

Sweet 'Live Wire!' sampler

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To paraphrase from one of the worst movies of all time, a compilation CD is like a box of chocolates. And when the confectioner, so to speak, is a variety show to begin with, the unpredictability factor is even greater.

But there are ways to rein in the randomness, or sometimes to take advantage of it, and make a sampler feel more like a treasure trove than a minefield. And so it is that "Live Wire! Live, Volume One" arrives as a sweet collection, indeed.

The 14-song disc captures musical highlights from "Live Wire!," the comedy/variety radio show aired monthly on Oregon Public Broadcasting. (Full disclosure: I was the first "Live Wire!" interview subject. But it's OK -- the producers learned quickly from that mistake.) And in true variety show spirit, the package offers a bit of entertainment in itself, with a lively batch of photos and quotes ("I decided we definitely needed a typewriter because it was the one thing missing from our sound," said Sneakin' Out percussionist Don Henson. "I'm looking for one with a more manly bell, though"). Plus, it features a roulette-style disc design that lets you match up the musical artist with the show date and a memorable comic moment.

When it comes to the music, the disc makes good on the show's mission to present the flavor of the Northwest. Brooklyn-based Brit John Wesley Harding starts it all off with his devilishly witty "Goth Girl," but that's the only nonregional entry. Folk/funk singer Laura Love is the only other act not from Portland.

That focus in no way limits the variety, which ranges from the dusky Americana of Amelia to the show's antic house band Klezmocracy. Tracks are sequenced smartly to flow smoothly between styles. Each tune is tasty in its own way, from the vaudevillian approach of Trashcan Joe to the melancholy drama by the Decemberists' Colin Meloy. The Stolen Sweets and Reggie Houston's Box of Chocolates hit notes of toothsome nostalgia, and only mopey alt-country band Richmond Fontaine throws a boring Brazil nut into the mix. So dig in and enjoy.