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Taking pains to mask those embarrassing hickeys, March 1989



He's tackled nearly every form of contemporary music over 27 albums. Now **Elvis Costello** is taking his cultural ambassador skills to their logical conclusion... as a talk-show host. "*Inside the Actor's Studio*," he says. "Is that the guy with the extraordinary beard?"

By **CHRIS NORRIS**

In December 1977, *Saturday Night Live* introduced America to a man who would become one of the most iconic and enduring figures in rock history: a spindly, pissed-off-looking Brit with oversize specs and a palsied stance who (as a last-minute sub for the Sex Pistols) halted a performance of "Less Than Zero" mid-verse to instead race through the uncleared anti-censorship screed "Radio Radio" in a torrent of pressured speech and incendiary playing, winning himself the scorn of the network and a fiery rep as the new hypervocal bard of punk.

Thirty-one years and a few string quartets and jazz suites later, Elvis Costello sits at a booth in Harlem's Lenox Lounge, preparing to reclaim the small screen. He just finished taping the 13th episode of *Spectacle*, his Sundance Channel talk show, premiering in December,

down the street at the Apollo Theater and is soon to board a plane to Vancouver with his wife, jazz singer-pianist Diana Krall, and their twin two-year-old sons. Though clearly exhausted, with graying scruff and a sleepy gap-toothed smile, the 54-year-old born Declan Patrick MacManus still looks camera-ready—his trademark glasses set off by the silk scarf, black shirt, gold bracelets, and dark duster coat of an urban troubadour. He sips ice water to nurse a voice hoarsened by weeks of talking and singing and humbling himself with everyone from Tony Bennett to the Police to Lou Reed to soprano Renée Fleming to Bill Clinton. "Every show," Costello says, "has a moment where your head nearly falls off."



Clockwise from above: With the Attractions' Bruce Thomas, Pete Thomas, and Steve Nieve; the notorious *Saturday Night Live* rebellion, December 17, 1977; continuing his love-hate relationship with the camera, in New York, 1999



"Drugs just helped me stay up longer and do the stupid things that became the subject matter of certain songs."



**I understand you just finished interviewing James Taylor. It's hard to imagine a starker antithesis—acid-penned terrorist versus Sweet Baby James.**

We did mention [our respective reputations], of course. The curious thing for me is that I was such a fan of his; he has one of the most beautiful voices in American music. The singer-songwriter is almost back in vogue now, but it certainly wasn't when I was coming up. Ours was the music that was going to get rid of that—along with a lot of other stuff. But it usually doesn't work that way. After a while, everyone has to fess up to having older records in their collection. Like the Clash—"No Beatles, no Stones in 1977"—then *London Calling* comes out and you realize that's Joe Strummer's entire record collection. But I think we're past those juvenile arguments about music, like, "Our generation, our music." Because right now you're living in a time when everybody you speak to can listen to everything they want to.

**Introducing the episode with Smokey Robinson, you said you couldn't be more excited if Marilyn Monroe, Frank Sinatra, or Groucho Marx were about to come out. Was Robinson the most daunting guest you've had?**

He was pretty daunting. I wasn't kidding when I said the first record I ever owned was *With the Beatles* and the first Smokey Robinson song I ever

heard was [their version of] "You Really Got a Hold on Me." And now I'm onstage at the Apollo singing it with the guy who wrote it!

**From your debut album, *My Aim Is True*, and on, you have incorporated country, reggae, Tin Pan Alley, and scores of other styles, but you were marketed as one thing: punk.**

Well, I was marketed by other people, not by me. And "punk"—what nonsense that was. Or "new wave"—even bigger nonsense. I'm just a songwriter. I knew older stuff and I knew newer stuff.

**But as far as marketing goes, that was definitely some of the coolest of the 20th century. Didn't you relish being part of it?**

Yeah, but I never really went along with the philosophical background, because I never really thought it was entirely the work of the people. It was the provocateurs who had more to do with that—the Malcolms and the Bernies [Sex Pistols impresario McLaren and Clash manager Rhodes, respectively]. A lot of the lesser groups just got on the manifesto.

**What about your early glaring mug shots and rock'n'roll poses?**

The packages made me laugh. When we put out the reissue of *My Aim Is True*, they printed some of the outtakes of the cover shots. People wanted to

believe that this was some sort of very aggressive image, but if you look at the outtakes, I'm laughing in almost all the shots. There was just something inherently ludicrous about that pose to me, because it was the opposite of what I felt like. I didn't feel like a rock'n'roll star. I was just some guy working in an office who'd written some songs. And the fact that I had this absurd name and was posing like a rock'n'roller with these splayed legs—it was a satire. That's kind of the same thing in "Pump It Up" [from *This Year's Model*]: If you listen to the lyrics, it kind of goes against the grain of hedonism.

**Still, your early work was fueled by a fair amount of intoxicants, no?**

With "Pump It Up," I was taking those little blue pills [amphetamines], so there were a lot more verses.

**Did drug use play a big role in shaping your style of hypomaniac wordplay?**

I don't think it did, actually. It just helped me stay up longer and do the stupid things that became the subject matter of certain songs. But I was always into writing a lot of words. I liked the effect of a lot of images passing by quickly.

