

On music

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [January 26, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Beatles Stereo Box Set

the Beatles
EMI



Time Stands Still

Chris Smither
Signature Sounds



Live

Smokie Norful

EMI Gospel



Pale Imperfect Diamond

Cedar Hill Refugees

Effigy



Outside World

The Silence
Wonderbox



My Trampoline

Peter Himmelman
Minivan/Frinny

It's been some time since I donned my best professional earbuds to focus on a question of audio fidelity. But the band in question is the Beatles and the discs part of an ambitious remastering of the band's catalog. Remastered Beatles material is as controversial as restoring a DaVinci—does the cleanup forever change the way the art will be perceived?

Of course it does. But in this case, even the \$260 16-disc stereo box set (plus DVD) and \$299 13-disc mono box set won't give you a definitive listening experience. Remastering Beatles material for ordinary CD is the sonic equivalent of taking that improved fidelity and clarity and then squeezing it into a straw. Compare that to Super Audio CDs, developed in 1999 but still waiting to catch on. Super Audio

represents a huge improvement in quality that you don't have to be a hi-fi geek to notice: it sounds amazing, as if you're sitting in the Studio 2 control room with the Fabs, listening to the playback of *Revolver*.

As for these remastered Beatles CDs, while no match for a great vinyl copy of your favorite album, they do yield a boost in quality. The rock tunes in particular benefit from all the sonic flossing. On "I'm Down," the ambient reverb cushioning Paul McCartney's voice gleams, and everything growling in the rhythm shakes and shimmies with added snarl. "Drive My Car" also sounds as if remixed afresh, a formerly indistinguishable piano riff popping out on the song's fadeout.

Yet the remastering isn't always a net gain. "And Your Bird Can Sing," while clearer in the upper register, doesn't sound as cohesive in its newly minted form. Likewise, on "I Am the Walrus," McCartney's bass just doesn't break out of the gate the way it does on previous versions. In the audio realm, cleaner doesn't always equal better.

As an audio engineer, critic and Beatles lover, I'd suggest not spending money on these box sets. Consider that in the remastering, the Beatles brain trust prepared the new results for a possible Blu-Ray audio release. Once these versions become available, I expect they'll merit replacing every disc in your catalog. Until then, I'll enjoy the Beatles recordings I currently own, especially the bootlegs—most of which are of marginal sound quality yet reveal incredible musical treats. In the final analysis, the songs always matter far more than sonic purity.

Chris Smither picks and growls with the best of them. Here he mixes blues, folk and tinges of country to create a sepia-tone soundscape that makes for prime wintertime listening. The title track bounds with brushed snare, foot-tapping and jangling acoustic guitar arpeggios. It's a decided contrast to the electric tremolo blues of "Surprise, Surprise," which tackles religious doubt: "Save me just this once / I promise I will bow down to your will' / You waited for an answer / Surprise, surprise, you're waitin' still."

Smokie Norful isn't nearly as bombastic as Kirk Franklin, though he certainly loves to stretch out—each of the ten songs on this live disc clock in at more than five minutes. With a tight R&B band and smooth-singing choir, Norful maintains uplifting energy on tracks such as "I Will Bless the Lord," which is punctuated with wah-wah guitar and plentiful horn stabs. "Dear God" showcases Norful on piano, singing a striking hymn of praise: "The moments I thought I failed / I was reminded of your

nails / so I held on.”

John Carter Cash may have huge shoes to fill, but he’s also got a penchant for tackling challenging projects that would do his parents (Johnny Cash and June Carter Cash) proud. On *Diamond*, Cash gathers three dozen musicians and singers for a sprawling, exotic album that merges Uzbek sounds with American mountain music and swing. Guests run the gamut from Nashville studio whiz Marty Stuart to Tatar guitarist Enver zmaylov; songs such as “Oh, Bury Me Not” sound like Celtic music plucked from a distant dawn mist.

After plugging along in the Philadelphia music scene for better than a decade, The Silence continue to mature and develop as a trio. On *Outside World*, front man Evan McIntyre shows supple soulfulness in his voice that complements his guitar playing, a mix of anthemic college rock and lean blues styles. The songs show the band’s penchant for searching, stretching and questioning, as on “One Life”: “I believe in saving souls / In fact, I’m working on my own.”

The best kids music woos adults too, and singer-songwriter Peter Himmelman nails it on this infectious disc. The bouncy-beat opener “Imagination” celebrates how role play gets kids through dull days, while the title track unfurls a silly country-rock strut, studded with beefy saxes and girl-group backup vocals. Himmelman can also sound sweet, as on the piano-and-strings closer “Lullabye with Baseball and Trains”: “It’s a wonderful feeling when my momma holds me tight.”