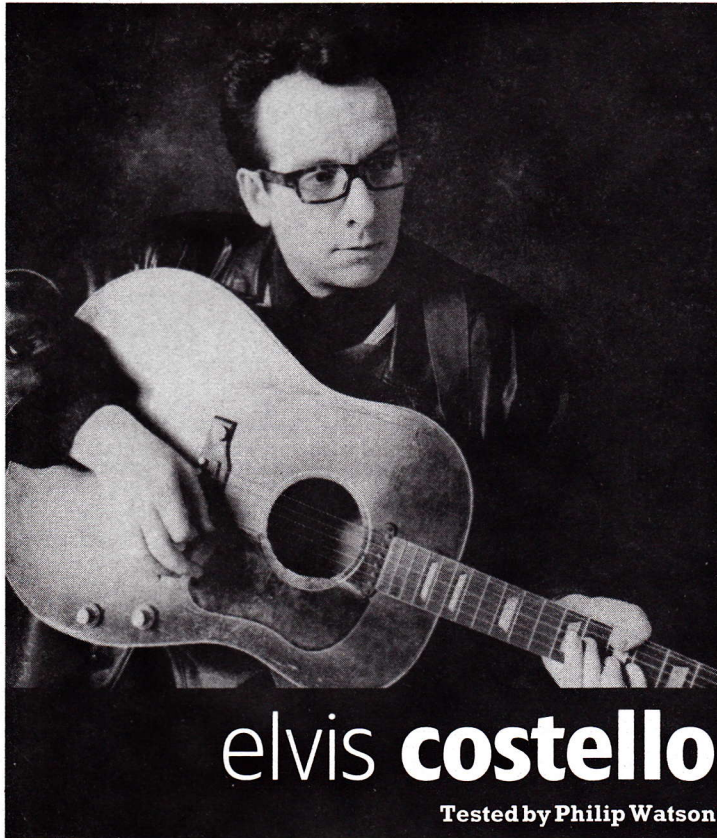


the jukebox

Every month we play a musician a series of records which they're asked to identify and comment on — with no prior knowledge of what they're about to hear. This month it's the turn of...



elvis costello

Tested by Philip Watson

Elvis Costello was born Declan MacManus in West London in 1955. The son of a respected singer with Joe Loss's Orchestra, he seemed to arrive fully-formed in 1977 with his epochal Nick Lowe-produced debut *My Aim Is True*. His 'revenge and guilt' hit single songwriting period ended with a series of characteristically catholic records: *Get Happy!!* (1980), a soul/Stax/R&B tribute; *Almost Blue* (1981), recorded in Nashville by legendary country producer Billy Sherrill; and *Imperial Bedroom* (1982), a pop record embellished by orchestral arrangements. Of his more recent output two CDs stand tallest: *Spike* (1989), a sophisticated rock album featuring contributions from Chrissie Hynde, Marc Ribot and The Dirty Dozen Brass Band, among others, and last year's collaboration with The Brodsky Quartet, *The Juliet Letters*, a song sequence for voice and string quartet. Costello has also served time as a producer (The Specials, The Pogues), composed music for film and television, and worked with George Jones, Johnny Cash, Chet Baker, and Hal Willner on the latter's Mingus tribute *Weird Nightmare*. This month he releases *Brutal Youth*, an album of 15 new originals featuring, for the first time since 1986's *Blood And Chocolate*, his three piece 70s band The Attractions. Costello has an enthusiastic, eclectic and authoritative passion for music; the Invisible Jukebox, despite running for over two hours, only touched the surface of his knowledge.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH "Allegretto" from String Quartet No 3 In F Major Op 73 played by The Brodsky Quartet (Teldec)

It's the Brodskys. I haven't listened to the record we made for a while, but it's funny how different the timbre of the quartet sounds on that recording to when we recorded. But still, it's just like a singer — it is a voice that is instantly recognisable.

