

Elvis Costello: Shabby Doll or Fancy Man?

By Jennifer Amaya

It is inevitable that a songwriter's musical influences will have a profound effect on the music that they write and/or perform. There are songwriters who embrace their influences, there are some who draw all of their own materials directly from other artist's works, and there are those who specifically try to avoid sounding like anyone else. Regardless of how they approach the issue, most popular musicians settle into one distinct style (adding a little bit of their own flattery, of course) and rarely stray. There are a select few artists, however, who spend their careers writing, embracing, and morphing together a diverse selection of musical styles. Elvis Costello is one such character.

And quite the "character" he is. His image comes from the punkster movement but more clearly defines the later sub-genre "New Wave," where "thin neckties, rockabilly fashions, and mod culture from the 1950s"¹ was made popular. He is often compared to a roughed-up Buddy Holly, with "a reputation early on as kind of a bad boy, which was very much in keeping with the punk ethic."² But, regardless of his obnoxious, self-righteous attitude and overabundant use of the f-word, (or perhaps *because* of these things), the public fell in love with Elvis Costello.

Costello's lyrics are probably the most original and important ingredients in his music. His lyrics, as a whole, fall well within the punk genre: "...Punk lyrics introduced a confrontational frankness of expression and social and political relevance that had been missing from contemporary music."³ Costello is known for introducing controversial themes surrounding social or political issues, but he is also well-known as a romantic. Regardless of subject matter, his lyrics are often brutally honest, can be somewhat bizarre and/or disturbing, and are rarely literal. Costello is the king of wordplay, a literary

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org>, 5/22/06.

² <http://www.elviscostello.info/articles/n/nbc.020830a.html>, 5/22/06.

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org>, 5/22/06.

technique in which the nature of the words used themselves become part of the subject of the work. In fact, “he has mockingly described himself in interviews as ‘rock and roll’s Scrabble champion.’”⁴

When social issues had effects on him, Costello wrote about them. The war in the Falklands, for example, inspired two of his songs, one of them being his 1983 release, *Pills and Soap*, which is described as having “...jaw-breaking wordplay that baffles as much as it enlightens.”⁵ He also wrote about “...adolescent attempts to attain a personal identity and independence,” and “examined [them] with sensitive compassion and wit,”⁶ as he did in *Shabby Doll* in 1982. Women, especially, are attracted to Costello’s romantic side. During a 2002 taping of the Today Show on NBC, Diane Curry asked Costello, “...would you agree with this idea that a lot of your lyrics...are about women and relationships, and the toughness of relationships of love?,” to which Costello responded, “I think...nearly all songs are about, ‘I lost somebody, I found somebody, I believe in something, I want something,’ in every language, everywhere in the world. And maybe even birds and bees sing that stuff, as well. So, it’s just human stuff or animal stuff.”⁷

Whoever’s “stuff” it is that he’s writing about, you have to *think* in order to *get* the meaning of Costello’s lyrics, which is often why critics disagree about the validity and overall commercial quality of his tunes. The lyrics to *Pills and Soap*, for example, have been both criticized and praised. Following are two examples of quite different reactions to Costello’s lyrics. First:

Despite Elvis’ reputation as a wordsmith, this song
is definitely here because of the melody and arrangement,
‘cause these words don’t really add up.
There are several well realized horror scenarios,
such as the ghoulish media scene... [and]...
the central image...of Noah’s ark...
Whatever it is, it is not really very clear.⁸

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org>, 5/22/06.

⁵ Connelly, Christopher.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/elviscostello/albums/album/106448/review/5946553>, 5/22/06.

⁶ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷ <http://www.elviscostello.info/articles/n/nbc.020830a.html>, 5/22/06.

⁸ Barger, Al. <http://blogcritics.org/archives/2003/05/27/011234.php>, 5/22/06.

And, second:

The song is a stark, eloquent and uncompromising outburst, evidently describing contemporary Britain in lines like:
“*The king is in his counting house, some folks have all the luck,
And all we get is pictures of Lord and Lady Muck...*”⁹

Costello’s *Shabby Doll* is in quite the same place. In fact, it appears as if no critic has even attempted to dissect the meaning of the song’s lyrics, although they have commented on the album (*Imperial Bedroom*) as a whole, saying “...its intensity is cumulative, the depth of feeling evident in the hard-won wisdom of Costello’s lyrics and his extraordinary attention to musical detail.”¹⁰ Now, that description is all fine and dandy, but unless you have a PhD in literature, a strong background in poetry, or a knack for defining highly-metaphorical language, as a listener you are left on your own to interpret a big, metaphorical mess. It might help to know that in this particular album, critics have said that “...Costello has become an expert storyteller; he now knows that the accusing finger can often be pointed in both directions, and this has given him a newfound generosity of viewpoint.”¹¹ So, armed with that bit of information, one could conclude that *Shabby Doll* is possibly about a soul-searching, big-shot man who ridicules others, only to find out he could be ridiculed in much the same way. After all, he starts by accusing, “*She’s just a Shabby Doll,*” only to realize later, “*Now I’m a Shabby Doll...*” But, who *really* knows for sure what meaning lies behind the lyrics? Perhaps because the lyrics are open for individual interpretation is the reason for it’s success -- fans can either relate to the lyrics in whichever way they wish to dream up, or they can gain some satisfaction out of believing they have deciphered the meaning correctly. After all, it is a “word game,” and the listeners are the key players.

