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Music reviews: Elvis Costello stirs up a 'Specta

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Written by Brian Q. Newcomb

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Elvis Costello with the Revolver Tour live in Columbus, OH 6/19/2011

"Spectacle; Elvis Costello Season Two"

The Sundance Channel DVD featuring Bono & Bruce Springsteen, Sheryl Crow, The Edge, Lyle Lovett, Mary-Louise and many more. (VSC/Red)/Spybox)

Genius is a term that gets used a lot in music. While no one would disagree that it's a concept of exceptional talent, what we really are looking for is connection. It can be intellectual, sonic or lyric

think of music that connects to our lives, that lifts our spirits, that invites us to think and being as a thing of genius. Elvis Costello is one such person. In fact, the reason I hate to use that description, is that you then end up with a list of genius players/songs/discs that come to mind, and my OCD kicks in and end up leaving someone out, so I end with a litany that starts out with the Stones, Kinks and The Who and ends with David Byrne, Leonard Cohen, and some guitar part from a song off the new Strokes album.

So let me just go ahead and admit that Elvis Costello, to my mind, is a sir with an impressive career, and not just a set list of great, great songs, although there are plenty of those for that. Beyond the big songs – some actually airplay hits – his career framed by truly great albums as well, often evolving, exploring, and pushing the creative process in ways that are not only electrifying but poignant and evocative expressions that give meaning to this moment in time. He may have started with a novelty name and a record of flap-dash new wave that all seemed so brilliant at the time – "My Aim Is True," 1977 – but that music has stood the test of time and each incarnation since, each new album concept, each tour has provided a revelation of sorts.

First time I saw Costello with his Attractions, he was touring the "Goodbye to America" album with Nick Lowe as his opening act. Lowe had produced "My Aim Is True" and wrote one of EC's biggest hits, "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love & Understanding." That was in St. Louis, and for reasons I'll never understand

refused to come back to that town for many years, so we coordinated our him play in Chicago, and once in San Diego. When he finally came back i a quiet nearly solo show backed soulfully by his keyboardist Steve Nieve.

The curse broken, he came back with his band The Imposters. He then o acoustic guitar for a Bob Dylan tour. Once we moved to the Dayton area, him out playing country/blue grass oriented with his band The Sugarcane working with Nashville pickers, Burt Bacharach or Allen Toussaint, record music with The Brodsky Quartet or The London Symphony Orchestra, or for his jazz pianist/vocalist wife Diana Krall, Elvis is nothing if not versatile

So every tour, following each new release (now with over 40), it must be : imagine what to play, and what to leave out. To solve that very problem, (resurrected the "Spectacular Spinning Songbook" from a previous tour, a great band The Imposters (Steve Nieve and drummer Pete Thomas go b: Attractions, bassist Davey Faragher joined up in 2001) and a 70's era go-with the name, Dixie De La Fontaine, former Mother Superior of Our Lady Torment. For his own part, Costello adopted the pseudonym Napoleon D: give voice to his inner carnival busker, T.V. game show master of ceremc lounge lizard.

With the set-list largely dependent on the spins of the big wheel, Costello opening and transitions as a way to frame the evening, so the fitting open "You're Happy Now" set the tone – ironic, yet joyful and fun. The band plo through rocking versions of "Heart of the City," "Mystery Dance," "Uncom his early anti-hit that contained the line "I want to bite the hand that feeds Radio." Thomas is loose, yet solid on the rhythms, Nieve's mix of cheesy circus calliope organ sounds add buoyancy to Costello's more punk rhyth Costello's growing guitar hero prowess provide a winning combination.

Audience members were chosen, the great song wheel was spun, and th played, with only Costello's willingness to play fast & loose with his own ri the evening any sense of direction. "Bedlam" was the first big disc's first v turning to a large hollow body electric, Nieve playing a theremin, an eerie synth played by physical proximity... way cool.

The beautiful, theologically reflective ballad "Deep Dark Truthful Mirror" w three from the album "Get Happy," Costello's cover of the Sam & Dave cl "Stand Up for Falling Down," along with "High Fidelity" and "I Stand Accus which turned up "Detectives vs. Hoover Factory" required the audience tc "Watching the Detectives," followed by "Riot Act" and "And Your Bird Car Beatles cover from the "Revolver" album, also the name of the tour. Are y to sense the evening's inner logic?

