

# Elvis Costello at 50

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Graeme Thomson, *Complicated Shadows: The Life and Music of Elvis Costello*, Canongate Books, Edinburgh, 2004, 342pp.

Larry David Smith, *Elvis Costello, Joni Mitchell and the Torch Song Tradition*, Greenwood Publishing, Westport, CT, 2004, 312pp.

As I write this, Elvis Costello's *The Delivery Man* has just been critically acclaimed as his best album of new songs for fifteen or twenty years and he is being feted in the pages of *The Gramophone* for his ability to cross the popular/classical divide as exemplified in his ballet score *Il Sogno*. A few weeks prior to the release of these recordings Costello's fiftieth birthday celebrations included a three-day showcase of the range of his musical interests in a series of performances at New York City's Lincoln Centre. It is surely time for an assessment of the music and creative career of one of the most prolific, idiosyncratic, versatile, and awkward of contemporary pop musicians. Costello brings out the snob (and inverted snob) in listeners and the responses he provokes from critics are part of his intrigue. Is he a pretentious postmodern dilettante barely concealing his limitations behind mannered overwrought wordplay and the needless over-ornamentation of derivative rock songs and genre pastiches? Or is he a renaissance man, forging a unique path and highly original aesthetic whilst resisting the demands of industry, the barbs of blinkered rock critics and the conservative expectations of fans alike? It certainly requires a broadminded, musically knowledgeable and aesthetically reflexive analyst to get to grips with these composite creations (the artistic persona and his works).

Considering their subject, his strong opinions, provocative pronouncements and the musical moves that he's taken over the years, both writers are strangely cautious and unwilling to offer little substantive critical analysis of either music or public performing persona. Smith's is the more critical, but both assume Costello to be one of the greats of recent rock history and both continually compare aspects of his persona and song writing to Bob Dylan, a comparison that many (including me) might feel is historically unwarranted and musically misleading. Both books are heavily dependent on the interviews that Costello has given over the years and the essays that have accompanied the re-issues of his back catalogue, along with extensive citations from reviews that have greeted each Costello album. In each book the story is largely told through Costello's interviews and the responses of journalists. The fans and public, and the perspectives of Costello's artistic contemporaries rarely feature.

For someone who once said ‘writing about music is like dancing about architecture’, Costello has spent a considerable amount of his artistic career pontificating about music when speaking and writing. The fact that Costello once said this to a journalist is itself an indication of one of the lessons we should surely have learnt from pop music history: a sceptical attitude is required when assessing and making use of the words spoken by musicians during press interviews. There is not too much of that here, as quote after quote is uncritically used to explain the motives of the maestro and his music. Well, not so much the music, as the lyrics. Whilst Thomson does continually attempt to give a sense of the sound of the music, often with some highly idiosyncratic analogies, referring to the songs on *Mighty Like a Rose* as ‘over-stuffed sofas, uncomfortable, misshapen, the springs poking out all over the place’ (p222), Smith focuses solely on lyrics, the music is barely mentioned. Much of the material in both books is familiar to me and I have only partially followed the intricate twists of Costello’s career over the years. Dedicated followers are unlikely to find anything particularly new, with the possible exception of Thomson’s material about Elvis’s, or should I say Declan’s early years. Strangely, neither book contains a discography.

Thomson has some interesting material about Costello’s early days accompanying his musician father Ross MacManus to concerts and recording sessions (father and son collaborated on an advert for White’s Lemonade, ‘I’m a Secret Lemonade Drinker’, for example). Thomson also sheds light on Elvis’s time with the band Flip City and as the solo performer D.P. Costello. He’s consulted old friends who have given him lyric sheets (reproduced in the book) and allowed him to hear demos that give an indication of the folk, r’n’b, rock, Americana, popular song traditions that Costello has continually drawn from. There are no real surprises here, as Costello has extensively exposed the public to his musical influences over the years (and released many old demo recordings). Nevertheless, there are some fascinating details of the changes undergone by songs. For example, a song called ‘Radio Soul’ that in 1974 had a gentle ‘Spanish-style sway’ and was ‘an affectionate nod to the wireless’ was transformed into ‘a snarling riot of guitars and organ’. By 1978, as ‘Radio, Radio’ it still had the same melody and much lyrical content, but the thematic argument had been inverted. The phrase ‘sound salvation’ had shifted from the redemptive to the caustically ironic.

In narrating the tale, Thomson uses a particular literary device for marking the invention of the Elvis persona and the transformation from Declan MacManus. Whenever the musician speaks of the period prior to this moment in 1977 he is referred to as ‘Declan’. Numerous public media interviews given by Elvis Costello much later in his career are cited as if ‘Declan’ were speaking. After the name change it is ‘Elvis’ speaking. If the book truly presented the opinions of Declan prior to the name change, during this particular period, then it might shed some light on any psychological shift that accompanied the musical changes as he

struggled for the important deal, got his foot in the door, and then grappled with the consequences. As it is, this trick muddies the waters, even if it does highlight the impact of selecting the name ‘Elvis’ just prior to Presley’s death in 1977 (Costello being the maiden name of his great grandmother).

