

Elvis Costello

and the Attractions

By Ashley Kahn



1 And it came to pass that many tribes were spread across the land, divided by the music they made and the clothes they wore. One danced in tight skins of many colors, one sang of peace and allowed no razor to touch their heads, and one sang of wrath and shaved their heads and rent their garments.

2 From the East a singer came, whose words were plenty and whose songs found favor from all tribes. But the singer was strange, for his hair was neither long nor shaved and he called himself with a kingly name and he sang of wrath and yet said he was not wrathful.

IN SOME WAYS, 1977 IS ALMOST ANCIENT HISTORY now, back when a skinny-tied, gap-toothed, Fender-banging Buddy Holly look-alike from England formed a band, called it the Attractions and dared to name himself after the King of Rock & Roll. At first, Elvis Costello seemed a part of punk's spit and audacity, his music spinning aggression into slashing riffs with lyrics that became slogans of the season. "I'm not angry – anymore," he claimed through clenched teeth. "Everything," he charged, "means less than zero." "My aim," he promised in the title of his debut album, "is true."

And so it was. In short order, the focused flash of Costello's arrival gave way to a well-targeted succession of musical styles and influences. His music – already filtering traces of Sixties rock, garage bands and reggae – began to channel the sounds of Tin Pan Alley and country, Motown and Sixties soul, big-band swing

