

Anka offers classy versions of today's rockers

June 28, 2005

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It's tempting to lump Paul Anka's *Rock Swings* into the same trash heap as Pat Boone's *In a Metal Mood*: Washed-up '50s teen idols taking a whack at songs they have no business singing.

Yet there's one big difference. On his 1997 CD, Mr. Boone was aiming for kitsch and wound up with corn, but Mr. Anka is dead serious about his versions of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and Van Halen's "Jump."

"These are great songs," he recently told *The New York Times*. "Let's not pigeonhole them as rock songs."

And he never does, which is why the CD works so well. Instead of trolling for laughs, Mr. Anka recasts these '80s and '90s hits as classy Sinatra-style swing tunes.

Of course, Mr. Boone tried to swing, too, but he failed to connect. His wobbly big band version of "Smoke on the Water" is destined for a future *Golden Throats*.

But the 63-year-old Mr. Anka has the vocal chops to pull it off. In early hits such as "Diana" and "Puppy Love," he was infamous for his bombastic tenor. But he toned it down in the '60s and '70s and got in tune with jazz, writing *The Tonight Show* theme and co-writing the Sinatra hit "My Way."

On *Rock Swings*, he swaggers like Ol' Blue Eyes through Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," Oasis' "Wonderwall" and Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" (with its Chairman-inspired couplet "My heart's an open highway/Frank said it: I did it my way.")

But he's just as convincing on the ballads. He turns Spandau Ballet's "True" into something akin to Cole Porter and makes the Pet Shop Boys' "It's a Sin" smolder like an old Billie Holiday song.

Some of the lyrics will make you giggle – the "mosquito/libido" rhyme in "Smells Like Teen Spirit" or "We bite and scratch and scream all night" in the Cure's "Lovecats" (Robert Smith biting a lover seems normal, but the image of Mr. Anka doing it is disturbing). And even a crooner as sharp as Mr. Anka can't rise above the sap factor of Lionel Richie's "Hello" or Eric Clapton's "Tears in Heaven."

Such middle-of-the-road ballads are what you'd assume Paul Anka would be recording these days. But what drives *Rock Swings* is the thrill of the unexpected: When the voice behind the '74 schlock hit "(You're) Having My Baby" turns around and nails Soundgarden's "Black Hole Sun," now *that's* swinging, baby.