



Given the treatment that has been meted out to Van Morrison at the hands of the mainstream rock press over the years - he's been praised and vilified in equal measure - it's no wonder he's a reluctant interviewee and acutely suspicious of the media. After all, perhaps it's right he should feel hard done by, especially if he's been unfairly painted as some kind of eccentric, charmless, Victor Meldrew figure by people that he's never met or who don't actually know him as a person. The trouble is, so much has been written about Van Morrison's life and music by obsessive journalists trying to make a name for themselves that it's sometimes hard for us mere mortals to see past the myth-making hyperbole and see the real man. However, it's much easier to glimpse the real Van Morrison than you might think - just listen to his music and then you'll be able to sense someone who's committed to his art and fiercely passionate in the way he expresses himself. For these reasons, I believe Morrison is a bona fide soul singer - and perhaps the best 'blue-eyed' exponent of the genre, too. Certainly, in terms of his declamatory vocal style, it's possible to detect traces of Ray Charles, Solomon Burke and James Brown in there. Where Morrison's true genius lies, though, is the way he absorbs and filters those black music influences through his own personality and experiences to produce a unique style that has been captivating audiences since the mid-'60s when he rose to fame fronting the group, Them. The past forty years, this Belfast-born troubadour-turned-mystic has carved out a unique niche in popular music with what some observers have called 'Celtic Soul' - a seamless blend of soul, rhythm and blues, pop, country, jazz and folk. Novices seeking a career-spanning introduction to the man's music should seek out the recent Best Of compilation, 'Still On Top,' as it functions as an excellent entrée. However, those who wish to delve deeper should seriously investigate a new batch of remastered titles on Polydor. Almost all of Morrison's back catalogue titles - except his early Warner LPs, including the seminal 'Astral Weeks' and 'Moondance' - are due for reissue during the next year. Just out are seven titles - with 22 to follow - all remastered and expanded. The oldest is 'Tupelo Honey,' originally released on Mercury in 1971. Representative of his 'Caledonia Soul' period, to my mind it's one of Van Morrison's best works, almost up there with his perceived magnum opus 'Astral Weeks.' It's immensely varied, yet cohesive too. Mood-wise, the material ranges from upbeat numbers like 'Wild Night' - an energetic dance floor stomper driven by Stax-style horns - and the equally pulsating, passionate '(Straight To Your Heart) Like A Cannonball' to the beautifully tender love song, 'You're My Woman,' and the glorious title track (recently covered by jazz singer, Cassandra Wilson). There are two bonus tracks - an alternate version of 'Wild Night' and a live rendition of 'Down By The Riverside.' Some of Morrison's best-known numbers appear on the 1974 live double album, 'It's Too Late To Stop Now,' where the singer is accompanied by the Caledonia Soul Orchestra. The set include versions of his classic 'Brown Eyed Girl' (previously unissued) and 'Into The Mystic' plus lusty renditions of Them's 'Gloria' and 'Here Comes The Night.' It provides a vivid snapshot of Morrison's exciting live shows in the mid-'70s. Next up is 1978's 'Wavelength,' a strong album whose chief highlight is 'Kingdom Hall' (a live rendering of

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the song is one of two bonus cuts). A year later, Morrison unleashed 'Into The Music,' which is also expanded by two alternate takes. The key track here is 'And The Healing Has Begun.' 1984's 'A Sense Of Wonder' features the brilliant 'Crazy Jane On God' while 1989's impressive opus, 'Avalon Sunset,' features the UK smash, 'Whenever God Shines His Light,' an infectious duet with Cliff Richard and a wistful, quasi-poetic reminiscence called 'Coney Island.' The best cut, though, is the pensive romantic ballad, 'Have I Told You Lately That I Love You.' The final album in this first batch of reissues is 1999's 'Back On Top,' another terrific set that is distinguished by the incantatory 'Philosopher's Stone' and poignant string-steeped ballad, 'When The Leaves Come Falling Down.' Seven superb reissues then to choose from here - but for neophytes seeking an entrance into the huge and sometimes daunting Morrison canon, 'Tupelo Honey' is as good a starting place as any. Life-enriching music and then some... (CW) 4/5