I went into a shop a couple of months ago and they were playing an old Beethoven string quartet recording by The Busch Quartet, and it was like somebody walking up to you and slapping you round the face. It wasn't like a modern digital recording; it had such a mood, it was very individual. So I immediately bought it, and I wondered how much of the way it sounded was the same as what I like about old blues records. It had an atmosphere. I actually prefer analogue recordings, even with classical music. I can stand the hiss because I grew up with vinyl.

Do you know what they were playing?

No. I recognise certain parts of it. That was Shostakovich? Oh, I'll get it in the neck from the Brodskys for not recognising that. But it didn't sound like him, it sounded Spanish. But I like the way he incorporated Spanish music, that might have been considered light or banal, and made it into something. Sometimes he did it ironically, and sometimes he did it just because he liked it. I'm fascinated by the Brodsky cycle because they play it from memory, and that's a daunting thing, to remember that amount of music.

The string quartets were probably less liable to interference than say the symphonies because the symphonies were the big philosophical and political statements in praise of the collective farms or something, the ones that got big articles written about in *Pravda* the next day, with the unseen hand of Stalin condemning him. Whereas, with that piece, it's as if it couldn't be more capricious and more personal.

The last time I read a decent interview with you, you were reading *Testimony*, Shostakovich's memoirs.

Yes, and I believed it then at face value. I didn't realise there was a

controversy about it. And I've read other books about him since, and I think you have to pick intuitively what feels like the truth for the music, because even the things that he himself put his hand to are dubious. But there's still some very chilling and some very funny things in the book. But also nobody wants to believe that someone like Shostakovich, who could write music that good, could be so rubbery of will, that he was just a stooge of the state.

HANK WILLIAMS "I'll Be A Bachelor 'Til I Die" from The Wonderful World Of Hank Williams 1947-1950 (SPA)

[After the first bar] That's Hank Williams. I don't know that song, but I don't really care so much for that kind of Hank Williams tune. That track's much more like pop music really, isn't it? And he *was* a pop star in a big way. It was instantly Hank Williams because of that scrappy fiddle sound. It's very distinctive. And again the atmosphere of the tune is better because it's analogue, and when it comes on there's this sort of air just before the voice all the time.

He's great with funny lyrics, but I prefer to hear him sing something really sad, really heart-rending, because then he really digs in. His voice is so great, it's wasted on a song like that. It's like, I'd rather hear Billie Holiday sing "I Cover The Waterfront" or "Ghost Of Yesterday" than I would some blues thing where she's having fun, at that moment. It's just my personal disposition towards melancholia.

Is it the damage in the voice that attracts?

Well, it's partly that. I like that. Hank Williams had next to no voice, like Billie Holiday in a technical sense. He had very little range and a very one-dimensional tone. But even on that track you can't take your ear away from his voice. It's like a laser beam. Most of the country records made in Nashville today sound like the theme tunes to bad daytime soap operas, and the actual exponents look like the actors in bad daytime soap operas. They have those stupid trimmed beards and creased jeans, and a lot of them won't even wear Western clothes. It's the 'I'm wind-surfing in a cowboy hat' look.

Do you think there is a Hank Williams legacy?



If there is, it's a cold place in the centre of the darker of today's songs. Inside his apparently limited technique as a singer and guitar player is real to-the-bone music. It would be daunting for anybody to try to get to the heart of the matter in quite the same way as he did. Hank Williams is the benchmark: he took from the tradition and made it his own. He's an artist. He's a true artist.



COUNT BASIE
"Do You Wanna Jump, Children?" from Count Basie Vol II 1938-1940 (Jazz Classics)

I guess it's American — from the sound of the brass more than anything. The woodwind had me foxed because it sounds like a kind of smoothie swing band, with the clarinet and everything. But it didn't sound like Ellington or anything like that. It's not as refined as that. It tended to sound more like an English dance band or someone doing Basie, but not as good as Basie. But I don't know who it is.

It is Basie actually.

Is it? Wow. Oh, so it's Jimmy Rushing singing. The thing that made me not think it was Basie was that his piano solo sounded uncharacteristically busy, and that the woodwind sounded white. It sounded almost like a Miller-type band. I'm more an Ellington fan, but I like later Basie, like *The Atomic Basie*, the real driving sort of stuff. That's a much more powerhouse sound than on that track, which is slightly ingratiating.

