

If you think Elektra is just another record label, you don't know Jac

BY ROSS RAIHALA
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From Motown in the '60s to Merge today, the finest record labels have always been about more than a little logo nestled on the corner of an album sleeve. When they're at their best, record labels act as a sort of Good Housekeeping seal of approval for fans, a means to say that someone whose taste you already trust thinks this record is important.

The new box set "**Forever Changing: The Golden Age of Elektra Records 1963-1973**" offers five CDs of proof that, at least for the decade it surveys, the Los Angeles label was one of the country's finest.

Compiled by a trio of Brits in homage to the label's founder, **Jac Holzman**, the set chronicles Elektra's transformation from a small-but-potent folk outlet to a major player of the superstar '70s. And despite the dizzying range of styles — from jug bands to proto punkers — found in the 117 tracks, it's a fascinating and engaging trip.

Bob Dylan's shadow looms over the first of the roughly chronological discs. Holzman missed out on signing Minnesota's favorite son but made up for it by giving a home to plenty of other acts from Dylan's Greenwich Village era, including locals **Koerner, Ray and Glover**, who pop up on the box as both a trio and in various solo and group permutations. (As such, the set works well as musical accompaniment to Cyn Collins' recent "West Bank Boogie" book.)

But folk was just the beginning. Elektra's breakthrough rock acts, the **Doors** and **Love**, were among the first "alternative" bands, long before that name existed. The second and third discs in the box show the label's breathtaking surge forward during the latter half of the '60s, with an increasingly diverse roster that included singer/songwriters (**Tim Buckley, Tom Paxton**), bluegrass-based rockers (the **Dillards, Earth Opera**) and the **Stooges** and **MC5**, two of the most influential acts of the era.

While there are a few megahits sprinkled through the set — **Judy Collins'** "Both Sides Now," **Carly Simon's** "You're So Vain" — the primary focus is the weirder, lesser-known tracks, often from acts largely lost to time (**Cyrus Faryar, Farquahr**), as well as a few that later found fame under new names the **Byrds** (the Beefeaters) and **Blue Oyster Cult** (the Stalk-Forrest Group). More than 50 of the songs have never been issued on CD until now.

"Forever Changing" wraps up just as Elektra went corporate and entered the era of the **Eagles, Jackson Browne** and **Linda Ronstadt**. Even under new ownership, the label did eventually regain a hint of that early eclecticism — in the late '80s and early '90s, the roster included **Bjork** and the **Pixies** next to **Metallica, Missy Elliott** and **Phish**. But it's hard to imagine a box set drawn from a later decade of Elektra's life being any more vital and fascinating than this.

Formed by brothers Erik and Kent Widman, who moved from Sweden to Minneapolis in search of rock 'n' roll fame, **Love in October** specializes in bright, crunchy and melodic guitar rock that seems aimed at the youthful Motion City Soundtrack crowd, although older folks will likely appreciate the band's bountiful hooks. They debut their new EP, "Words of Sound," tonight at the Entry with **Catchpenny, Brakelazy** and **Grayshot** and then hit the road for a week's worth of Midwest gigs.

Another transplanted group — **the Debut**, originally from Madison, Wis. — plays its own CD-release show Saturday at the Varsity. Thanks to its confident, infectious alt-rock songs, the Debut is one of my local picks for '07. They band is smart, too, as this gig includes performances from three high-profile established acts: **White Light Riot**, the **Alarmists** and **Revolver Modele**.

Room for Gray — a local band that claims Bon Jovi, Tonic and the Goo Goo Dolls as influences — opens for **Pat McCurdy** on Saturday at the Fine Line. They've got their own new EP out, with plans for a full-length later this year. Early risers can also catch them live Saturday morning on KARE 11's morning news.

First Avenue's annual cover song contest moves into the Entry for two nights of shows Friday and Saturday. **The Busiest Bankruptcy Lawyers, Stingray Green, Terry Eason** and **Alicia Corbett** are among the dozen acts on the bill, which will run you \$6 for one night or \$10 for both.

And speaking of cover versions, a group of students from the St. Paul branch of the **School of Rock**, which opened last fall, makes its stage debut with early, all-ages gigs Friday and Saturday at Bunkers. They'll perform Pink Floyd's anti-authoritarian rock opera "The Wall." They don't need no education — except from the School of Rock?

Last year's road warriors the **Plastic Constellations** return to action with a pair of shows Friday at the Triple Rock, with support from **Hockey Night** and the **Future**. The Plastic Constellations promise to play some new material, and chances are good Hockey Night will do the same.

Finally, even if you're not a football fan, you still might want to tune into the Super Bowl on Sunday on CBS. A little-known local **R&B singer/guitarist with a penchant for purple** will headline the halftime show. He also debuts a new song, "Guitar," online Friday at 3121.com.

Pop Music Critic Ross Raihala can be reached at rraihala@pioneerpress.com or 651-228-5553. Read more about the local music scene on his blog, "The Ross Who Knew Too Much," at blogs.twincities.com/ross.