Joe Cocker - With A Little Help From My Friends (1969)

Joe Cocker's debut album holds up extraordinarily well across four decades, the singer's performance bolstered by some very sharp playing, not only by his established sideman/collaborator Chris Stainton, but also some top-notch session musicians, among them drummer Clem Cattini, Steve Winwood on organ, and guitarists Jimmy Page and Albert Lee, all sitting in. It's Cocker's voice, a soulful rasp of an instrument backed up by Madeline Bell, Sunny Weetman and Rossetta Hightower that carries this album and makes "Change in Louise,"
"Feeling Alright," "Just Like a Woman," "I Shall Be Released," and even "Bye Bye Blackbird" into profound listening experiences. But the surprises in the arrangements, tempo, and approaches taken help make this an exceptional album. Tracks like "Just Like a Woman," with its soaring gospel organ above a lean textured acoustic and light electric accompaniment, and the guitar-dominated rendition of "Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood" -- the formal debut of the Grease Band on record -- all help make this an exceptional listening experience. The 1999 A&M reissue not only includes new notes and audiophile-quality sound, but also a pair of bonus tracks, the previously unanthologized B-sides "The New Age of Lily" and "Something Coming On," deserved better than the obscurity in which they previously dwelt. ---Bruce Eder, Rovi

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