Was there a lot of big band music at home when you were young?

No, it wasn't played so much in the house. Of course, the singers my mother and father listened to, particularly my mother, were accompanied by big bands. And when I used to go and see my dad play in the 60s, there used to be a big band playing on the same stage as

the beat groups. But I do actually like that sound — that sweet, clarinet-heavy Miller-type sound, and the stiff alto playing. And I love the arrangements. I have this great recording of my dad, who was sometimes given incredible songs to cover, singing "See Emily Play" with the [Joe Loss] Orchestra, and it's phenomenal. The arrangement is mind-boggling.

PJ HARVEY
"Water" from Peel Sessions (Strange Fruit)

PJ Harvey. She fired that drummer I heard, which is crazy. I haven't heard this particular version, but I actually like it better than the record. And better than the new album, where that [Steve] Albini guy does that sort of Nirvana trick all the time of playing the verse as quietly as possible so that when the chorus comes in it sounds like the voice of Armageddon. That's a great trick, but there's nothing so very new about it — it's about tension and release — and anybody who uses it too much is going to realise that it soon runs out of possibilities.

This has something real about it; there's an abandonment. Whatever it's about I have no idea, but I like the guitar sound very much. It's not a fake sound; it's just right, just right with her voice. I think there's quite a lot of Chrissie Hynde in her voice, more than people have ever mentioned. Especially in the slight, occasional asides that she does. I like the sudden bursts of really good melody, or the little calm asides and pay-offs, in an otherwise screaming and shouting song. And I really like the drumming, he's wonderful. He [Robert Ellis] may not be technically flawless, but that doesn't matter because his feel is amazing — it sounds as if the thing is turning around all the time, and that is very unsettling.

But there's a lot more to the records, there's other sounds, there's quirkier instrumentation on some tracks, with the sudden appearance of cello or something, that's great. Rock and roll can't be subjected to the same kind of musical analysis as you can to, say, the Shostakovich, and this is the kind of music you can like the sound of without necessarily listening to the lyrics. The sound of it is a good sound.

You have returned to that small group sound on your new album haven't you?

Yes, but combo music is really only the same challenge as playing with a string quartet — except it's louder. When people thought it was a very radical thing for me to play with a string quartet, I couldn't really see it, because I have been in a quartet for most of my career. I'd been much more experimental on my previous two records where I was using the recording studio as if it were the score and trying to juxtapose different musical elements. Especially on *Spike*, in that each component part was its own section.

Is it fair to say that the new album is more a return to good ol' rock 'n' roll?

I've never been away from it. There was rock and roll in *The Juliet Letters*.

What about a return to an idea of musical roots?

I don't see it as roots because nothing's roots to me. The first music I owned was by The Beatles, that's combo, so maybe you can draw it to that, but I'd heard lots of other music. I was buying records by the time I was eight or nine and I already knew a lot of music — folk music, jazz, big band music, ballad singers like Ella, Sinatra, Tony Bennett, and I'd been taken to classical concerts. It may be roots in terms of my professional career, but nothing is the natural thing I revert to. It's just whatever the songs dictate. I wrote all the songs for the new album on the guitar, so what other way am I going to do them? Whereas a lot of my previous songs, particularly on *Spike*, couldn't really go any other way because the component parts were written for certain sounds.

People get rather overheated about this. I remember after *Mighty Like A Rose* there was an hysterical piece, in *The Wire* I think it was, accusing me of trying to destroy pop music. Why in the world would I do that for my living? If you don't like something aesthetically, that's your prerogative, but no musician would ever dream of thinking like that. It's like saying 'I've made a mistake by doing that'. But I haven't made any mistakes. I just made the record that I made then, and if you don't like it, then don't listen to it.

