Twangs for the Memory

Middle Earth: The Soundtrack of London’s Legendary Psychedelic Club 1967-69 (3CD, Cherry Red)Jingle Jangle Morning: The 1960s Folk Rock Explosion (3CD, Cherry Red)Motor City is Burning: A Michigan Anthology 1965-1972 (3CD, Cherry Red)

Themed anthologies are great except when there is stuff you don’t want to hear on them, and sometimes when they start to bleed in to each other. The bleed here is of course between folk rock and Middle Earth, and I guess a bit between Michigan and Middle Earth. The real shocker is how much awful slightly twanging pop was around in the 60s before rock really arrived as we know it.

The Middle Earth club was before my time, but its reputation lives on. The first CD here starts with classic stuff from Soft Machine, Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger and the Trinity, Fairport Convention and Arthur Brown; later there’s the Bonzos and Third Ear Band, albeit playing an excruciating raga; and in between there’s twee stuff from the likes of Picadilly Line, Blossom Toes and one of Bowie’s earlier band outings, The Riot Squad.

This right old mix is repeated on the second CD: Traffic, the Incredible String Band, Spooky Tooth, Tim Rose, Chris McGregor Septet, Captain Beefheart and Tim Buckley? Good. Ten Years After, the Pretty Things, the Yardbirds and the Deviants? OK. The rest? I’ll give it a miss. On CD3 it’s Yes, the Byrds, Edgar Broughton, Jefferson Airplane and the Who for me. It reminds me why I never liked compilations or mixtapes, still don’t really. I have the good stuff already (those bands listed above) and can’t be bothered with the rest.

Jingle Jangle Morning is my least favourite of the three compilations here. Whilst there are songs from the likes of the Youngbloods, Buffalo Springfield, Bob Dylan, Nico and Barry McGuire, all musicians I like, in the main it really is jingle-jangle territory; far too twee for me. I guess that I like a bit more rock in my folk-rock than is on offer here. I mean the Byrds are at their best stretching out ‘Eight Miles High’ live, not the two-and-a-half-minutes of ‘Mr Tambourine Man’; and however good ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’ is, and it is, it’s a bit of an obvious choice for his Bobness.

My favourite here is Motor City is Burning although that too starts off a bit jangly and takes a while to warm up. CD2 is where what I expected kicks in, and the ‘beat’ guitars are left behind in favour of some abandonment from the likes of the Stooges, Alice Cooper and MC5. There are some great new names here, too: The Glass Sun and Frijid Pink, for instance. CD3 spreads its wings a little bit too wide for me, not because I dislike funk and soul but because it doesn’t seem to fit the idea of burning music or a city on fire! John Lee Hooker has, of course, got the blues down pat, but even Parliament sound thin and weedy here.

But I guess it’s me not the compilations. I could (and might) reduce each of them to a single CD to play in the car, but I imagine they are supposed to be wide ranging gatherings-up and definitive (or maybe tentative) explorations of three very different ‘scenes’. And to be fair, the booklets are full of information, biographies and photos that help contextualise and reconsider their subjects. If you can take the bad with the good, or have a handy remote control with a ‘skip’ button, then you will probably enjoy all three of these box sets, so ignore my mumbling.

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