

National Ransom, Elvis Costello and Americana music

By Hiram Lee
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British singer-songwriter Elvis Costello has been a significant figure in popular music for just over three decades now. During that time he has produced no shortage of remarkable songs and albums, including *This Year's Model* (1978), *Armed Forces* (1979), *Get Happy* (1980) and *Imperial Bedroom* (1982). While his strongest work was produced during the 1970s and 1980s, Costello remains capable of turning out strong work, as the recent albums *When I Was Cruel* (2002) and *The Delivery Man* (2004) both attest. He remains a powerful live performer and is perhaps a better vocalist today than in the years during which his music first gained notoriety.

His latest album, *National Ransom*, is unfortunately not among his best. Like last year's *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane*, *National Ransom* once again finds Costello exploring traditional American music, primarily country, folk and other forms of "Americana," along with straight-ahead rock and even the sounds of early twentieth century pop standards.

One must say that artists "trying on" the sounds of traditional American folk music have all too frequently done so very poorly. One can recall any number of alt-country bands or "old timey" performers from the 1990s who adopted the exaggerated dress of country-western performers of the 1950s and played music that was both sentimental homage and ironic critique. In many cases, there was a tendency for artists, disgusted perhaps with the present state of music and cultural life, to retreat into a form of art considered more "authentic," uncorrupted by today's commercial interests. Emulating the supposedly simpler ways of "simpler" times—which were, in reality, anything but simple—have turned out disappointing results for more than a few artists over the years. Such work has the feeling of costuming and

caricature.

As for Costello, the singer has experimented with American country music throughout his career. In 1981, he recorded *Almost Blue*, a very good album of country music covers including an excellent version of George Jones's "A Good Year for the Roses" and a memorable uptempo version of Hank Williams's "Why Don't You Love Me (Like You Used to Do)?" In 1986, there was *King of America*, a strong album of original songs performed with a band including legendary country guitarist James Burton.

Perhaps Costello's most successful venture into country music, however, came on the 2004 album *The Delivery Man*, a work in which Costello struck the perfect balance between his country influences and his own unique sound. Unfortunately, *National Ransom*, like its predecessor *Secret, Profane & Sugarcane*, finds the singer overcome by his influences. At times his efforts to reproduce the "aura" of traditional country music or a kind of vaudevillian pop music leads him into the territory of cliché.

The album is written in such a way that each song is meant to evoke a particular place in time, although these amount to little more than snapshots in which a great deal is left out of the frame. Frequently, it isn't clear how the songs, either in musical arrangement or lyrical content, are meant to reflect the times in which they are set.

There is a song about a cowboy singer from the 1930s, "Jimmie Standing in the Rain," and a femme fatale from the 1920s in "A Slow Drag With Josephine." Presumably, these are meant as references to country music legend Jimmie Rodgers and perhaps cabaret singer Josephine Baker, although neither song appears to deal directly with those figures. Both come across as novelty songs about which there is little to

take seriously.

For a musician like Costello, capable of composing unique and surprising material, of doing the unexpected within the popular song format, one is disappointed to find far too many songs on *National Ransom* that feel merely adequate and no more. Songs like “Five Small Words,” “I Lost You,” “The Spell That You Cast” or “My Lovely Jezebel,” none of them particularly bad but all fairly typical rock or country compositions, come and go without leaving a lasting impression in the listener’s mind. These songs make up the bulk of the album.

“Church Underground” is intelligently written and well performed, but also limited. The song concerns a young woman who wants to make it big in show business. “She worked for tips in a 10-cent dance, said moving pictures might pay per chance,” sings Costello. She finds she is unable to make it big ultimately, as “her lonely voice was just a ruin in these riches.” Costello has little to say on the subject beyond providing a vivid portrayal of the character’s suffering and disappointment. This is just yet another washed-up character, another nameless “he” or “she” like the dozens who have strolled through Costello’s narratives—however vividly and often memorably portrayed—over the years. It is not a bad song, as far as it goes, but it doesn’t go far enough. Costello is unable to penetrate further into these lives.

While the album is disappointing on the whole, there are a few moments in which *National Ransom* approaches excellence. “Stations of the Cross,” a song meant to evoke New Orleans in 2005, during the Hurricane Katrina disaster, is beautifully composed, with a moving vocal melody built around an interesting rhythmic framework featuring a walking bass line placed underneath an unusual, loping drumbeat from the talented Pete Thomas.

In “You Hung The Moon,” written as though it were a kind of pop standard, Costello sings hauntingly of the punishment meted out to a young war deserter. He demonstrates a remarkable control over his voice as he sings, “So slap out his terrors/And sneer at his tears/We deal with deserters like this/From the breach to the barrel, the bead we will level/Break earth with a shovel, quick march on the double/Lower him shallow like tallow down in the abyss.”

In the album’s title track, Costello deals directly with

the economic crisis. He protests conditions under which working people are forced to pay for an economic crisis for which they are not to blame while the financial criminals responsible continue to rake in vast amounts of wealth. “They’re running wild,” he sings, “just like some childish tantrum/Meanwhile we’re working every day/Paying off the National Ransom.”

Regrettably, these few songs are among the only instances on the album in which one feels Costello is dealing seriously or urgently with the enormous burdens and challenges facing working people in the world today.

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