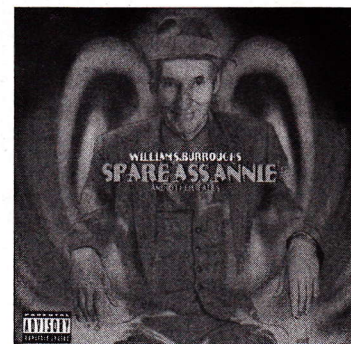
There's no such thing as a mistake in music. I really think that's true. It's like saying 'wrong harmonies'. That idiot Steve Martland went on

television, or radio, and accused us of writing 'wrong harmonies' when we made *The Juliet Letters*. Wrong says who? Wrong says Bach? Wrong says Schoenberg? Wrong says Mingus? Wrong says me? Or him? Wrong harmony? Try telling that to Ornette Coleman or Charlie Parker. It's just different.

Everything is written consciously, deliberately. There's no mistakes in that sense. You can have bad intonation. You can sing out of tune. It's like that Bahamian guitar player, Joseph Spence, who Ry Cooder really admires, well, his intonation would drive most people right out of the room, because it sounds berserk, but to him it's real. Or take Balinese music — it's all between the cracks.

But what about concepts of good and bad? There must be some critical benchmarks.

It's good and bad to you, though. In the moment that you hear it. And there's good and bad to me in the moment that I make it. So if I make something that doesn't appeal to people, then that's too bad, isn't it? I'm not making it at the whim of somebody else, I'm making it at my whim.



WILLIAM S BURROUGHS
"Words Of Advice For Young People" from Spare Ass Annie And Other Tales (Island)

William Burroughs? I don't know this album. Is this Willner's project with that rap band [The Disposable Heroes Of HipHoprisy]? I've been meaning to buy this. [Willner] came round to my house when we were talking about the Mingus record and he played me this version of Burroughs singing "Falling In Love Again", in German. Or maybe not; maybe I just heard it in German.

I like the groove, it sounded like a

JBs groove. Great sound to the bass — it's so deep. But I've never read anything by William Burroughs. He's like one of those people who were very fashionable when I started out — you had to have read Burroughs and Kerouac and listened to Kurt Weill and Jacques Brel. I've always been suspicious of bands who name themselves after book titles.

There are two things about Burroughs that have always put me off reading him. One is he shot his wife accidentally, by pretending to do a William Tell thing, which seemed to me to be enormously stupid, and the second reason is that he took heroin, which also seemed enormously stupid. It's somehow become retrospectively hip that he survived it.

Maybe I should read the books and I would think of it differently, but heroin's never appealed to me. And I've always been a bit suspicious of the contrived bohemian; maybe he's the real item, I don't know. Perhaps the appeal is that people like to go and visit certain dark places, and they want a guide. But if you have your own imagination, perhaps you don't need that help so much. Or there are more interesting places to go in other music and other books. **But still, Burroughs is regarded fondly as being something of an artistic provocateur. Doesn't that tally with people's idea of you being somewhat contrary or awkward by nature?**

I don't think I'm particularly awkward. It just seems to me that everybody else is awkward.

How about artistically?

No, I think all that's bullshit as well. And the idea that I'm an outsider. For one thing that's an excuse for not being successful. It's like, I hate the words "alternative rock". I was deeply offended by being nominated for an Alternative Grammy a couple of years back. As was Tom Waits, who I really, really admire. I know there are elements of the bohemian culture that go through his music, yet somehow, even though I know there's a contrivance to some of it, it has soul and humanity. There's a chilling thing in the Burroughs that doesn't appeal to me — but then again, I'd rather listen to that than to some rapper talking about how big his dick is.

FRANK SINATRA/BONO "I've Got You Under My Skin" from *Duets* (Capitol)

[After a few bars] "I've Got You Under My Skin" — different one though. Is this from *Duets*? There's only two tracks on it worthwhile. That one, and the one with Tony Bennett. Sinatra sings great for a man of his age who's lived as hard as he has, but I think most others just embarrass themselves. And some of the contrived things about the record really make me cross — like on the track with Natalie Cole, when she interjects a line like, "*The way you hold your hand, Frank*". He didn't need to do it. He's way hipper, and more talented than any of the other singers — he makes all the others seem like amateurs.

