

## REVIEWS

## PAUL SIMON

*So Beautiful or So What*

[Hear Music/Concord]

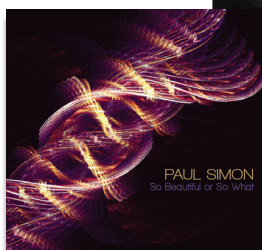
Elvis Costello, himself no stranger to conveying hard-won wisdom in song, pretty much nails it in his liner notes for Paul Simon's first new album in five years: "This is a man in full possession of all his gifts, looking at the comedy and beauty of life with clarity and the tenderness bought by time." Simon's solo output has always been erratic, a zigzag of indisputable landmarks, most notably 1986's *Graceland*, and half-hearted efforts like 2006's *Surprise*. *So Beautiful or So What*, which reunites Simon with producer Phil Ramone for the first time since 1980's *One-Trick Pony*, leans toward the classic. Drawing from a trusted well of influences—world-music instrumentation, R&B grooves, gospel-inspired vocal jubilation—and boasting some of his sharpest songwriting in decades, Simon isn't so much breaking new ground here as putting a new sheen on what he does best.

Often he places a lyric into a framework that should by definition jar but instead fits snugly: In "Rewrite," an author's frustrating

conundrums sway to an exquisite melody played on African instruments and Simon's guitar, while "Love and Blessings" sets pastoral, romantic images and uptempo doo-wop scatting in a minimalist, bluesy setting. The poor sucker entering "The Afterlife" finds himself bogged down in heavenly paperwork, but at least he gets to do it to a swinging Cajun-esque rhythm. In 1968's "Old Friends," Simon mused that it would be "terribly strange to be 70." Not at all—this fall, Simon can blow out just that many candles knowing that he's still ingenious after all these years. —Jeff Tamarkin



Mark Seliger



**'He's still ingenious after all these years.'**

