

AUDIO FILES



George Michael

Listen Without Prejudice, Volume One

The latest album from repentant pin-up George Michael is both more consistent and less exciting than his breakthrough release *Faith*. The mood is mellow and downbeat, with a lot of strumming acoustic guitars and barely a synthesizer or mechanical drum beat

to be found. Except for the second single, "Freedom 90," there isn't a weak track.

The tone is set by the lead-off track and first single, "Praying For Time." This rather dour tune takes a look at the world and shakes its head in despair. It has some particularly well-written lyrics, such as, "So you scream from behind your door/ Say what's mine is mine and not yours/ I may have too much, but I'll take my chances/ 'Cause God's stopped keeping score." It also features soulful vocals by Michael buried under a burnished, glossy melody.

Unfortunately, it's followed by "Freedom 90," the weakest song here. "Freedom '90" has an elaborate and energetic arrangement that veers from funky drums to gospel to a repetitive keyboard line. But the lyrics bemoaning his pop stardom are too predictable and simple-minded to gain our sympathy. When his plea for artistic respect is that he hopes we realize "sometimes the

clothes do not make the man," it's obvious Michael still has a way to go.

But the middle of *Listen Without Prejudice* is some of his strongest music yet. He follows a controlled and convincing cover of Stevie Wonder's "They Won't Go When I Go" with an engaging mid-tempo tune called "Something To Save." It marries brisk guitars to a pair of cellos with charming, Beatle-esque effect.

Then comes the album's centerpiece, "Cowboys and Angels." This memorable ballad opens with a spare piano introduction, then fades easily into a gentle Latin beat. It's the story of a man trying to woo a lover he doesn't think will be interested. "It's the ones who resist that we most want to kiss/ Wouldn't you say?" he sadly sings at one point. After the beautiful melody has run its course, the song dissolves into a plaintive, striking saxophone solo by Andy Hamilton.

The album also has "Mother's Pride," a genuinely affecting track about a

mother who must watch her boy go off to war and almost certain death. So with all these good songs, what's the problem?

Well, it's clear Michael has moved beyond his idol Elton John in terms of talent. While John usually has settled for releasing mediocre albums with a few good singles, Michael won't. His songwriting has deepened and matured.

But while the minor songs here are better than the filler on *Faith*, almost none has the easy swing of an instant classic. That was something he seemed to achieve with ease on the '87 album, which boasted pop gems like "Kissing A Fool," "One More Try" and "Faith." Still, as long as Michael doesn't continue to confuse seriousness with a fear of catchy melodies, this shouldn't be a problem down the road. And that's exactly where his best music will be.

MICHAEL GILTZ