. music paper *Melody Maker* (released on Epic for about a week in the U.S.), is selling for

\$110; and a Mobile Fidelity CD version of *Year of the Cat* album is selling for \$138.99, while a UK vinyl pressing of the same album is going for \$174.34.

As with wine, of which he is a connoisseur, Stewart believes "anything with perceived quality and the demand exceeds the supply is going to go up in value no matter what it is. The perfect example of this is my first single, 'The Elf', of which only 500 were pressed and was released on Decca in 1966. One of those I know for a fact sold for \$750." Stewart, ever the reluctant recording artist, is not preoccupied with others profiting from his studio output. "Even though I've done 17 albums, I've done most of them at gunpoint. I said 30 years ago in an interview I would never make records. People would come to my live shows and go home with a tape of the show [without paying for it]. I don't like being in studios. I don't like the process of making records, and I don't like the business dealings," he laughed.

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