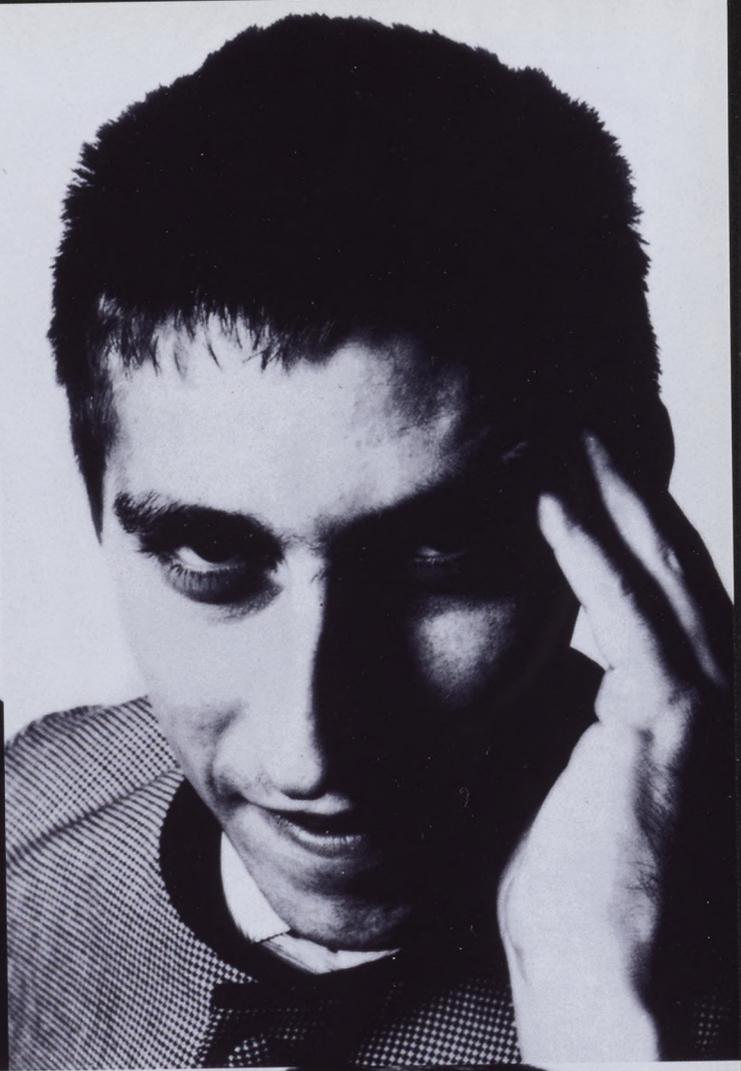
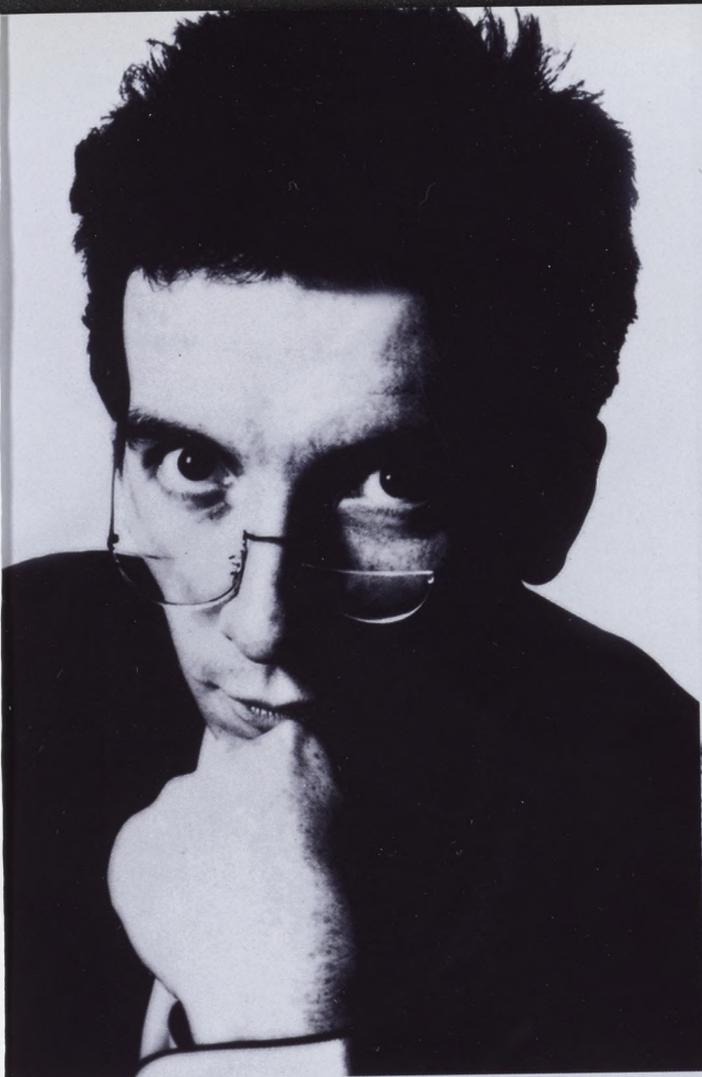
and lush Hollywood soundtracks. His songwriting revealed a depth and wit and prolificacy unmatched by most popular tunesmiths, let alone his punk-driven peers; Dylan comparisons were inevitable and earned. Each album defied expectation and defined an ever-widening musical embrace.

Costello was less a product of his time, it turned out, than of his parents' expansive record collection. "My mother says I could work the record player before I could walk," reports the London-born Declan McManus, as Costello's birth certificate reads. Music was a given from the outset: His mother was a record-department clerk at Selfridge's and his father a dance-band singer who recorded intermittent-

ly as Day Costello. "We listened constantly to jazz: Ella Fitzgerald, Sinatra, Mel Tormé, Tony Bennett... I had very sophisticated taste in music until I was about eleven, when I discovered the Beatles and they became everything." Three years later, young Declan



Four angry young men: Elvis Costello (né Declan McManus), Steve Nieve, Bruce Thomas, Pete Thomas (clockwise from top left)





Armed Forces: Elvis Costello and the Attractions – Steve Nieve, Costello, Pete Thomas and Bruce Thomas (from left) – pump it up during a 1994 performance.

saw his future. “I knew I had a career by the time I was fourteen – it just took the rest of the world a little longer to work it out.” Like many before him, he traipsed through his teens donning musical monikers (“D.C. Costello” was a mid-Seventies folk incarnation) and roles (leading the country-rock band Flip City) before signing with a fledgling label, Stiff Records, and settling into his best-known identity by early ’77.

