

Boxed sets begin to colonize the aisles, and Christmas is in the air.

BY ADAM BLOCK



There is something ominous about boxed sets. Don't they look like little coffins for dead artists or the embalmed-but-still-breathing? Often weighed down with tedious outtakes added to thin catalogs, the suckers have the heft of a tombstone. As these cash-hungry zombies begin to colonize the aisles of record stores, I can smell Christmas in the air.

When Barbra Streisand rushed out *Just for the Record* (CBS), I figured the staggering audio hope chest (94 tracks, 67 previously unreleased, with a lavish 92-page booklet annotated by Babs herself) was the *Terminator 2* of boxed sets, done up in Laura Ashley drag. Wrong.

The set opens with the singer at age 13 on an acetate of "You'll Never Know" and concludes, 33 years later, with her accompanying the same track. In between she unearths tapes of her first TV appearances, a 1962 club set, a home recording of her mother singing "Secondhand Rose," and nervy duets with both Ray Charles and Judy Garland.

Avoiding studio cuts, Streisand shows herself claiming that imperious voice for her own ends. As the set hits the '70s and '80s, though, rarities are displaced by oddities: the Israeli national anthem? Three demos for *Yentl*? But the early, casual recordings capture Streisand at her least histrionic and most disarming—and this career chronicle brilliantly demonstrates how she invented herself, with as much aplomb and determination as Madonna, back when the odds against an independent woman were even greater.

In the case of Billie Holiday, those odds proved insurmountable. That's wrenchingly documented in three new retrospectives. Most satisfying by far is *The Legacy (1933-1958)* (Columbia), whose 70 performances over three CDs capture Holiday at

the peak of her form. *The Decca Recordings* (MCA) from 1944 to 1950 cast her with strings and, ultimately, choruses. Only three cuts ("Lover Man," "Good Morning Heartache," and "My Man") out of 50 (with scads of outtakes) are definitive. *Lady in Autumn: The Best of the Verve Years* (Verve) charts Holiday's further decline, over 35 cuts, from 1946 to 1954. Two cuts from 1958 that close the Columbia disc mark the toll the years had taken. Holiday died in 1959 at the age of 46.

Bessie Smith was only 43 when she died in a car accident in 1937. Her career had effectively ended by the time Holiday started recording, but between 1923 and 1933, she cut 160 sides that left an indelible mark on pop music, with emotionally naked performances that set a benchmark for singers like Janis Joplin and Aretha Franklin.

CBS is reissuing Smith's entire catalog, and with *The Complete Recordings, Vol. 2* (Columbia) you can sample 37 sides from 1924 and 1925 as she began to lead blues toward jazz, with accompanists Louis Armstrong and Coleman Hawkins. Chris Albertson's excellent companion essay notes that after Smith's delicious duet with Clara Smith on "My Man's Blues," the two ended their friendship in a public fistfight—over another woman. Smith sings like she packed a mean punch.

Ray Charles sings the way Muhammad Ali boxed in his prime. His three-CD set, *The Birth of Soul* (Atlantic), finds him fusing gospel with rhythm and blues (the sacred and the carnal) across 52 landmark tracks cut from 1952 to 1959. Robert Palmer's luminous biographical essay helps make this box indispensable.

One of rock's most ebullient voices is working overtime on Fats Domino's *They Call Me the Fat Man/The Legendary Imperial Recordings* (EMI). The four-CD collection culls 100 cuts from a 260-song catalog (recorded between 1949 and 1962) and annotates the New Orleans crooner's career in an 84-page booklet.

Startime (Polygram) gives James Brown his due with a 72-song set that tracks the apparition from his chitlin-circuit showstopper "Please, Please, Please" to his duet



Barbra Streisand

A staggering audio hope chest

with rapper Afrika Bambaataa on "Unity." A 69-page booklet offers three essays on the genius behind "The Popcorn."

The British Invasion: History of British Rock, Vols. 1-9 (Rhino) offers 180 cuts recorded between 1964 and 1969 by the shock troops who accompanied the Beatles and the Rolling Stones across the Atlantic. The package lovingly excavates classics and curiosities and comes with a photo-laden history book, *Rock Explosion*.

At 104 cuts, *The Patsy Cline Collection* (MCA) overruns Streisand's by ten tunes (in covering a career that spanned only nine years). It's a tribute to both Cline and her packagers that there's no filler here. Despite the presence of ten unreleased cuts, only one song, the poignant "Leaving on Your Mind," shows up twice—once in a live radio transcription just before her death.

Cline was Nashville's greatest female singer, a fearless interpreter who made standards her own. This meticulous package with a 63-page illustrated biography (the gowns are fabulous) is a tribute that does her talents justice. Some folks would gladly buy the box just to hear Cline sing "Tennessee Waltz" for the first time. ▼

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