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A swing and a hit

Paul Anka is buoyed by the buzz over his new disc of rock covers

Patrick Langston

The Ottawa Citizen

June 7, 2005

You'd think that after almost 50 years in show biz, Paul Anka wouldn't be ruffled by anything.

But the response to his audacious new album, *Rock Swings* -- which hit Canadian stores last week and lands in the United States today -- has clearly left the Ottawa-born Vegas crooner a tad bemused, not to mention breathless.

"I haven't stopped," he says by telephone from Toronto. "I hit Toronto, then Montreal. I must have done 22 interviews yesterday. Back on the plane. I'm doing Bravo in an hour."

Still on the to-do list, he

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CREDIT: Gordon Beck, The Montreal Gazette
Paul Anka is thrilled with the response to his new CD, *Rock Swings*, on which he gives a swing treatment to rock hits by Nirvana, Soundgarden and others.

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continues, is an exclusive by the New York Times, an appearance on Letterman, another on Howard Stern ... well, you get the picture.

The album that's sparked all the fuss features 14 pop-rock hits from the 1980s and '90s recast by Anka as bold, brassy swing arrangements.

Nirvana's Smells Like Teen Spirit. R.E.M.'s Everybody Hurts. Van Halen's Jump: Once the anthems of the grunge, alt-rock and metal sets, such tunes seem remarkably ill-suited to a balding 64-year-old who wears a tux to work. And, of course, lurking in popular music's closet are countless other crossover attempts, including Pat Boone's cringe-inducing 1997 heavy metal foray In A Metal Mood: No More Mr. Nice Guy.

"I had a sense that I had to do something different," says Anka as he recalls being approached by Sony a couple of years ago to record a new album.

What the world didn't need, he felt, was another Anka song, even if his 400-plus compositions -- from the early days' Put Your Head on My Shoulder to such lounge perennials as the Frank Sinatra hit My Way -- have put him on Easy Street.

Solution? Revisit what Anka calls the "standards of today," but give them some uptown spit and polish.

Risky, sure, but the guy has ever lacked for chutzpah.

At 16, Anka, suspecting that he was cut out for a bigger life than Ottawa could offer, started saving soup can labels for a contest whose first prize was a trip to New York City.

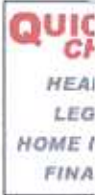
He won and auditioned his song Diana for ABC. Within a year, Diana was No. 1 and Anka, whose songs have now been performed more than 150 million times, hasn't looked back.

This time around, Anka, who was awarded a star on Canada's Walk of Fame ceremony last Sunday and will receive the Order of Canada on Friday, had more than just soup labels to work with.

He spent months combing through Billboard Top 10 songs and artists from the '80s and '90s, trying hundreds of tunes on for size.

"In my studio," he says, "I could sit with a drum machine and all my computer stuff and start to frame stuff, and you go, 'Wow! This works.' You change chords, you put some structure to it musically, and it just all started to happen."

When it came time to record, it was first-class all the way, with the big money, Anka says, spent on studio time and the musicians, including 40-odd



folks on horns, reeds and violins.


A wise investment.

The album bubbles with character, from the slinky insinuation of the Cure's Love Cats to the longing of Tears in Heaven, written by Eric Clapton after his four-year-old son's death.

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