Thomson’s book follows Elvis’s career, in a pedestrian detailed manner from some brief family history prior to his birth up to his marriage to Diana Krall. It’s noticeable that the periods when Costello is promoting his work and giving interviews are well covered. When he disappears for months the narrative simply jumps to the next public event, particularly in the latter part of the book. Everything is neatly placed in chronological sequence, with copious attention to the dates when tours began and finished. Yet, there are some odd imbalances. Less than three impressionistic pages are devoted to the music on the 1978 album *This Year’s Model* – a classic of post-punk posturing and postmodern plundering. This is surely an album that provides many insights into Costello’s skill as a songwriter, one responding to contemporary musical and social changes. In contrast, Elvis’s curation of the genre crossing and occasionally art farty Meltdown Festival in 1995 is ponderously detailed over ten pages. There are few new interviews conducted for the book, and of The Attractions it is only Bruce Thomas who has spoken with the author. Thomas’s voice tends to predominate in accounts of escapades during the 1970s and early 1980s. Considering Thomas wrote a book about touring with the band (*The Big Wheel*) and that this contributed to his departure and inspired one of Costello’s most vitriolic songs (‘How to be Dumb’) the ex-bassist’s observations are surprisingly coy and muted.

Whether the historically unfolding biography is a useful way of understanding any creative artist, it’s clear that Costello’s music and performing identity do not ‘develop’ in the way that it might be possible and fairly plausible to narrate the history of the Beatles, or Miles Davis, or Mozart (even if such an approach to these would have its problems). Over 30 years Costello has cyclically returned to certain themes, styles, and threads and gone off on many tangents that are interesting even if not judged to be aesthetically or commercially successful (which may not be their goal in the first place). In fact, it’s symptomatic of the categories and discourses of both rock critics and music industry that many of his experiments are deemed to have ‘failed’. Thomson provides ample evidence to support Costello’s complaint that the music industry has been unsupportive, obstructive and unwilling to promote his recordings.

Smith attempts to avoid the linear biographical approach by taking a more thematic perspective. His study of Costello appears in a book that is half devoted to Joni Mitchell, the two artists linked due to their apparent relationship to a ‘torch song tradition’. Does singing about the trials and tribulations of love inevitably make one a torch singer? And is this an apt label to apply to either Costello or Mitchell? It’s a pretty tenuous link, and one that is only really argued for in a brief passing

introduction and conclusion to the book. Again, there is much in this book that will be familiar to the fans of Elvis and Joni and Smith's approach will be familiar to readers of *Popular Music*. The author uses 'auteur theory and narrative techniques' as a means of assessing the words of songs and interviews and to examine the 'stylistic tendencies that organize those expressions'. He detects 'narrative superstructures', identifying these as Joni Mitchell's 'Earth Mother manifesto' and Elvis Costello's 'Citizen Elvis editorials'. Both 'writers cast tales of love, war, peace, politics, fashion, fascism and house pets in a manner consistent with their stated artistic philosophies and creative goals' (pxvii). This doesn't suggest the rather narrow torch song tradition to me.

This is certainly a more analytical and structured study than Thomson's rambling tale and there is much more to argue with as Smith seeks to explicate the patterns of each singer's 'narrative superstructure' via chapters on 'The artist' (life story), 'The Impulse' ('artistic philosophy'), 'The Oeuvre' (organised thematically) and 'The exemplars' (key songs analysed almost solely in terms of their lyrics). As a way of making sense of a huge body of work there is a value in such an approach, even though it is inevitably reductive, schematic, and perhaps finds too much coherence – he's unwilling to allow for paradoxes, contradictions and loose ends. Mitchell's 'Earth Mother manifesto' the apparently unifying theme that connects the diverse strands in her musical trajectory is split into periods: The participant commentator phase; the sonic explorer period; the seasoned commentator period. Costello's 'Citizen Elvis editorials' are also broken down into distinct periods: The making of citizen Elvis; the punk tunesmith; the punk composer. Whilst Mitchell's works and influences are elucidated with a degree of subtlety, Costello's development is more crudely sketched as a 'punk' - that word recurring with tedious regularity. In contrast, Thomson, possibly due to his British perspective on punk, is clearly aware of how Declan used the prevailing zeitgeist opportunistically. Like many, Elvis never wholeheartedly embraced punk and he wore the (strait)jacket more awkwardly and ambivalently than many of his contemporaries who rode their bands in on the same wagon.