You know the reason why Sinatra is hipper than Elvis? It's because Frank never sang anything about seafood. He made embarrassing records, I'm sure, but he never sang about clams. If he's having fun being back in the charts, then I think that's great, because he deserves all the respect for the music that he's done. And Bono at least has fun doing the thing. Considering that none of them were recorded at the same time, as I understand it, which really doesn't seem to be that big an impediment to this sort of thing. The only time duets like this can work is on those great records with Bobby 'Blue' Bland and BB King who knew each other well. Or if you're Van Morrison, because Van sings so far back in every phrase. I once duetted with Van at The Albert Hall on "What Would I Do (Without You)", the Ray Charles song, and it was fantastic because we never sang in harmony. I phrased forward, and Van sang very far back, the latest he could sing.

Here, there doesn't even seem to be an attempt to make them sound as if they're in the same room. Streisand arrives in this kind of pink halo of reverb, which sounds like it's in a different universe to him. Bono's performance is spectacular — I love the falsetto and it's bold. And it sounds like he's enjoying himself, he's saying, 'What the hell? This is not real; this is just like Zoo TV. This is plastic. Let's have fun.' And the only other track worth even listening to is Bennett and Sinatra because they just sound like two old Italian guys imitating Bennett and Sinatra at a

party and having a great time. Although Tony Bennett is making better records than ever — he's singing better than it's reasonable to expect. "Foggy Day" on his latest album is the best version in years.

Also, what's the fucking point of doing another version of this song? The original is one of the great pieces of music. And Sinatra's re-entry after the middle horn section — well, you can't notate that, there is no notation for that. That is genius in singing. Just that phrase. If someone asked me 'What's great about Sinatra?', I'd say 'That note'. That's what makes him better than anybody else.



ARNOLD SCHOENBERG "Galgelied" and "Enthauptung" from *Pierrot Lunaire*, played by Ensemble Musique Oblique (Harmonia Mundi)

Pierrot Lunaire. I tell you what, that's much better to go and see than listen to. I went to see Simon Rattle conduct it with the CBSO, their chamber ensemble, and there was a slight attempt at staging, and it was fantastic. They were really engaged in the music. But I think it's a little bit hard to listen to — the *Sprechgesang* is a bit hard to take. But you know, I went to hear the Monteverdi, *The Coronation Of Poppea*, a month or so back and there was real freedom in the singing there. Obviously, it conformed to rules about harmony and form and everything, which Schoenberg broke up, but there's an argument for saying that that degree of free expression for the word and the emotion inside the structure is more of an achievement than just breaking all the rules, and just going anywhere. Although I went to see Schoenberg's *Pelleas And Melisande* at the Opera House and I was nearly asleep by the end of the

first half. But not because it was bad; because it was so damn good. It was soporific in the most fantastic way. It was like a dream. The music was so beautiful it actually lulled you into complete calm. It was wonderful.

I think there's beautiful music in Schoenberg's work; I just don't think this is particularly it. But I'm glad this existed — like a lot of things that were terribly radical when they happened, they became a stepping stone to something else, like a freedom of expression. Without him doing this, certain other things wouldn't have been possible. It's like listening to the Vogue recordings of Stravinsky's early work, made in France just ten years or so after the premieres of things like *The Rite Of Spring*. They're absolutely unbelievable. Music critics will tell you they're badly played, but what I hear is the musicians struggling with the music, and that's what's thrilling. It's like going to a downtown club in New York and hearing somebody hammering out some new little corner of music — sure it isn't absolutely perfect, but it's a glimpse into some other possibility. And that's what this is.

BOBBY BLAND "Fever" from *The Soul Of The Man* (MCA)

[After first few bars] "Fever". Bobby Bland? I haven't heard that before. It's real music. It's the best. I like the kind of Shelly Manne/Chico Hamilton ensemble sound. It's very open, like a lot of 50s jazz recordings. It's really hip. *Really* hip. It's proper music. He's the greatest. There's something just so right about everything, about the way he sings.