⁹ <http://www.elviscostello.info/articles/n/nme.830528a2.html> , 5/22/06.

¹⁰ Puterbaugh, Parke.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/elviscostello/albums/album/188533/review/6067566>, 5-22-06.

¹¹ Ibid.

But, for the listeners who cannot satisfactorily decipher the lyrical content, Costello has certainly supplied some bearable music. Often criticized for stealing from several genres at once, Costello could probably not even help it. He grew up with a musical father who sang with the Joe Loss Orchestra, a group which is most notorious for turning “anything that was a good tune into something in their own style.”¹² The music played by the Orchestra “had no boundaries, it could be jazz, blues, light classic or rock and roll -- if you could dance to it, then Joe’s orchestra would play it.”¹³ If he learned one thing from his father’s experience with the Orchestra, Costello most likely learned this: “By playing whatever was proving popular at the time, the band outlasted all its rivals.”¹⁴ Costello, perhaps even unconsciously, has done the same with his own career.

Many of Costello’s musical ideas stem from punk rock. Examples include: Simple musical structures and arrangements; works with very short durations; works with fast or double-time tempos; and instrumentation made up of drums, electric guitar, bass, and vocals. His sound is often described as a “harsh, driving rock formula, which by now owes a lot to punk, but goes far beyond it.”¹⁵ While he is known for pushing the envelope, not settling for the simple or obvious, and taking ideas one step further than the norm, he is also a master of simplicity, taking ideas one step *backward* from time to time, which is exactly what he has done in both *Pills and Soap* and *Shabby Doll*.

“Music has to get to people,” he says, “In the heart, in the head. I don’t care where, as long as it fucking gets them. So much music gets thrown away. It’s such a fucking waste. That’s why I like and write short songs. It’s a discipline. There’s no disguise. You can’t cover up songs like that by dragging banks of fucking synthesizers and choirs of angels. They have to stand up on their own. With none of that nonsense. Songs are just so fucking effective. People seem to have forgotten that.”¹⁶ And, yes, *Pills and Soap* and *Shabby Doll* are (at least, musically) evidence of Costello’s simple, yet “fucking effective” songs.

¹² <http://ww.45-rpm.org/uk/dirj/joel.htm>, 5-22-06.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <http://www.warr.org/costello.html>, 5-22-06.

¹⁶ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Evidence of minimalism exists in each tune, although moreso in *Pills and Soap*. In fact, the minimalist movement in all classical art forms co-existed at the time, so it's not surprising that Costello (and other artists) developed a "...new, stripped-down approach to rock." He says, "I want to get away from the conventional group sound. I hate hard-rock bands. I hate anything with fucking extended solos or bands that are concerned with any kind of instrumental virtuosity... There are going to be no fucking soloists in my band."¹⁷ And, in fact, there are no real "solos" in either of the tunes under discussion, although each instrument does take on a solo part due to the lack of doubling. The *Pills and Soap* instrumentation is stripped down to mostly piano, with a hint of synthesizer, and synthesized drums and handclaps. *Shabby Doll* exemplifies Costello's basic stripped-down ensemble of electric guitar, bass, keys, and drums. There's nothing "thick" about the texture of either tune. The orchestrations are light and airy. At their fullest, each individual instrument occupies their own frequency range, and the best example of any doubling occurs between the bass drum and bass guitar in *Shabby Doll*. The piano is handled with virtuosity in each tune, it's part encompassing the entire range of the instrument (which is not "normal" for pop music, in which the piano is regularly played at it's mid-range). Further, each instrumental part is heard equally and is just as important as any other. Even at the end of *Shabby Doll*, when it sounds as if a solo section is emerging, all of the instruments have important musical lines that carry the tune to it's close. Where he could sustain power chords in all instruments, Costello will only sustain the chord in the guitar, and will allow the piano to arpeggiate. Each note appears to be purposefully placed within the texture. The music contains definite musical gestures, and is loaded with the development of those figures (on each repeated verse, for example). Hence, while "...Costello's music refers constantly to the classic pop/rock standards of the last decade, each song being sharply defined and full of irresistible hooks and delightful instrumental phrasing,"¹⁸ his music is also much more artistic and intelligent than that of an average pop/rock songwriter.