Signing to Stiff not only put the budding star in the hands of Jake Riviera, a determined entrepreneur with a flair for guerilla-style marketing, but it allowed Costello to work with Nick Lowe, as well. A bassist and talented songwriter in his own right, Lowe provided the production guidance that steered Costello’s first studio efforts: two singles – “Less Than Zero” and “Alison” – and an album, *My Aim Is True*, featuring the support of transplanted American band Clover. (Historical footnote #1: Lowe would produce Costello’s next four albums, and Clover lead singer Huey Lewis would find greater fame back home in the Eighties.)

Swept up in ’77’s summer of punk, Costello, his album and even his record label (releasing era-defining albums by Nick Lowe, Ian Dury and Wreckless Eric) became fixtures on the exploding British music scene. Costello’s bespectacled image

The four forged a tight, intuitive and versatile unit

may have implied geek more than cheek, but the bite in his music and the brevity of his songs were one with headline-makers like the Damned and the Sex Pistols. His star on the rise and in need of consistent backup, Costello carefully recruited the Attractions, a stripped-down combo of wide pedigree: classically trained keyboardist Steve Nason (soon recast as Nieve), session bassist Bruce Thomas and country-rock drummer Pete Thomas (no relation). Their band name ringing with marquee-topping promise, the four forged a tight, intuitive and suitably versatile unit for the songwriter’s creative current.

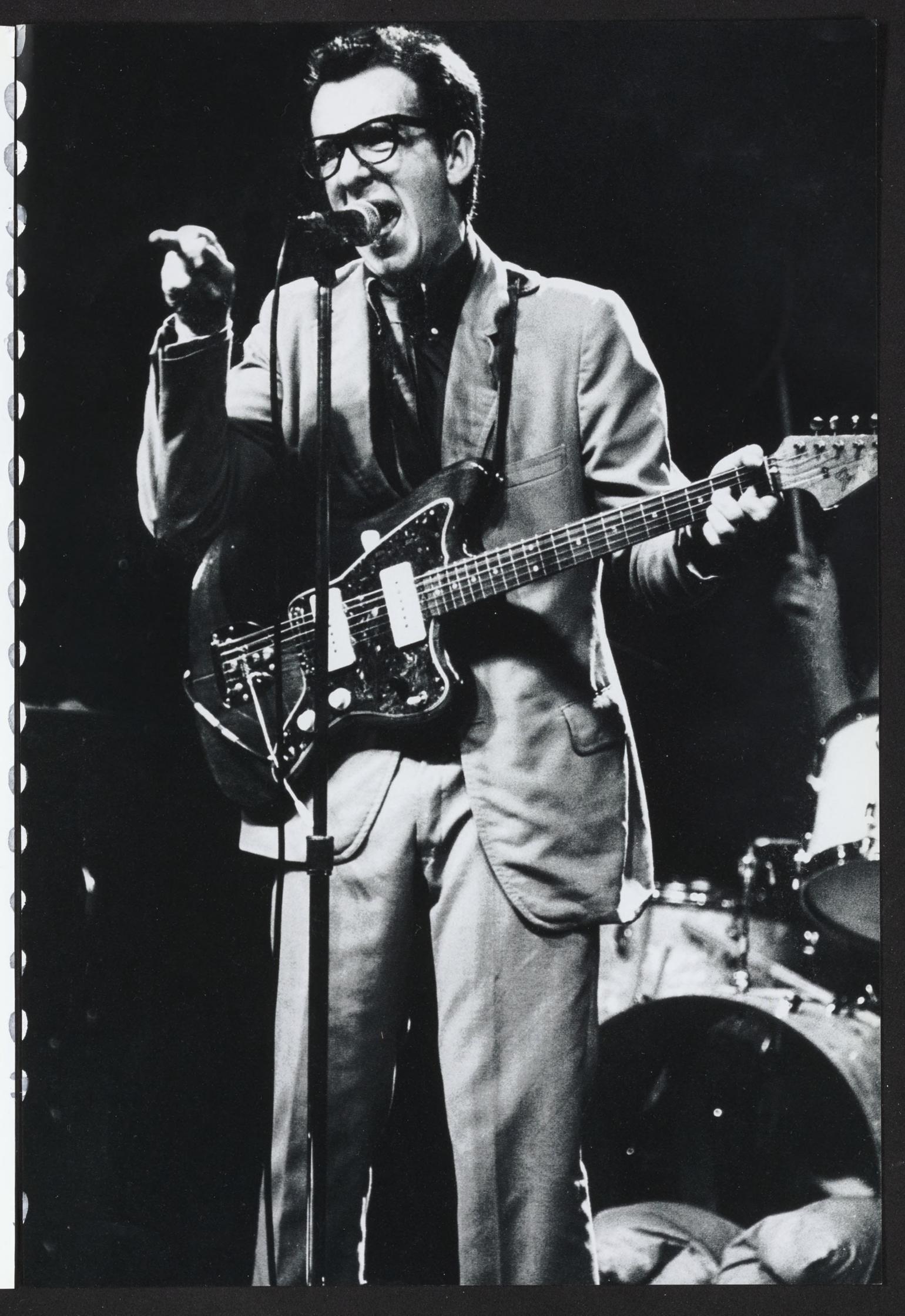
With the U.K. already taking notice, Costello set his sights on the far side of the Atlantic and took matters into his own hands. An impromptu curbside performance outside a CBS sales conference in London grabbed the attention of record-company executives, the press and the local police. Each week saw the group’s profile climb higher (reaching the U.K. Top Twenty, opening for Santana) and higher (leading the legendary Stiffs Live tour of England, signing with Columbia Records). Before ’77 had come to a close, Elvis Costello and the Attractions made their first U.S. appearances, performed on national television and began building a loyal and enduring following in America. (Historical footnote #2: Within a year, as a measure of Costello’s reach and respect, even mainstream idols such as Linda Ronstadt would opt to cover “Alison.” In 1980 she did the same with three more Costello tunes, while C&W legend George Jones recorded “Stranger in the House.”)

