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'Spectacle with Elvis Costello: Season Two' Gives Us Shows Worth Rescuing From a Fire

By [Terry Lawson](#) 28 June 2011

The graybeards who comprise the majority of Elvis Costello's faithful audience, who return summer after summer to hear "Pump it Up" and "Watching the Detectives" one more time, tend to make much of his transformation from the Awful '80s-Angry Scowler to today's Beloved Entertainer. But the first of Costello's incarnations may actually have been the most theatrical invention of them all, and was close to disappearing by the time of his third LP, *Trust*, which he promoted by appearing on the late Tom Synder's *Tomorrow* show in 1981, where the host, more argumentative than his guest, accused him of "mellowing"

"That makes it sound as if I were a piece of cheese," Costello shot back.

Three decades later, touring with his "Spectacular Spinning Songbook" schtick—complete with a Vanna White-vamping hostess, a go-go dancer and a great helping of audience participation while doing audience-roaming encores in a gold lame jacket, Costello seems to have shamelessly embraced his Inner Cheese, the cheddar the better. Not only does he appear on the sit-com *30 Rock*, he actually wrote an episode for NBC, that perhaps thankfully, never aired. He even showed up in New Orleans to be the gag line of the first episode of *Treme*. Finally, encouraged by David Letterman and his ardent admirer Sir Elton John, he become a talk show host.

If you hadn't heard about Costello's *Spectacle* shmoozefest, don't feel out of touch. Hardly anyone, save those who have his website bookmarked, would have. It was originally produced in 2008 for



Spectacle with Elvis Costello: Season Two

(US DVD: 27 May 2001)

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The Sundance Channel, which is harder to find on cable than sincerity at the Sundance Film Festival. Despite its obscurity, it was somehow renewed for eight more episodes in 2009. The original format might have been designed for failure: Usually bookended with fine performances by Costello and his crack band The Imposters, then joined by his weekly guests and other performers you would never expect to see on TV.

The meat in this sandwich was Elvis' often insightful but always uncomfortable interviews with the likes of Police (who the angry young Elvis once dismissed as male models, but by then, was touring with) and other "heritage" artists, including that other chameleon known for his spectacles. Were you a music geek of Elton and Elvis' standing, able to name every member of Little Richard's recording band, you would undoubtedly have enjoyed it. But as any collector/obsessive who has a sagging shelf of Costello releases on CD, or better yet, on vinyl, and occasionally ventures out in public should know, most people don't get a similar charge from dissecting obscure B-sides in mixed company.

The abbreviated Season Two, recently released on a 2-DVD set by VSC, has the tell-tale signs of a lame horse making a suicide run. It, too, was filmed onstage at the vaunted Apollo in New York City, but now in the performance segments the stage is subjected to a barage of colored lights, with Costello wearing complementary garish ensembles. Someone apparently wanted it to look like a David Lynch film, but it comes out looking like a sub-standard, pseudo-pyschedelic episode of *The Flip Wilson Show* shot in *Wayne's World*.

Someone has obviously told Costello to lose the clipboard, the worst choice of a prop ever, and pour on the praise and hype. It's gratefully toned down when Costello is in the company of another Boss, Bruce Springsteen, who remains a raconteur of note, with some great stories to tell. His humility, forced as it may be, is in decided contrast to the hour spent with Bono and The Edge, who, as usual, pretend to be just folks, and come off all the more smug for their trouble.

Still, there are three shows anyone who even faintly likes popular music would salvage from a fire. The best puts Richard Thompson (a bit of a blowhard who's at least earned it), on stage with the ever-incredible Allen Toussaint, the ever-effacing Nick Lowe (who seems alarmed at his pal Costello's descent into show biz), and the ever-enduring Levon Helm, who smiles and waves and drums like a fiend, but who, following his throat cancer, could no longer sing himself, at least in a setting like this one.

A Nashville-style guitar-pull with Ron Sexsmith, Neko Case (who, with Ray LaMontagne, is the only person under 50 to be booked, and who weeps as Sexsmith sings "Secret Heart" in his wounded angel voice) is almost stolen by an unrecognizable Jesse Winchester. He surprises everyone with a recently-written song that equals any on his debut album from 40 years ago. This is spoiled only by the presence Sheryl Crow, who seems to have been added in a quest to get someone to tune in. She proves only that an acoustic unplugged rendering of "Leaving Las Vegas" can be as histrionic and hammy as the original.

Memorable, too, is the assembly of LaMontagne and his spiritual godfathers, John Prine and Lyle Lovett, who remind us one more time of what great songwriters and gents they truly are. Sadly, the season wraps with a gushing and wince-inducing interview with its host, conducted by super-fan Mary-Louise Parker, who almost faints with an idoltry that might have even embarrassed the first Elvis—if he could have actually been embarrassed. While Parker's crush Costello can still claim to be winking under hisshroud of irony, Parker, unfortunately, has no refuge—or shame.

Rating: 

Terry Lawson was a film critic for 30 years, lastly at the Detroit Free Press, where he also contributed music and book reviews, and a weekly DVD column. He has won numerous awards for his journalism and criticism, been nominated multiple times for the Pulitzer Prize in Criticism, and was twice a runner-up. He has taught Screenwriting at the University of Michigan for than a decade, and lives with his wife Kate and two feuding cats, in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

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