¹⁷ <http://www.warr.org/costello.html>, 5-22-06.

¹⁸ Brackett, David, *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

But, perhaps Costello is fooling us into thinking that he is the mastermind behind this artistically-crafted design. His keyboardist, Steve Nieve, was with him for most of his career, and is actually credited for much of the Costello sound. Specifically in regards to *Pills and Soap*, it is said that, “The real expression of fucked-up-ness comes from Steve Nieve and his gently and subtly disturbed keyboards. Again, Nieve’s Norman Bates keyboards are a whole layer of hooks in themselves. Tasty ear candy - with razor blades in it.”¹⁹ And, about the *Shabby Doll* album, “Due credit must go to Steve Nieve, who orchestrated many of the songs and whose keyboards predominantly color in the sound.”²⁰ It is unknown just how much of a “key player” (pun intended) Steve Nieve was in the production and arrangement of Costello’s tunes, but it should be noted that Nieve was classically trained at the Royal Academy of Music, so it might fit to say that a lot of the classical artistry in Costello’s music might possibly come from Nieve.

Also, Costello’s producers are very important to his overall success. There is a burning issue regarding the reasoning behind his choice of producers for various albums: “Critics have speculated that Costello’s choice of...producers reflected an attempt for another hit record... However, it seems more like Costello’s continuation of his quest for a new sound.”²¹ So, the burning question is: Is Costello sacrificing his music for commercial gain (by employing former Beatles engineer, Geoff Emerick, for *Shabby Doll*, for example), or is he simply being himself, and experimenting with new sounds? Costello says in his 1994 Rykodisc reissue of *Imperial Bedroom*, “I wanted to try a few things in the studio that I suspected would quickly exhaust Nick’s patience...”²² *Imperial Bedroom*, thus, was the first Costello Album not produced by Nick Lowe, who was known as a “one-take,” “non-producing” producer. This switch also happened at a time when Costello was in need of a hit record, so the speculation continues; however, even though Emerick added his own touch to the Costello works on *Punch The Clock*, the album is still very “Costello” in nature. In fact, it appears to have done what Costello desired -- it more distinctly defined his role as a “New Age” songwriter, with “...music that tended toward experimentation, lyrical complexity, or more polished production...”

¹⁹ <http://blogcritics.org/archives/2003/05/27/011234.php>, 5/22/06.

²⁰ <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/elviscostello/albums/album/188533/review/6067566>, 5/22/06.

²¹ <http://www.stylusmagazine.com/feature.php?ID=383>, 5/22/06.

²² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Bedroom, 5/22/06.

What appears to hold all of Costello's various styles and productions together is his voice. His vocal roots are in jazz and, once again, punk. From jazz we get the scoops and falls, and the "...angst-ridden, moaning vocals."²³ From punk we get the signature pitched "speak-singing," and a melodic timbre that is often nasally or throaty. But, from Costello, alone, we get a tired, almost exhausted, breathy vocal timbre that permeates in all of his works, regardless of style. Even when singing very intense music, Costello breathes and breaks often, and sounds nearly (but not quite) strained as he reaches his upper register. His melodies are sweet, but monotonous, and he projects them always with what has been described as a "take it or leave it attitude,"²⁴ which also stems from that tired, careless, yet addictive timbre.

In *Pills and Soap* the main vocal melody is low-pitched and monotonous during the verse, sweetly melodic during the chorus, and angst-ridden and moaning during the hook. *Shabby Doll*'s vocal progression could be described in much the same way. Costello's vocals in *Shabby Doll* begin light, manipulative, and speech-like. The *Shabby Doll* chorus is melodic, yet more tiresome than the *Pills and Soap* chorus. The overall tone of the *Shabby Doll* vocals is very depressing because of the continuously tiring quality of his vocals. That trademarked Costello sound, although tiring, depressing, airy, and almost boring compared to most artists, is, ironically, what draws the listener in to listen more intently, as if they really are feeling the pain and desires that the singer is emoting. It is this quality in Costello's vocals that makes his music his own, and which makes his music authentic and great.

Costello's vocals, alone, are highly-recognizable, unique, and authentic. Combined with his highly-intelligent lyrics and compositional techniques, he has created for himself a template for an original sound that he can apply to whatever style of music he wishes to pursue. Costello answers positively the question, "Can an artist be authentic while just singing a cover tune?" (For proof, listen to Costello's version of *My Funny Valentine*.) He is what audiences look for in pop stars - versatile and talented, sure of himself, and original, and because of that, "he remains the most consistently interesting songwriter in rock & roll..."²⁵

²³ <http://www.warr.org/costello.html>, 5/22/06.

²⁴ <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/elviscostello/albums/album/106448/review/5946553>, 5/22/06.

²⁵ <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/elviscostello/albums/album/106448/review/5946553>, 5-22-06.