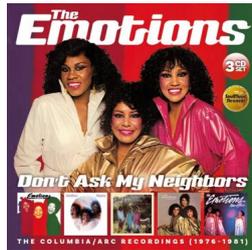


THE EMOTIONS: 'Don't Ask My Neighbors: The Columbia/Arc Recordings 1976-1981' (SoulMusic Records)

Written by Charles Waring

Wednesday, 14 August 2019 13:14 - Last Updated Friday, 16 August 2019 11:10



Although it wasn't until the late '70s when The Emotions hit the radar of mainstream record buyers - following their No. 1 US hit, 'Best Of My Love,' in 1977 and their memorable appearance on Earth, Wind & Fire's big disco anthem, 'Boogie Wonderland' a year later - the three Hutchinson sisters were already an established and successful R&B act with a string of hits to their name. Originally from Chicago, they started out as a family gospel trio called the Heavenly Sunbeams before becoming The Emotions in the late 60s. After a couple of 45s for local Windy City indie labels, they signed to Stax Records' Volt subsidiary in 1969 and scored a hit with the sensational single, 'So I Can Love You,' a big US R&B and pop hit. But it was later at Columbia (and its subsidiary, Arc) between 1976 and 1981 where the soulful trio really hit their stride and it is that fertile period which is documented by this fabulous new 3-CD anthology.

It contains all five of the siblings Columbia LPs - 'Flowers,' 'Rejoice,' 'Sunbeam,' 'Come Into Our World,' and 'New Affair' - plus a raft of bonus cuts, which include 12-inch mixes, non-album B-sides and single edits. With insightful liner notes by compiler, David Nathan, it all adds up to an essential package that no self-respecting soul music fan should be without.

'Flowers,' released in 1976, was the sisters debut LP for Columbia. Helmed by fellow Chicagoan, Earth Wind & Fire's Maurice White, it certainly upped the production ante compared with the group's earlier Stax/Volt albums. It's lead off cut, 'I Don't Want To Lose Your Love,' with its infectious refrain and punchy horn lines, was a Top 20 US R&B hit. Other great cuts from that set are 'Flowers,' 'No Plans For Tomorrow' and a short a cappella vocal piece, 'We Go Through Changes,' which highlights the beauty of the Hutchinson sisters' ethereal harmonies.

It was '77's 'Rejoice,' though, which is widely regarded as The Emotions' magnum opus. It's a glorious amalgam of soul, funk, and gospel flavours and although the catchy, dance-oriented 'Best Of My Love' gave the group their first and only No. 1 single, there were even better songs to be found on the album: such as the mesmerising Skip Scarborough-penned ballad 'Don't Ask My Neighbor,' the super-sanctified groove ballad 'Blessed,' and the album's exultant title cut.

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For this writer, '78's 'Sunbeam' didn't quite reach the same high level as their first two Columbia albums despite having Maurice White again behind the mixing board. It did have some good moments, though, like the upbeat 'Smile' and the string-swept Skip Scarborough ballad, 'Walking The Line,' stylistically a close relation of the previous year's 'Don't Ask My Neighbor.'

1979's 'Come Into Our World,' their debut for Maurice White's Arc imprint, possessed more of a palpable disco influence, reflected by the driving, lushly-orchestrated title song complete with popping syn drums and the carefree 'I Should Be Dancing.' It contained some strong ballads, too, like the David Foster-co-written 'On & On' and the funky groove, 'Layed Back.'

The Emotions' final Columbia/Arc album, 'New Affair,' from 1981, was the least successful of their projects under the aegis of Maurice White but don't let that put you off. It's a little gem of an album featuring a blend of strong dance material and ballads. Pick of the bunch are the ace dancer, 'Love Lies,' and the silky, jazz-infused funk of 'There'll Never Be Another Moment,' the latter the only track produced by White (the rest were helmed by Billy Meyers plus Wayne Vaughn together with his wife, Emotion's member, Wanda Vaughn).

'New Affair' appears on CD 3 of the compilation, which is filled out with bonus material: ranging from a 12-inch mix of 'Boogie Wonderland,' four single edits, and best of all, two single flip sides ('My Baby Dance' and 'Changes'), which, as far as I'm aware, have never been issued on CD before. This compilation, then, offers us a definitive portrait of The Emotions at their peak and as such, it's not to be missed. (*'Don't Ask My Neighbors' is released on August 23rd*).

(CW) 4/5