In retrospect, the next few years flashed by with a breathtaking outpouring of music. Critically celebrated and instantly influential albums, *This Year’s Model*, *Armed Forces*, the soul-charged *Get Happy!!*, continued to ring with titles both polemic and anthemic: “Pump It Up,” “Accidents Will Happen,” “High Fidelity,” “(What’s So Funny ’Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding” (the last penned by Lowe).

Costello the singer proved able to belt out the rough stuff, then caress tunes more tame and tender. Costello the songwriter could rip and rhyme and find inspiration anywhere. There were songs that flowed from the past (“Welcome to the Working Week,” influenced by a job at an Elizabeth Arden cosmetics factory) and present (“Radio, Radio,” on his inability to break into the closed playlists of American rock radio). There were songs



Costello has changed musical styles as often as he has eyeglass frames.





lashing out at political issues ("Oliver's Army," on Britain's mishandling of the Irish situation) and speaking sardonically, chillingly, of love and passion ("Two Little Hitlers"). His third album found him willfully weaving together the personal and the public (*Emotional Fascism* was its original title), reflecting the fish tank into which fame and fashion had thrust him.

Trust (1981) proved Costello's kaleidoscopic view, delivering a buffet of musical flavors – rock, rockabilly, dancehall – and yielded the hit "Clubland." Soon after, Costello and the Attractions journeyed to Nashville, where legendary producer Billy Sherrill (Tammy Wynette, George Jones) shaped the thematic album *Almost Blue*, featuring classic country material by Hank Williams, Merle Haggard, Gram Parsons and others. The year 1982 saw *Imperial Bedroom* – all sonic texture and brilliant ambition – hailed as Costello's pop masterpiece, resulting from a self-conscious "rock star" effort: generous in budget and produced by former Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick. Sadly, the commercial success of *Bedroom* and the group's next three albums, *Punch the Clock*, *Goodbye Cruel World* and *Blood & Chocolate*, never equaled the works' artistic accomplishments (save for "Everyday I Write the Book," a U.S. Top Forty hit in 1983). In 1986 a slightly disgruntled Costello disbanded the Attractions for eight years.