My favourite version of "Fever" has always been the Little Willie John version, just because his singing is so wild, like Little Richard on his ballads. I just love that melismatic singing — Little Willie John is just so fearless. But there's a moodier song to be had out of "Fever"; Bobby Bland tends to hit each song very hard. The Peggy Lee version is really great; and another one that often gets overlooked, that came out on that *Elvis Blues* album a few years ago, was Presley's version, which is tremendous. It's done similar to that, but even sparser, with just bongos and an upright bass, and it's one of those real tense Elvis performances.

He was really a great blues singer, like intuitive, not like some guy singing in a choked-up kind of way, like some fake, I'm-really-soulful voice like Michael Bolton — now there's a singer, there's a true artist.

But I love this, these MCA records particularly, like *Two Steps From The Blues* and *I'll Take Care Of You*, especially when he sounds like he's just about to slide off the note, yet the tone remains so beautiful. And Bland's always recorded songs that either came from country or from further over into jazz, rather than blues. People call him a blues singer, but that's a very limiting description of what he does. It's like Billie Holiday — when she's singing a twelve bar blues she's much less interesting than when she's got some serious harmony to deal with, like on "Body And Soul". I honestly believe there is no credible version of "Body And Soul" other than her Columbia recording of it. It is the definitive version. There is no point in ever playing the song again. Nobody should touch it — it's like trying to do "Great Balls Of Fire" again. What's the point? But there's always hope I guess that you'll hear another version that you'll like. I mean I hadn't heard this version of "Fever", and it's fabulous, fabulous.

BOB DYLAN & THE BAND "Tears Of Rage" from The Basement Tapes (Columbia)

Oh great. That's "Tears Of Rage" isn't it? I didn't ever have this at the time — I never bought bootlegs, so I didn't hear these songs until they were commercially released [in 1975], and I really love the record. It's one of the great records.

Dylan, undoubtedly, when he started, and there's no secret to the fact, invented a persona, just like Woody Guthrie did, which became more and more credible as he went on because he was a naturally great artist. Plus he really liked rock and roll; he wasn't one of those uptight folkies who couldn't deviate. What's interesting about this is that by the time he got here, I think he was trying to write songs that sounded like he'd just found them under a stone. As if they sound like real folk songs — because if you go back into the folk tradition you will find songs as dark and deep as these. And I don't know why anybody has been at all

surprised by the last two albums he's made — they're in some ways the missing link with this stuff. And I happen to be of the opinion that his last album is the best he's made since he recorded this.

What makes this great is that it's not in any way contrived — he doesn't hold my attention nearly as much making Peter Gabriel-sounding records as those that sound as if they were made in a cardboard box. What I hear on this is something intangible, the sound is so carefree, and sombre as well, very serious. He's unbelievable. But I was never really that big a Dylan fan when I was a kid. I thought Bob Dylan was a pop singer because my dad used to bring home all the records he had to learn to cover in the band, and they did "Subterranean Homesick Blues" and "Like A Rolling Stone" because they were in the charts — strange as it may seem to imagine The Joe Loss Orchestra playing those things. It was only later that I started buying the albums — I remember buying *Blonde On Blonde* in 1970, and really liking it.

Recently I recorded a demo tape of songs for George Jones, after we'd discussed the possibility of him making a more wide-ranging record of American songs that apparently fell outside country music, but by just him singing them would be country or George Jones songs. I recorded sketches really of songs by Tom Waits, Ira Gershwin's "How Long Has This Been Going On?", "Congratulations" by Paul Simon, Springsteen's "Brilliant Disguise", and then I recorded Dylan's "I'm Going To Make You Lonesome Til You Go", and the difference in the lyrics and the structure of Dylan's writing was amazing. Dylan's words blew everybody else right out of the water — even Ira Gershwin. No comparison.

I saw Dylan play at the end of last year and it he gave a performance that, even though his voice might seem a little fucked now, was as great as people have always said he was in the 60s. I could not believe what I was hearing — every line counted, every word seemed to be measured. When he does that he's terrifying, he's like Muddy Waters or Van Morrison at their very best. □