

JERRY BUTLER: 'The Ice Man Cometh' (Mercury/Elemental)

Written by Charles Waring

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Jerry Butler's decision to leave The Impressions in 1958 to pursue a solo career after a short spell with the fledgling Chicago soul group was vindicated when he topped the US R&B charts in 1960 with 'He Will Break Your Heart.' Throughout the remainder of the 1960s, the Mississippi-born singer with the honeyed baritone voice proved a consistent hit-maker, racking up a raft of charting singles, initially for Vee-Jay and from 1967 for Mercury. But his second No. 1 single proved elusive until late 1968 when Mercury released the infectious 'Hey Western Union Man,' written and helmed by rising Philly production team, Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff. As well as topping the charts, 'Hey Western Union Man' ushered in a new, urbane and sophisticated, soul style and established the blueprint for Gamble & Huff's Philadelphia sound. The track was the lead off song on Butler's groundbreaking third LP for Mercury, 'The Ice Man Cometh,' which is now remastered and reissued as a limited edition CD and 180 gram LP by Elemental.

'The Ice Man Cometh' is one of soul music's all time essential records: a landmark LP that should be revered alongside the likes of Marvin Gaye's 'What's Going On,' Aretha Franklin's 'I Never Loved A Man The Way I Love You,' Al Green's 'Let's Stay Together,' and Curtis Mayfield's 'Superfly.' The 11-song set also contained Butler's third and final US R&B No. 1, the anthemic 'Only The Strong Survive,' which like 'Hey Western Union Man' was co-written by the singer with Gamble & Huff, as was the Top 5 US smash, 'Never Give You Up.' Other singles from the album, though they were less successful, were the brassy dancer, 'Lost,' and the string-drenched impassioned beat ballad 'Are You Happy.' Orchestral strings also feature prominently on the gospel-inflected 'I Stop Heaven,' a heartbreak tale called 'Go Away - Find Yourself,' and the mid-tempo, '(Strange) I Still Love You,' where female background singer counterpoint Butler's pleading lead vocal. Interestingly, the album's arrangers include Thom Bell and Bobby Martin, who would both go on to play an important role in the genesis of the Philadelphia sound, which would come to dominate soul music in the 1970s.

Connoisseurs of '60s - or indeed Philadelphia - soul music will probably already own this in one form or another, but if it's not in your collection, you should acquire this album right now. You won't be disappointed. And it just might change your life...

(CW) 5/5

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