**The website Songfacts.com suggests that people who dig "Pump It Up" also like "We Didn't**

Start the Fire," "Layla," and "I Will Survive."

[Laughs] Maybe. "We Didn't Start the Fire," particularly. Who is that, Journey?

**Billy Joel.**

Hmm. He's got a couple of good tunes.

**Do you put any stock in music-recommendation software?**

Those remind me of this toy I had when I was a kid called a Magic Robot. You asked it questions and the little robot would swivel round and, because of the magnets in it, fix on an answer. I don't know how it worked—maybe it really was magic—but to me, the idea that your computer can recommend music for you is the same thing. It's idiotic. What happens instead is someone you trust tells you, "I've got this record by people from the Romanian mountains playing hip-hop" or that one of Congolese street musicians putting kalimbas through sound systems [Konono N°1]. I was looking at that CD in a shop in Nashville and happened to be standing next to the drummer for Sonic Youth, who said, "Oh, *get that*." And I did, loved it, and recommended it to five friends, and then 15 more friends bought it. That's how it works now.

**You recently released your 27th album, *Momofuku*, and Rilo Kiley's Jenny Lewis was among the musicians. On an episode of *Spectacle*, you mentioned that, prior to working with Lewis on her album *Acid Tongue*, you had no interest in doing another record.**

That's true. Paul McCartney said something after he put out his last record [for EMI]: They always sent him to Cologne to do this press junket, and this time, EMI was gonna do it again. That's when he realized he was just a piece of the furniture. It doesn't matter whether it's the smallest band starting up now or somebody like *him*. So I thought, "No, it's just too boring." I'm very glad to be doing the job I'm doing, which is *playing music* in front of people, and I can do that in a variety of ways. Just last year, I played MerleFest with bluegrass musicians, then I'm touring with the Police, then I'm playing in Europe with an orchestra, then I'm playing a solo show. It's the same reason Bob Dylan is on the road—because that's *what he does*. He comes from the tradition of people who just play. Making records—it used to be the thing that made the motor go round. Now I sort of just make a record and let it go.

**So how did *Momofuku* come about?**

I went down to do the [*Acid Tongue*] song "Carpetbaggers" with Jenny, and they were wondering how to pay me. I said, "Don't worry about money, let's just cut something for fun." And we cut three songs in one afternoon. I went home



Clockwise from top left: Schmoozing with Tony Bennett on the set of *Spectacle*; vamping with smooth operator Burt Bacharach in 1999; eating a meal of some sort, perhaps, with Bruce Springsteen and wife Diana Krall in 2007

with the CD, and I thought that the tracks all sounded good. I had a song I wrote with Rosanne Cash, a song I'd written with Loretta Lynn, and I wrote another eight in three weeks. And we cut the whole thing in ten days.

**The album sounds like a return to the kind of raucous, socially outspoken rock you used to do with the Attractions. The song "American Gangster Time" recalls excoriations like "Pills and Soap" and "Tramp the Dirt Down"—its chorus begins, "It's a drag / Saluting that starry rag."**

It isn't like a political-slogan song as such. It's more about a sense of amorality that runs through some of the decision-making now. It's not a mystery what's going on. But I've never been one for trying to write the obvious political song. My first single ["Less Than Zero"] was about a chance viewing of a 1930s Fascist, Oswald Mosley, being tolerated on late-night television. That started a way of writing about things that happen to us all. Even [*Punch the Clock's*] "Shipbuilding" [about shipyard workers during England's Falklands War] came out of very specific events, but I still sing it, because we still make the same mistake.

**You ended one episode of *Spectacle* with "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding," a song Nick Lowe wrote as**

**a tongue-in-cheek snipe at hippies. It sounds pretty irony-free when you play it, whether on your '79 album *Armed Forces* or today, five years into the Iraq War.**

When Nick sang it, it wasn't long after the idealism of the late '60s, when people were thinking, "Well, it didn't work out, did it? We don't have a dream world where we're all getting along." The only thing you can do about that is laugh. At one point we're singing, "Everybody get together / Smile on your brother," and the next we're beating each other to death with billiard cues. But now it is a serious time. You can't apologize for songs being serious. That's not a bad thing.

**For years, one of your calling cards was the bait-and-switch pop song, a sweet melody enclosing a cynical message, like "Oliver's Army," a twinkly Abba-esque pop tune assailing British imperialism. Can you think of other recent artists who work that kind of duality?**

I think there's a similar juxtaposition in some of the Kurt Cobain songs. You won't find exactly the same type of juxtaposition of words and music, but there's almost a romanticism, an extreme vulnerability, in the midst of all that distortion and aggression. And really, when [Nirvana] did *Unplugged*, it sort of proved that. In a funny sort of way—you talked of James Taylor being antithetical to my presumed sensibility—but really Kurt Cobain at a different time would have been a singer-songwriter, not a rock'n'roll singer.

**Being such a wordsmith, are you tempted to have any rappers on *Spectacle*?**

That was discussed, and I think it would be quite

"Punk—what nonsense that was.  
Or new wave—even bigger nonsense."

