

## AL GREEN

Anthology (The Right Stuff/Hi Records)

Rating: \*\*\*\*\*

By Richard C. Walls

Al Green is one of those popular music figures who in the '90s is much praised and little heard. Although many agree that he's one of the greatest soul singers ever, his period of widest commercial success lasted just a few years in the early '70s. What's kept Green from James Brown- or George Clinton-like sustained stardom, is that he's remained true to his singular brand of gospel-inflected soul music, oblivious to the trends and winds of disco, funk and rap. *Anthology* is a four-disc, 61-track boxed set of Green at the peak of his powers, and testimony to the timelessness of his personal vision.

Green's voice is an instrument of rare subtlety, not as raw as Brown's or as brutal as Otis Reddings', not as macho as Wilson Pickett's or as mellow as Sam Cooke's, but still capable at times of surpassing them all in intensity. Green started out as a gospel singer and, after his popular success, ended up as one. The richly ambiguous pleasure of his voice is the pained mellifluousness of someone passing through the world of sensation, aware that his life is bracketed by higher ground. There's more than a little testifying in Green's love songs and more than a little sex in his sermons.

*Anthology* covers the basics as well as throwing in the requisite rarities, beginning with a few rough cuts Green made in '67 before moving on to the first hits. One of the most effective of the early cuts is a cover of the Doors' "Light My Fire" with the singer removing the song from its original psychedelic/gothic mode and turning it into a stripped-down bluesy plea with unexpected touches of playfulness (he seems especially tickled by some of Morrison's more pretentious lyrics).

Green's most popular song, '72's "Let's Stay Together" is presented in two versions, the original studio one and also as part of a medley (the other song is the Carpenter's "We've Only Just Begun," a primo example of Green's transforming powers) which was taped for a TV show. These TV appearances--there are eight of them here--as well as nine documentary-like excerpts from the movie *Gospel According To Al Green*, make up the bulk of the box's "extra enticements."

The headiest moments on the box are when Green's religious/secular mix meshes into something wholly his own, e.g., "Jesus Is Waiting," with its explicit gospel lyrics set