The audience participation throughout the evening not only humanized C: also hinted at the deep connection many find through his songs. The ranc were invited to sit on stage, or join the cage dancer. There was a bit of gc was down right contagious that impacted even the serious songs. Early o had described his own oeuvre as one dominated by songs about "love, se dancing, but not necessarily in that order." When one young spinee sugg looking to hear something cheerful, he admitted, "with this wheel that will doing."

To prove his own point, Costello choose two without audience guidance, the "End of the World" and "Beyond Belief." A father-son duo were brought double spin—It was Father's Day after all—"(I Don't Want to Go to) Chels out of the box, then suddenly Costello directed the band into "Turpentine. the Father's Day theme, he followed that guitar heavy rocker with the quic of "My Three Sons," before getting around to the father/son's second spir

Honeymoon." That was followed by another ballad, "God Give Me Strength" (Costello sang with near operatic vocal ease while walking through the crowd, shorter in person). Perhaps longing to end with a rocker, Costello strapped on his guitar to haul out the fan request "Less Than Zero," going all the way back to the album to end the show proper.

I remember the first time I saw Costello, how he was so enjoying playing that he stood at the edge of the stage with his index finger in the air asking "one more?" He played seven songs for his encore that night. I sensed the show was not over yet.

"Indoor Fireworks" was another request from the crowd, which preceded a spin of "Alison," to which he's been adding a couple lines from the Smokey Mountain classic "The Tracks of My Tears." "Everyday I Write the Book" was a banter piece, then Costello leaped into a lovely closing suite which involved a solo acoustic guitar through the Sugarcanes' era "A Slow Drag With Josephine."

Costello made a quick move to piano to play an unrecognizable version of "Up," which evolved into "Busted," with Costello joined by Nieve and the real closer was Costello's first hit, the Lowe classic "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Kix & Understanding."

Now a long time, hardcore fan might be tempted to complain that Costello didn't play "Veronica" or "Clubland," and that we didn't get to hear what might have been a spinner landing on "Imperial Chocolate," which suggests two of my favorite Costello albums... but as with all games of chance, with the spectacular songbook it's the unexpected surprises that make this particular evening

"Spectacle; Elvis Costello with..."

As if Costello is not charming enough in his own right, on his Sundance Channel show Elvis unleashes his master of ceremonies skills as host to a variety of musical guests (except for the one episode with Mary-Louise Parker where she is the guest, not him). A quick list of the guests probably provide the best reasons to watch the show: names at the top of this review Neko Case, Allen Toussaint, Richard Thompson, Nick Lowe, Levon Helm, Ron Sexsmith, Jesse Winchester, and Ra Ra LaMontagne.

I didn't need another reason to watch, but what I discovered watching the programs is the insights and fun that comes from watching seasoned songwriters discussing their craft, telling stories of their encounters with their greatest heroes and heroines, acknowledging the difficult tensions of balancing fame and artistic designs. There are real insights revealed in each show – from Bono admitted that he formed before they could play instruments and that they dug deep to discard traditional song structures when challenged by Bob Dylan and Van Morrison. The visit with Paul McCartney in the studio is priceless.

There are two shows with Bruce Springsteen where they get into the who's who of artistic authenticity, integrity and the place of conflict and transformation in society. Often it feels like a mutual admiration society, but it moves beyond that of fan engagement, real conversations and humorous asides, and the occasional moment that someone nicked an idea for a song from someone else... it's illuminating fun for music fans. And then there's the songs, or course, the highlights are too many to name here. A couple of my favorite moments though are Rorke singing Dylan's "Ring Them Bells" with Sheryl Crow and E.C. on harmony guitar, "Weight" with Helm, Lowe, Thompson, Toussaint, E.C. & the Imposters, and the shows with Parker that emphasize Elvis' songbook, the Bono & The Edge show and the two with Springsteen.

Filmed largely in September of 2009, both in NYC's historic Apollo Theatre and the Masonic Temple in Toronto, these shows offer a deeper look at some of the loved artists of recent decades. The two-disc DVD set presents the seven shows aired on Sundance, with three bonus songs: Elvis and the Imposters performing "I Wanna Be Like You" and U2's "Dirty Day," and then Bono and The Edge performing "I Wanna Be Like You." The TV shows go, including all the reality/singer competitions, this is a world-class DVD and a must-have for the real music fan.

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