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DVD Review: Spectacle - Elvis Costello: Season 1

So among his many adventures, Elvis Costello now adds talk show host to his resume. Over time, he's been the kind of guy to try all kinds of different things, throw stuff at the wall and see what sticks. A fair amount of this show sticks. Elvis certainly knows how to make a spectacle of himself - and his many and varied guests.

Each of the 13 hour long episodes of this Sundance channel series features Elvis and a crack band with generally one or two musical artists. Some of them are major legends - Smokey Robinson or Tony Bennett, and some of them are newer or more obscure acts that he thinks are especially cool. These would include Jenny Lewis and Rufus Wainwright.

Some of the talk of course involves songwriters explaining how certain songs were written, or who they had in mind. It was right interesting to hear executive producer and first guest Elton John talking about his early mentor Leon Russell and demonstrating how Leon plus Laura Nyro came out of him as "Burn Down the Mission."

That kind of talk dovetails with a broader intention with the show of turning viewers on to less well known cool people past and present. He makes a strong point of getting famous musical guests to talk about others that they especially like more than telling their own little backstage stories. And when they are talking about themselves, he keeps it geared mostly to stuff about music rather than cute anecdotes. Elvis is the kind of geek who would host a talk show where viewers may wish to take notes. That's pretty high praise for a damned talk show, but it would behoove a music geek viewer to have a pen and paper to take notes for singers, songs and albums to look up later.

But that might start to make the exercise sound a little academic when the show is varied and visceral. For one specific structural point, I really dig his big over the top built up, band backed carnival barker introductions of his guests. Plus, there's a fair amount of Elvis singing his guests' songs. Elvis has become one of the best vocalists in the business, with the arrangement skills and imagination to do all sorts of interesting things as an interpreter. Elvis starts out the whole series with a sharp version of Elton's "Border Song." Then there are a good number of variations of Elvis singing his songs with his guests. It was particularly nice to see Elvis and the Police singing "Watching the Detectives" coupled with their "Walking on the Moon."

One thing in that though, I wish he'd be just slightly less reverent to some of the older guys, particularly as regards to song selection. It was cool hearing Elvis sing "The Hunter Gets Captured by the Game," but he

apparently wouldn't dream of presuming to ask Smokey Robinson to sing one of his songs. I would have KILLED to hear Smokey singing "Everyday I Write the Book" for example.

The Herbie Hancock episode was particularly interesting for his talk about working with Miles Davis. This wasn't particularly personal anecdotes, but mostly discussion of how Miles worked and the things he wanted and encouraged from his band members. Some of this seems like stuff he may likely have talked about over the years, but it's the first time I'd heard any of it. It was interesting also to hear Hancock talk about his childhood training in classical music, and seeing him demonstrate his arrangement of "Embraceable You" in classical style. Plus, Hancock got a Grammy for Album of the Year just recently for a record of Joni Mitchell songs. They ended the show with Hancock playing and Elvis singing "Edith and the Kingpin." This performance made a bigger impression on me than the Joni Mitchell original ever has.

The episode with the Police may be the high point of the season. Besides the fact that they're major league musicians, this appearance was capturing something of a moment for them. They famously have egos too big to fit into the same room, and were at this moment just finishing a big reunion tour which was the first and supposedly last time they would be playing together in something like 25 years. I appreciate the way in which Elvis brought them out to talk individually before bringing them on together for talking and singing. It was good boys fun watching Sting and Andy Summers (who started the band) "firing" one another. Plus, there's Elvis singing "Purple Haze" with the Police.

Some of the time though, I wonder what Elvis and some of his guests are hearing that I'm missing. In the first episode, they were carrying on at some length about some obscure guy David Ackles from the 70s. They played one of his songs, and went to the bother of digging up footage of the man - and I was left wondering what the hell they see in him. Was there a hook in there and I missed it? But both Elvis Costello and Sir Elton John are rhapsodizing about how great a songwriter he was, which is enough right there to make me think I'm missing something.

Plus, some of the lesser known guests seem less than impressive to me. Rufus Wainwright seems like a fine fellow and all, but I didn't hear anything substantially interesting from him in terms of songs. One episode was a spotlight for new talent, including Jenny Lewis, She and Him and Jakob Dylan. Now, Elvis could and has gotten nearly everyone he wants, so this showcase of lesser knowns is a major personal endorsement; it's not like he couldn't have gotten much bigger names.. Didn't hear an interesting song or hook from any of them.

Some of the time, Elvis seems to get wrapped up too much in words, as if song lyrics are literature - for which category such things rarely legitimately qualify. Some of this is simply that words are easier to talk about with more words than music is, but repeatedly he gets to rhapsodizing over the words of songs that don't have much obvious going on as MUSIC.








A couple of quick observations about the performing abilities of old dudes. Smokey Robinson's pen seems to have been pretty dry of hot songs for some years, but this old man can sing seemingly about as good as ever. He's still one of the singingest son of a guns going. Get him a song worthy of his name, and Smokey would right now make you forget about some cheesy R Kelly or Usher.

Lou Reed, on the other hand, was never, ever even close to a professional quality singer. I grant that he wrote "Walk on the Wild Side" and a few other worthy songs, but he's way, way over rated. He's spent a career mostly peddling the kind of largely tuneless faux-literary crapola that Elvis has a weakness for. But quality of songs aside, the guy could never *sing* worth a damn, and he really, really cannot even vaguely carry a tune now. It was little short of excruciating to listen to him croaking away. It sure sounded like it was just absolutely physically painful for him to even talk, much less sing.

In my role as rightwing nutjob, I must take a moment to mock Elvis a bit for his second episode - an hour with Bill Clinton. Dick riding much, Elvis? I can appreciate perhaps the point that if you have a POTUS willing to

come on your little Sundance channel show, you about have to take it. Nonetheless, this was one of the more unworthy moments of Elvis' career. He chatted at length with Bill Clinton about playing the frigging saxophone as if the guy was actually a musician, and listened supportively as he spun BS about the lessons of his musical interest for his political career. Clinton spouted on with the predictable crap about the importance of more money for music training in schools, while Elvis just lapped up this obvious cheap pandering like it represented some kind of insight. Damn it, Elvis is smarter than this. Shouldn't he have been biting the hand that feeds him or something along about here?

Political foolishness aside, this series is excellent. It is highly recommended for fans of Elvis Costello, any of his guests, or anyone with a hunger for new musical turn ons.

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