

VARIOUS ARTISTS:

Message To Love: The Isle Of Wight Festival 1970

(Columbia/Legacy)

By Chip Stern

In its cinematic juxtaposition of chicken salad and chicken s**t, interspersed with snippets of "you are there" narrative color, *Message To Love: The Isle Of Wight Festival 1970* brings back memories of days when anything seemed plausible, let alone possible; when audiences would sit still for the wretched excesses of Emerson, Lake & Palmer (bludgeoning Dave Brubeck's polymetric classic "Blue Rondo A La Turk" into a series of Cossack fours), yet had to be chided into sitting still for Joni Mitchell's acoustic reveries; when audiences thought it was reasonable to expect Jimi Hendrix, the Who, the Doors and Bob Dylan on one bill--and could still be persuaded to dig something as blatantly experimental and open-ended as Miles Davis's thrilling pre-*Bitches Brew* band.

And yes, it's a free concert, man. (Read: three days of mud and colonic dysentery.) *Message To Love* offers ample evidence that the faux goodwill of Woodstock, so recently coined, was already spent. Incidents of audience boorishness abound, and peak moments include Kris Kristofferson musing on the possibility of gunfire, while Joni Mitchell flays the masses for behaving like tourists and one of the event's organizers rains curses upon the loutish freeloaders.

In between, well...let's just say that the festival format has always been a dubious concept at best, and the results here are wildly uneven. Dinosaur blues bands such as Free, Jethro Tull and Ten Years After--then newly-hatched raptors--acquit themselves indulgently at times, but with real spirit; Jim Morrison and the Doors are surprisingly tight and coherent given the unevenness of their live vintage, but artsy British bands such as the Moody Blues and Family fail to match the production values of their studio efforts. Then there's Jimi Hendrix, whose Isle Of Wight set has been documented on past releases. His entire final tour (save for a September 3 concert in Copenhagen) was a bummer, and herein the compilation's producers wisely cull two of his older chestnuts ("Foxy Lady" and "Voodoo Child [Slight Return]"), where Jimi's golden tone and muscle memory alone can deflect attention from the fact that Mitch Mitchell and Billy Cox are a mismatched rhythm section, and the guitarist--reduced to the role of a human jukebox--is clearly an unhappy camper.

But then there are the Who, standing heads and shoulders above everyone else when it comes to sound, energy, interplay and showmanship (their complete Isle of Wight set on Legacy is

highly recommended). Rounding out this journey on the plus side are rough but moving performances by what then constituted folkie royalty, including the aforementioned Mitchell and Kristofferson, as well as Leonard Cohen and Donovan (not to mention the breathtakingly bad John Sebastian and Tiny Tim). Joan Baez, representing an older folkie generation, is most affecting on an intimate reading of the Beatles' "Let It Be," while Bob Dylan turns in an inspired reading of his epic "Desolation Row" in a non-performance highlight. While *Message To Love* is certainly an interesting period piece, the festival format does not cohere as an event, and fans of the individual bands would be better served by their own separate live recordings.