

# Van Morrison: The Prophet Speaks

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Daniel Bromfield

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Van Morrison is four albums deep in a jazz/R&B/blues-cover phase, which is par for the course for rock musicians his age. But no artist besides Bob Dylan does better to give the impression that this is something they want. In a dry, revealing interview with *Time* around the time of his last *Astral Weeks* revival, Morrison explained he doesn't listen to any new music, just old jazz and blues. He didn't shit on new music, though; he just seemed to be most comfortable going back again and again to those old records. For a man who revealed a great discontentment with the music industry in the same interview, it must be a relief to have his artistic ambitions intersect with a commercially-viable format. He wants to cover a load of old songs? Great. That stuff sells.

Morrison seems casual and at ease on these albums. He doesn't use this old music to court some facsimile of authenticity or integrity, and there are no painful white cock-blues workouts or tried-and-true songbook covers. There's really nothing that's bullshit on these records, and if this is an indulgence, it's one a lot of people will enjoy, which is kind of noble. He sounds like he could be fronting a slightly eccentric wine-bar jazz ensemble, and it's clear he wants to undersell himself a little, to present himself not as an institution, not as the auteur that gave us *Astral Weeks*, but as a singer. One imagines that, had he not been sworn into the annals of rock from a young age, this might be the music he'd be making in some Irish bar. I imagine he'd be happy.

*The Prophet Speaks* is the fourth of a series that started in 2016 with *Roll with the Punches*, and—as with Bob Dylan's dusty tomes of Sinatra standards—it's meant to be seen as part of a series rather than a stand-alone work. This isn't nearly as good an album as the theoretical, voluminous four-disc compilation you can put on shuffle, and it's a little pointless to quibble over which is the best. This is the one with the most originals, which means it'll get the most attention, and the originals blend seamlessly with the covers, not so much because they're in the same style (his own songs have a more spiritual bent than the classics) but because the record feels like it could be Morrison performing a revue of his own songs and classics he loves.

That *The Prophet Speaks* is an exercise frees it from much of the weight that might otherwise drag it down, and it's fleet-footed even at 70 minutes. Its flaws come from the nature of its existence. Morrison does some interesting stuff with his voice, which is still strong (those sheep-noises on "Rollin' and Tumblin'" are really something else), but his exhortations—a little "ow!" here and a "wool!" there—feel

unconvincing. How viscerally excited can you be playing music this middle-of-the-road? And, like much white blues, it's hard to feel much from it given that it's less about blues as a form of emotional catharsis than as a genre. The overwhelming emotion is relief, and it's churlish to demand another *Astral Weeks* when he's so content making the music he loves.