For Costello, the Eighties held little inspiration ("the decade that music forgot," he recently wrote), which partially accounts for a project-hopping wanderlust that began in 1985 and has yet to subside. He produced Irish pub rockers the Pogues. He took on British TV and film roles. Drawing together seasoned musicians from far-flung ethnic traditions, he recorded his first solo release, the excellent multicultural *King of America*. He collaborated with a wide range of music makers (T Bone Burnett, Daryl Hall, Paul McCartney, New Orleans' Dirty Dozen Brass Band), often under increasingly humorous aliases (the Coward Brothers, Napoleon Dynamite, the Imposter, the Emotional Toothpaste). As his least favorite decade wound down, Costello ironically notched a career-high chart in the United States with the Top Twenty "Veronica," off his solo effort *Spike*.

Costello has since demonstrated even more restlessness, pushing the scope and velocity of his ventures through the Nineties. He recorded his own *Mighty Like a Rose*, a brooding, thoughtful song set, then reunited and toured with the Attractions for two pop-flavored albums, *Brutal Youth* and *All This Useless Beauty*. TV shows like England's *G.B.H.* and *Jake's Progress* and Hollywood films such as *Notting Hill* and *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* all benefited from Costello's musical input. He became the rock world's Most Likely Unlikely Partner, collaborating successfully with the classical Brodsky Quartet; opera-trained vocalist Anne Sofie von Otter; pop maestro Burt Bacharach; Transvision Vamp singer Wendy James; and a slew of veteran jazzers including guitarist Bill Frisell, Tony Bennett, the Mingus Big Band and Debbie Harry and the Jazz Passengers. Long the king of the obscure cover, he

Costello is a walking resource of musical styles and songs



Costello halts a performance during the Attractions' 'SNL' debut in 1977.



Costello, 1979. Right: Bruce Thomas, Pete Thomas, Nieve, Costello, circa '83.

released *Kojak Variety*, a collection of lost soul, R&B and rock classics. (Historical footnote #3: Never one to let his hard-rocking exterior prevent him from exposing a more fragile, feminine side, Costello has wrapped his baritone around ballads associated with Dionne Warwick, Patsy Cline, the Shirelles and Billie Holiday.)

Today Costello is a walking resource of musical styles and songs, celebrated as much for his encyclopedic taste as for his extensive legacy (he has overseen a digital repackaging of his entire catalogue twice over). The Attractions, following a personnel shift, have evolved into the Imposters, with whom Costello recently recorded *When I Was Cruel* and continues to tour. Still the champion of overlooked talent and lesser-known legends, he remains generously collaborative, seeking new challenges with an apparently tireless work ethic. His career stands as an improvised work in progress, always threatening surprise... which brings to mind a burst of impulse from ancient times:

December 1977: Costello and the Attractions were the eleventh-hour replacement on *Saturday Night Live*, after Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren pulled his band upon learning the appearance was unpaid. So there were the Attractions live, reaching the widest audience of their nascent career; Pete Thomas wore a T-shirt that slyly read THANKS MALC. Costello, all jitter and nervous jangle, launched into "Less Than Zero," then abruptly halted the tune with a wave of his arms, suddenly determining that a song about a British fascist didn't hold enough relevance for an American audience. The Top Forty diatribe "Radio Radio" became the song's spontaneous substitute.

It's as defining a moment as any to represent a winding journey filled with stops, shifting focus and startling invention. For a quarter century now, we've watched Elvis Costello take aim and – with brutal intelligence and honesty – hit his mark.

3 And the tribes saw this and asked him of these things, that his name was kingly and that his countenance was wrathful and yet he said he was not.

4 And the singer spake unto them, answering, "Blame it on Cain." □