Finally, Smith attempts to bring Costello and Mitchell together by comparing their third albums, assuming a model whereby the third album of any band/ singer-songwriter is always the most significant test of their ability to continue producing new material. Ultimately he interprets the work of both artists as constituting a type of diary through which truths are communicated to fans; 'They sang from their hearts, playing their roles to their fullest. It is most likely that everybody in each audience took the songs as personal messages from Mitchell and Costello' (p286). So, the popular song works its magic directly as personal message from singer to fan. But notice the 'most likely' in that sentence. Of course, he's guessing. He doesn't know. He hasn't even mentioned an audience member that he's observed, let alone questioned. From talking and listening in bars after a few Costello performances I'd say that fans judge their relationship to the artist and his songs in

a much more sophisticated, reflexive, and ambivalent manner than this. Elvis is too knowing, too aware of many musical traditions, of the media, of his own experiences as a fan, of his own construction as a beloved entertainer. We know it too. Not only is Elvis Costello a pop ‘act’, but he is also quite self-consciously a writer of character songs and an *observer* of difficult relationships and perplexing situations. The trick of the great character songwriters is to sing convincingly from the first person; to have us believe. But, you just know that Costello’s verbal ploys, puns and put ons don’t in any simple way come straight from the heart (and why should they?).

Although acknowledging the quite calculated way that Costello has lifted musical, lyrical and thematic influences, both authors seem to agree that Costello is singing about events in his life. Just as Smith casually compares the work of Mitchell and Costello to a type of musical diary, so Thomson writes of the song ‘Alison’ and confidently asserts: ‘Despite several contradictory theories over the years regarding the inspiration for the song, many fuelled by its author, ‘Alison’ is for and about Mary, plain and simple’ (p59). (Mary being Declan’s first wife). We are indeed in the black and white world. As if any song could be so unambiguously about one person/ relationship - the most simplistic model of the link between life and work. The certainty and inevitability of such a claim adds little to our understanding of Costello’s creativity. Surely it’s the composite way that songs are created from multiple experiences and influences combined with large doses of imagination that makes songwriting such a fascinating art. These books certainly tell us a lot about his public life and persona, but far greater insight into Costello’s *music* can be found in David Brackett’s chapter on ‘Pills and Soap’ in *Interpreting Popular Music* (University of California Press, 1995).

As I was finishing these books, I kept wondering why Costello was so angry, and why the way he expressed that anger had such an appeal for many of us back in the late 1970s. It was a stance that was so far removed from the bland pop poses that would follow in the 1980s and the Brit pop pastiches that looked back in anger during the 1990s. One answer would surely lie in the experience of becoming a certain type of teenager in Britain during the 1970s; inhabiting that peculiar wasteland of suburban and provincial secondary schooling, with its strange warping impact upon aspirations, outlooks and the perception of possibilities. That anger and fatalism would very soon be appropriated by the spirit of Thatcherism and transformed into enterprise, entrepreneurialism, and self-invention. But, for a fleeting moment Costello channelled it and gave that confused rage a sound (more than a voice). This is what makes *This Year’s Model* an album worthy of serious sociologically informed music criticism.

Although Thomson astutely notes that many of the songs on Costello’s first album were ‘driven by the motor of suburban paranoia’ (p48), he doesn’t really pursue this issue or explore its context and background. For me there’s a neglected

connection lurking in each book. Thomson notes that when Costello released *King of America* he changed his publishing credits to D.P.A. MacManus, adding the ‘A’ for Aloysius as a tribute to comedian Tony Hancock who also used the name. Thomson says no more. Meanwhile, Smith quotes an interview with Costello from 2002 in which he said the following: ‘There’s a favourite film of mine that has a character who’s a clerk in an office, and he gives it all up to go and be a modern artist. It’s like a satire of England’s middle-class modern art in the ‘50s. He becomes a very celebrated artist, and at the end of it he’s asked how he creates his paints, and he says, “In a bucket with a big stick.” It’s such a brilliant line, because it’s the way I feel about what I do. How do I write these songs? In a bucket with a big stick’ (p164). Smith runs with the bucket as a ‘telling metaphor’. But he doesn’t ask *who* the comedian was or say anything about the film. Costello is clearly referring to *The Rebel* starring Tony Hancock.

There was Hancock. He was angry, dissatisfied and frustrated, peering out through the net curtains at the drab consensual conformity of the 1950s. There was Costello. He was angry, dissatisfied and frustrated, peering out through the factory windows at the social conflicts of the crisis riven 1970s. With the 1960s sandwiched between them, both felt trapped by a claustrophobic form of resigned Englishness that oppressively clouded lower middle class suburban life. Both aspired to artistic and intellectual ambitions that seemed beyond their identifiable fictional ‘characters’. The more they attempted to resist their inventions the more they become exasperated at the constraints of such identities. As Hancock and Costello attempted their rebellion both were patronisingly scolded by the English commercial and critical art world establishment for having ideas and ambitions above their station. Both characters were earnest, ethical and slid from irony to cynicism when dealing with the absurdities of existence. The torments of Hancock’s identity ended in drunken tragedy in an apartment in Australia. The torments of Costello’s identity ended in drunken farce in a hotel bar in Ohio. Perhaps ‘the rebel’ in Elvis Costello’s early music had more to do with Tony Hancock than Albert Camus, Bob Dylan, or punk rock.

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