

ELVIS COSTELLO

Simon Lockwood

The torrential output of Elvis Costello continues unabated with the release of *Goodbye Cruel World* his ninth album in seven years. The punk balladeer, the pop artist, the terse enigma, the nice guy really, the soul man, the country boy at heart, the crooner and now the protest singer. If not exactly a chameleon, Costello has the exalted position of David Bowie a generation on. Figures of near universal reverence, they have the apparent capacity to roll with any trend. While Bowie relies on the self-perpetuating power of his image, Costello (emerging from the anti-heroism of punk) supposedly exists in a parallel universe of conscientious craft; constantly reworking riffs, melodies, even lyric styles from the 60s, 50s and earlier. Costello has the thinking rock critic's sense of good taste. And of course the thinking rock critic would have it that Elvis is the great songwriter of his generation. He is also the white star who seems to most embody the pop sensibilities of the Left. Nine albums of verbal pyrotechnics and now hard politics. Difficult to argue with.

At a time when the sovereignty of escapist pop (mostly meaning male self-pity) is in the ascendancy, it's good to see Elvis doing his defiant thing. What needs examining is whether, ultimately, Costello is making a substantially more political interjection into our culture than David Bowie and whether it's feasible for white male stars to be anything but cultural oppressors.

Costello, has, of course, always been a writer of 'radical' lyrics. From his exposes of ruling class hypocrisy to his detestation of anything militaristic, his records have been steeped in political denunciation. It was never part of his adopted image, however, to make these features explicit. He was concerned to let the songs do the talking. Yes, sure there were radical elements but they were just part of a songwriter's armoury, like love songs. Costello would have argued that there was no point in ramming messages down peoples' throats and that he was more subversive if his audience trusted him as a pop star rather than a politico.

The theory was tested by the chart topping success of *Oliver's Army* — an implicitly anti-enlistment song which pointed to the funnelling effect of unemployment and would seem to support the case for stealth. How many record buyers, however, understood or gave a damn what the song was actually saying. How did Radio 1 DJs or *Top of the Pops* present the record? Did they have a choice? Of course they did.

Oliver's Army had the aural packaging of a conventional pop single. It was presented as such to most of the record buying public. It was not presented as an anti-enlistment song. Now the evidence of Frankie Goes to Hollywood's *Relax* (banned by Radio 1 for reasons of obscenity) suggests that radio has colossal power in defining what records mean to people. A catchy chorus with an apparently inconsequential lyric became, with delicious irony, explicit to all as a result of BBC censorship. With *Oliver's Army*, the effect worked in reverse.

But what of the thousands of people who bought the record and then had the chance to listen to Costello's lyric in the context *only* of their own sitting rooms? Well, yes, but listening to a lyric subservient to both the record's production and the 'soulfulness' of Elvis' singing. Crucially they are listening in an environment where the primacy of song has been devalued. The words are no longer the reason for a song existing. In 80s pop, the sound, the production, is the thing. This, of course, is the reason why packaging, selling, takes on

such disproportionate power. David Bowie based a career on, some would say made an art form of, the principle. The great majority of pop protest fits snugly within these conventions. The true ambitions of pop capitalism have been made glaring by the advent of the video. The puerile, even malevolent impulses which underscore many hits become unavoidable as the song recedes further into the background.

So, Elvis changed his stance. He advocated a Labour victory at the last General Election, he spoke out about 'Tory Britain' and about peace. He also wrote three directly political indictments which were not only highlighted at the end of his live show but were all released as singles (one in a version by Robert Wyatt). These were *Shipbuilding*, *Pills and Soap* and *Peace in our Time*.

Robert Wyatt's version of *Shipbuilding* was many people's single of 1982. Perfectly pitting the waste of the Falklands War against the despair of a depressed shipyard community, I would not have believed Costello could be so subtle, so selfless. No pompous sloganeering or rapid expressionism here, Costello lets the narrative do its stuff. Importantly Wyatt's vocal lets it do its stuff as well. All in all a perfect piece of storytelling, gripping, full of nuance and sung with perfect clarity. Great tune too, of course. An object lesson in political songwriting no less.

Well that's what I thought until I subsequently heard Costello's own version on *Punch the Clock* his last album. Steve Nieve ushers the whole thing in with Liberace power chords and there we are with Elvis and the boys on the stage at Caesar's Palace. I have always found British singers using American accents hard to take but it has never seemed so laughably inappropriate as when used for the persona of an unemployed shipworker.

The intimate, conversational feel so carefully constructed on the Wyatt version is mocked by Costello's decision to stake everything on the 'power' of his own vocal performance. A vocal performance which seeks to croon but creeks with the woode-



ness of his inflexions. What was he thinking of?

It is this obsession - with being seen to say the things he is saying — which is most

difficult to take in Costello, politically and aesthetically. He has always seemed to find performing a strain. Originally he disguised his discomfort with anger and even

though he has jollied up his facade considerably he still emerges as a rather brooding, resentful figure. He is emphatically a male hero. The effect is to make his jaundiced love songs misogynist and his political songs a celebration of his own enlightenment. He succeeds in not only rendering a lyric virtually inaudible through affectation but also in reducing its meaning to the one dimensional.

Pills and Soap and *Peace in our Time* are immediately much less interesting songs than *Shipbuilding*. Lacking the asymmetry of the latter's melody and rhyming schemes they are Elvis telling us more or less straight what he thinks about things. The irony of *Shipbuilding* becomes something closer to sarcasm and the removal of the constraints of character means he can run amok with the word play.

And, of course, no-one does it better. But ultimately in both songs isn't he saying something relatively simple in a complex way? Is not the density of Costello's art to be found in the juggling of poetic devices rather than ideas? Hypnotised by his own virtuosity his unceasing output suggests that, like the 60s Dylan, he is his own worst critic.

Politically, his self-obsession would be softened if Elvis were not actively conspiring with the glamourising aspirations of the pop industry which he purports to despise. And this is an area where innocence is complicity.

What of the new album, *Goodbye Cruel World*? It sounds suspiciously like a rushed job. Musically unmemorable, the words are often uneasily couched in the rhythm of the songs, Elvis relying on vocal dexterity (or 'soulfulness') to bluff his way through. Lyrically, it reflects Elvis' usual preoccupations — loveless relationships, joyless sex, the Martini crowd and, of course, social comment. It all comes across as rather cold. Costello has little feeling for the (mostly female) victims in the songs, and, where he does, the victim is usually himself (his singing makes it impossible to disassociate Elvis from the first person of his songs).

His wordiness for the part confuses rather than clarifies what he's getting at, his widescreen allusion hinting at connotations which leave one baffled. *Peace in our Time* stands aloof on the record simply because the directness of the song's emotional commitment transcends its pretentiousness. For all its puns and extended metaphors *Goodbye Cruel World* remains a humourless, unlovable album.