Songs Of The Ruff City

First there was Armistead Maupin's miniseries—generating "Tales of the City" novels. Now comes "Tales of the City—Dog Tunes by Murray Weinstock." Inspired by Murray Weinstock's late dachshund Sparky, the album (via his Lovenotes Records label) offers 12 songs from a dog's point of view. It features such estimable associates as Dr. John, John Doe, Snow, Soozie Tyrell, NRBO's Jojo Spaminato, Barbara Harris of 60's girl group the Toys. Rainbow's Joe Lynn Turner and John Sebastian, for whom Weinstock sang and played keyboard on the music for the "Welcome Back, Kotter" TV series.

"It came out of just hanging out with my dog, trying to express what he might be thinking or sniffing," says keyboardist Weinstock, a member of Kenny Vance & the Planetones, who has also worked with Manhattan Transfer, Esther Phillips, Richie Havens, Don Covay and Buddy Miles. For 15 years, Weinstock walked the streets of New York with the dearly departed Sparky, who passed away in 2002. He adds, "The idea was to capture in words and music the unconditional love we get from dogs by using all my different influences and styles." Weinstock has also written and produced commercials for clients including Toyota, KFC and Wendy's through his Lovenotes Music music company. (Havens sang his Gio-nominated CBS Network theme "We've Got the Touch").

"I thought of all the people I've worked with over the years, and what a coup it would be to have them singing the part of a dog," he continues. Among the renowned instrumentalists appearing on the album is Johnny Farina of Santo & Johnny, the 1960s instrumental duo of "Sleep Walk" fame, who had done shows with the Planetones and whose steel guitar solo graces "Big Kahuna," a depiction of a laid-back Hawaiian dog's life. Also meriting special mention is Turner, who sings on doggie dance track "Dog About Town"—and brought his yorke Lola to the session. "All of a sudden you hear Sparky in the background serenading Lola," Weinstock says. Both dogs are listed in the song's credits.

Weinstock likens "Tails" to the early 1953 movie "International House" starring W.C. Fields, Cab Calloway, Berta Bulgogi and Bette Rose Marie. "It's a melting pot of different people," he adds, acknowledging, too, its affinity with Maupin's San Francisco stories. In fact, Weinstock sent Maupin an advance CD, and received this testimonial in return: "Your humane, free-wheeling, feel-good sound—along with the life-enhancing honesty of dogs themselves—has helped me survive the Republican Convention. I've been playing "Tails of the City" every morning, bound around the house with Sophie, my Australian shepherd mix, who identifies with your work completely. And thanks for paying tribute to my own way this way."

"Tails of the City" was also used at the New Lease on Life Animal Rescue "Who's Your Doggie" benefit last month in Los Angeles, which starred Lily Tomlin and Martin Lewis. "I'm getting to meet people [through the album] the same as when I was walking Sparky," says the Furry Murray Music (ASCAP) writer, who is now considering a comparable feline CD project, "so cat owners won't feel left out."  

HARRICK—A TRUE FRIEND: "Fiddler on the Roof" lyricist Sheldon Harnick will receive the Town Hall Friend of the Arts Award Oct. 24 at the Princeton Club in New York as part of the 83rd annual Town Hall Benefit Gala. The award is presented in recognition and appreciation of abiding interest in the development, encouragement and support of the arts. Past winners have included Tony Bennett, Dizzy Gillespie, Jane Alexander, Beverly Sills and Joseph Papp. "He's honoring Sheldon Harnick as a friend of the arts, because of his outstanding contributions to the theater, the opera, the film and television industries—and for the great person he is," Town Hall president Marvin Leffler says. Harnick, of course, collaborated with composer Jerry Bock in creating the scores for such hit musicals as "Pippin!" and "She Loves Me," in addition to "Fiddler." He also has written libretti for operas and translated the texts of others, including "Carmen" and "The Merry Widow.

CAMPAIGN THEME: One of the many delights of DK Publishing's customarily lavish coffee-table book "Sinatra," for those of us old enough to remember, is revisiting Frank Sinatra's marvelously upbeat Jimmy Van Heusen/Sammy Cahn hit "High Hopes." The song

"High Hopes" was an Academy Award winner after bowing in Sinatra's Frank Capra-directed 1959 comedy drama "A Hole in the Head." But author Richard Havers notes that the song was a bigger hit in England than America—through Sinatra did sing it to Eleanor Roosevelt on his 1960 TV special "Here's to the Ladies," also featuring Lena Horne and Juliet Prowse. Havers recounts how later that year Sinatra recorded a revised version of "High Hopes" featured in the pro-Kennedy lyrics by Cahn ("Everyone is voting for Jack/Because he has what all the rest lack"). But it must be noted—and Havers does—that Sinatra, whose friendship with JFK was ill-fated, would later sing another revised song for a president. A major supporter of Ronald Reagan's candidacy, he performed several songs at a 1980 inaugural gala, including "Nancy (With the Reagans Face)," a slight rewrite of "Nancy (With the Laughing Face)." The song was written by Van Heusen and Phil Silvers for Nancy Sinatra's fourth birthday. Eight years earlier—as Havers also notes—Sinatra sang a Cahn parody of his Rodgers & Hart classic "The Lady Is a Tramp" on ABC's half of Richard Nixon's re-election campaign: At a Chicago rally, he performed "The Gentlemen Is a Champ" for VP Spiro Agnew.

BRILLIANT! Thanks, John, for naming your fab two-CD set "Words & Music: John Mellencamp's Greatest Hits" after this column!