

Better sound?

Elvis Costello is just one of the many artists whose recordings benefit from new digital technology

by Dr. Tantalus

During the past six years boxed sets have soared in popularity within the recording industry. One of the first, Rod Stewart's *Storyteller*, sold so well that folks began to realize that there was a market for previously released music that brought together the collected work of a single musician, or which attempted to present a collection of music of disparate popular artists that were linked thematically, stylistically or perhaps chronologically.

When the right amount of tender loving care is applied, usually by fans of the artists who are also highly trained engineers, boxed sets could sometimes outshine

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the original recordings. In order to achieve the best results the original master recordings found on tape (even vinyl albums had a tape source) are remixed using new digital technology to produce a cleaner sound, sometimes closer to the sound intended by the artist at the outset. Recording flaws can be eliminated through this process, although the extent to which such tapes are altered remains somewhat controversial. For example, in some older Elvis Presley recordings the sound of his renowned back-up group, the Jordanaires, might be brought up to the musical foreground rather than remaining muffled.

Dr. Tantalus is not an expert on digital technology, but the result is clear: one can now recapture the magic of recordings that had long since become horribly scratched on vinyl, were out of print, or which had suffered through a horrible CD transition in the first instance. In addition, boxed sets of-



include previously unreleased songs, and extensive liner notes regarding each song's history and perhaps an overview of the artist's career.

Because boxed sets vary highly, depending principally upon the source material utilized to make the CDs and the selection of music offered, any shopper seriously interested in plunking down \$25 or more (one of the Frank Sinatra collections retails at more than \$260) is well advised to spend a few bucks and buy some national magazines that provide reviews of both the recording quality and the music.

Which brings us, in a roundabout fashion, to talk about the recent release of Elvis Costello's first three albums in a boxed set entitled *2 1/2 Years*. Costello's career spans more than 15 years, and includes recordings whose sound has varied from early punk to country to his recent release with the classical Brodsky quartet. But no matter what format one finds him in, he displays a remarkable gift for crafting clear pop songs with clever lyrics and double entendres on top of one another until it makes you stop and—yes—even think. When was the last time a pop song did that? *2 1/2 Years* focuses on Costello's prodigious output during the early portion of his career, an effort that began with an album entitled *My Aim Is True*, a 1978 collection of songs that brought him immediate international attention if not immediate suc-

cess. Overcoming a band that had less talent than most, the recording begins with the scalding "Working Week," about the price of new found success: This song vents his frustration over having to work while attempting to become successful in a new job.

This is not the only place Costello turned to express his anger. In "Less than Zero" (a title apparently subsequently borrowed by Brent Easton Ellis for his novel about empty lives in L.A.) Costello effectively gave expression to all those lads whose lower economic class upbringing in class-conscious England relegated them to a relatively hopeless existence. *My Aim is True* is ultimately a collection of well-crafted songs that sometimes are better than the muscians collected to perform them.

Costello's rough-edged style but smooth as silk pop melodies and biting lyrics took a step up in his follow-up album, *This Year's Model*. Coupled for the first time with his band, The Attractions, he once again began with a song that would singe hair, "No Action." Costello leaves no doubt that he was planning to take his rightful place as one of the original angry young men of rock 'n' roll.

It would be a mistake to suggest that Costello is only angry, because he has always been a good judge of the mass-market culture in which he found himself. In "This Year's Model" he summarized, better than anyone else, the love/hate relationship that the public has with its celebrities. One need only reflect on the public's reaction to recent Tonya Harding news stories (or Michael Jackson or others) to understand the lyrics of this song: "You see her picture in a thousand places 'cause she's this year's girl."

While there are many good songs on *This Year's Model*, the one that deserves a slight bit of extra attention is the album's concluding number, "Night

Rally," Costello's warning about taking the English fascist movement too lightly. It's difficult to hear that song today without thinking about the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Incidentally, this song was removed from the U.S. release of *This Year's Model* because record executives thought it "too English." It appears here in its normal playing order for the first time on a domestic release, followed by the original finale, the bite-the-hand-that-feeds-you bitch-a-thon "Radio Radio."

Following the gusto of *This Year's Model* it was hard to believe that Costello could continue to top himself, but the third album in this remarkable collection just about does that. Originally to be entitled *Emotional Fascism* (now there's a warm and fuzzy title!) the record company retitled it *Armed Forces*. The content remains the same, with Costello once again exploring his country, his life and the similarities between the two.

In summary, *2 1/2 Years* is full of sound and fury and provides numerous thrills and chills; musically, lyrically and sonically. In addition to the three albums mentioned above, this set also comes with additional music that stretches each disc to about 75 minutes in length as well as a live album recorded in that same era.

This collection is no mere blast from the past, but one whose vitality continues to exert a powerful musical influence.

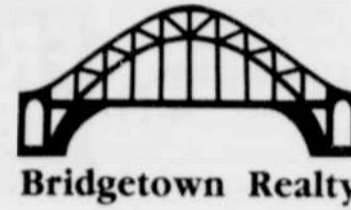
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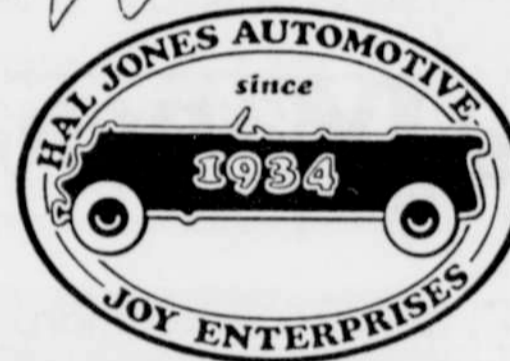


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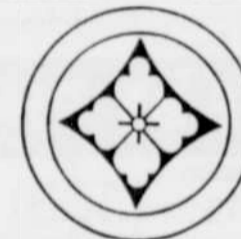
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