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Music from Elvis, Ray and Sugar Ray

by [Lloyd Carroll](#), Chronicle Contributor

09/03/2009

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Elvis Presley "From Elvis in Memphis" (RCA/Legacy)

1969 was a tumultuous year in pop music. The Woodstock Festival instantly became an iconic part of American culture. The Beatles were on the verge of disbanding. The conventional wisdom was that Elvis Presley, still the world's most famous rock star, had basically forsaken music in order to make films that were artistically mediocre but nonetheless very profitable for Hollywood studios.

As the 60s were drawing to a close, Elvis decided to rededicate himself to recording. He returned to Memphis, the city he grew up in but had not cut a record since RCA had purchased his contract from Sun Records some 15 years earlier.

Prior to 1969, the last memorable single that Elvis released was "Viva Las Vegas," the theme song from one of his best films with Ann-Margret. Released at the height of the British Invasion in the spring of 1964, the song struggled to make it into the Billboard Top 40 as radio programmers were giving Elvis the cold shoulder.

It is a vast understatement to say that Elvis had eclectic taste in choosing material to record for his return home. He relied on two young Nashville songwriters who were on the verge of establishing recording careers of their own. Mac Davis supplied the preachy "In The Ghetto" as well as a tearjerker about divorce, "Don't Cry, Daddy," while Eddie Rabbitt penned the magnificent "Kentucky Rain," a song in which Elvis traipses all over the Bluegrass state, searching for the girl who got away.

He even recorded a pair of songs written by some well-known New Yorkers, "And The Grass Won't Pay No Mind" by Neil Diamond and "Any Day Now," from Forest Hills High School alum, Burt Bacharach that was a hit eight years earlier for soul singer Chuck Jackson.

The high point of his time in Memphis remains "Suspicious Minds," a song composed by Mark James who generally let BJ Thomas get first crack at recording his tunes. Thomas actually had recorded a version of "Suspicious Minds" earlier but it remained an obscure album track. While Elvis pours his heart into the lyrics about a guy trying to convince his significant other that he has always been faithful, the magic of the song comes from its strong chorus and brassy orchestration that fades in and out.

"From Elvis In Memphis" truly makes you wonder if Elvis could have had yet another comeback in him had he taken better care of himself.

Ray Charles "Genius: The Ultimate Collection" (Concord)

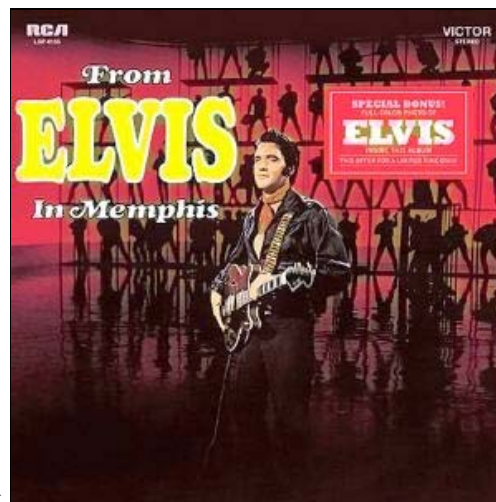
This single disc compendium of the late Ray Charles' best known songs lives up to its title as Concord Records has done a terrific job of mining material from Ray's tenure at both Atlantic Records in the 1950s and ABC Records in the 1960s. From Atlantic we get "What'd I Say" and "I've Got A Woman," while from ABC we are treated to "Georgia On My Mind," "Let's Go Get Stoned," and two songs where women clearly get the better of him, "Unchain My Heart" and "Hit The Road, Jack."

Ray knew how to put a soulful spin on country classics. His renditions of "Crying Time," "Busted," "You Don't Know Me" and "I Can't Stop Loving You" are superior and far better known than the originals by Buck Owens, Harlan Howard, Eddy Arnold and Don Gibson, respectively. All are in the Country Music Hall of Fame so that is certainly saying something.

Sugar Ray "Music For Cougars" (Pulse)

Sugar Ray reminds me in many way of a latter day Grass Roots in that they always have had a knack for making catchy singles as "Fly," "When It's Over," "Every Morning," and the very romantic "Someday," yet have never gotten the respect of snooty music critics.

The quintet, led by singer-composer Mark McGrath, these days known better for his recent hosting stint on the nightly syndicated TV show "Extra," has always had a strong following with older women. That's why McGrath and his bandmates humorously titled their new album, the first in five years, "Music For Cougars."



Despite their long break from the studio, Sugar Ray has not lost their ability to record hummable tunes. “Love 101,” “Last Days,” “Going Nowhere,” “When We Were Young” and “Rainbow,” whose philosophical tag line is “that to see rainbows, you got to sit through a little rain” should please their considerable fan base.

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