

Three pissed businessmen. Well, men in suits ... Terry is furthest under the weather. He turns to whisper — this chap opposite's Bob Jones, he says. And this other one's the Mayor of Thames — but that just *might* be the truth. "So how long have you chaps been over here?"

The three are amused by the strange-looking types partying in the house bar of their hotel. They haven't heard of this Elvis Costello chap. Who is he?

You could show them one newspaper article, a pastiche of the Elvis cliches, or another, in which he attributes his success to his "magnetic sex appeal" or you could point to the chubby, bespectacled man across the room. The man is distinctly English, highly articulate, at once engaging and defensive, a little odd.

Punch the Clock was far more of a commercial success than the immediately preceding albums. Did you anticipate that?

I think I would have been surprised if it hadn't have been, because it was definitely ... structured in such a way as to be more accessible, if nothing else. Even if the individual songs weren't any better than the ones on the last album — and I don't believe they were, in retrospect — the way the album was actually put together and the production technique employed was such as to be immediately arresting, whereas I think the *Imperial Bedroom* album requires a bit of listening. There was no one track on it that was representative, no obvious single. That's not to demean a record just because it's a single. Some people get a bit snobbish about that sort of thing but I'm really proud of 'Everyday I Write the Book' — it served a purpose. Ironically enough, 'Let Them All Talk' was the first choice for a single all the way through the recording and it wasn't until a few weeks before the release date that we switched. Which was probably a good thing, because it turned out that 'Everyday I Write the Book' had a much more lasting and general appeal, which drew people to listen to the record.

What was the reason for deliberately making *Punch the Clock* more accessible?

Well ... it does become a little pointless to be wilfully obscure. I don't think I was being wilfully obscure with *Imperial Bedroom* but if we'd made another record which was even more oblique and dense then we could have been accused of being indulgent. Some people accused us of being indulgent with that record anyway, so if we'd made another one which was even less accessible at first hearing then I think we'd have been just making records for ourselves. I think it was important to really try and consciously make one for public consumption. Hopefully that leaves the door open for us now to do something which is a good mixture of both. I think the new album, *Goodbye Cruel World*, demands your attention but at the same time is more demanding than *Punch the Clock*.

There was an irony, though, with *Punch the Clock* in that it put a bright-sounding backdrop behind lyrics like those of 'Pills and Soap'.

That again was the point of the way it was put together. The real cynics said it was insubstantial compared with some of the other records — I think they had just got used to the fact that every song had to be a

ELVIS



PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA

major drama. On that album there are songs that are quite light-hearted, set against those which are very, very solemn. It was a good balance but it was a different one from the one we'd employed in the past and therefore it confused the critics who were used to a certain emotional formula. Even if the musical makeup of the group changed from record to record they were used to a particular kind of emotional formula that we didn't employ on the last record.

Have you kept the backing singers and the brass section on the new record?

No. We've got Gary Barnacle from Leisure Process playing saxophone but there's no brass section.

So it's a more basic sound?

It's a lot sparser at times but we've got some quite full-sounding tracks. We've also used one singer to sing with me in the backing group so that we don't just have the sound of me tracked with myself on every song, because the Attractions don't do backing vocals. You get a wholly different sound blending two voices. So we've got Green from Scritti Politti singing on one track and Darryl Hall sings on another one. So it's quite an unusual combination.

How did working with singers of the calibre of the Afrodisiacs on the last record affect your own approach to singing?

When it comes to backing vocals it doesn't really affect your performance on the track. But live, singing with the Afrodisiacs, it started to affect me quite profoundly after a while because I started to imitate their phrasing. I'd teach them a line and they'd sing it back completely different, because they sing a different way. Their timing is different to mine. I don't know how good a mimic I am but I find I'm quite a conscious mimic. I find myself mimicking people, at least in my head — I don't know if it comes out of my mouth. That's the way I always sing. I think "I'll do Garnett Mimms in this song" and whatever comes out of my mouth might be something completely different.

You've just released your second single as the Imposter, 'Peace in Our Time'. Does that mean the Imposter releases will be a regular thing?

No, it means I'm going to release one when I feel like it.

What's the function of the Imposter?

Well, firstly, having established the Elvis Costello name, it's just a jar for it to be obvious that it's me under another name. It serves the same purpose as calling myself Elvis in the first place, to some extent — it does the same thing in reverse, if you like. I used it once so I thought I'd use it again, because people wouldn't expect that.

Do you think the use of the alternative name had much to do with the success of the original 'Pills and Soap' single?

No, the success was more to do with the mystery that built up around it — because it was deleted, it was out for a specific length of time, which is unusual. The whole point of these records having that identity is to separate them from the big business machinery. I try to keep them on a much more personal level — where time allows, — actually take the records to the radio stations and reviewers myself, so they can be quite clear in their heads that it's a personal statement rather than a corporate design.

You've often been characterised as a "clever" lyricist. Do you see yourself as clever?

I don't think I'm over-clever. Sometimes I seem to get some resentment for the way I use words but I refuse to take responsibility for the reviewer not having as much imagination as me, if he feels intimidated by me. I try not to use words in order to baffle — it's important to use words to express things in a clearer way. And the more words you use, the more interesting and exciting the language in the songs can become. It's very easy to take all too seriously, though. I don't set myself up as some kind of great lyricist.

You seem to get more flak about lyrics from American writers.

Yeah, well they tend to be idiots, I suppose ... there's a few almost intellectual rock 'n' roll writers, some of whom I quite respect, despite their rather academic attitude to the music, because they have a grasp on how important the music can be to people. There's a subtle difference between how important music can be to people and how important the artists think they are. Unfortunately, when artists start reading these people's books and magazines and start believing them and acting out what is said about them, that's when they start to lose their function. The other end of American rock 'n' roll writing is the stuff that just glorifies the simplistic, moronic element, the Johnny Cougar type rock 'n' roll. You know — it's a sin to be smart.

But isn't it somewhat understandable that American writers will get the wrong end of the stick? After all, so much of your imagery and the words you use seem to be specifically English.

Well that's pretty inevitable, seeing as I am English. It's always been a bit of a dilemma really, the mixture. It's American music, essentially, and an English point of view. Not many people have achieved it. There's only a few really great exponents of capturing something that's uniquely English but still what you might identify as rock 'n' roll, or even modern. I think the Kinks were probably the best example — and Madness now, but neither of those are really rock 'n' roll. I wouldn't say we were a rock 'n' roll band as such — we can be, but it's one of a number of styles and inflections in the music that add up to make whatever you call the music. I don't choose to call it anything myself.

Would you agree that the American music industry has lost touch with the best of its country's music?

I'd agree that the industry has lost touch with its best music but I still think the best music is in America. I don't think it's in England anyway. The groups that currently excite me most are American, which is something I didn't think I'd ever hear myself say again.

What groups are they?

Los Lobos, Jason and the Scorchers, X, the Leroy Brothers, T-Bone Burnette ...

What was your reaction when *Rolling Stone* magazine described you as "halfway to hackdom"?



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