



Show Notes: Elvis Costello

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BY JIM KELLY (GUEST CONTRIBUTOR)



Elvis Costello and the Imposters

Sony Centre for the Performing Arts

Thursday, June 23

Elvis Costello and the Imposters brought a carnival sideshow's worth of stage props and assistants, pro and amateur, to colourful life Thursday night in Toronto as part of the second leg of this year's well-received Spectacular Spinning Songbook tour. The show resurrected the whacky concept Costello legendarily brought to concert-goers initially in 1986, in which audience members are selected to spin a roulette-style wheel of songs.

The wheel dominated the stage to the right of the band, and featured an intoxicating array of titles from throughout Costello's near-35-year catalogue, plus a sprinkling of fan-pleasing covers ("And Your Bird Can Sing"!) and some special bonus categories. To the left of the stage, a red and gold go-go cage awaited anyone daring enough to step inside.

On with the show!



8:10 PM: The band takes the stage and launches into a quick-fire succession of classics. First, “I Hope You’re Happy Now,” segueing into a cover of Nick Lowe’s “Heart of the City,” then “Mystery Dance,” “Uncomplicated” and “Radio Radio.” The Imposters—bassist Davey Faragher, drummer Pete Thomas, and keyboard genius Steve Nieve—are in usual fine form. The songs come fast, but the pace is measured, and the bespectacled singer is sporting a somewhat conservative blue suit and tie topped with a natty straw fedora.

8:15 PM: Through all these opening numbers, a go-go dancer is working it in the gilded cage (don’t worry folks, it’s not a real cage; the “bars” are actually hanging strings of beads). She strikes a perfect balance: sexy but not raunchy; alluring but fun. Good thing too, because many of the men in the audience are greying at the temples, a little thicker around the middle, and I’m sure their ol’ tickers aren’t as robust as when they first picked up *This Year’s Model*.

8:25 PM: After “Radio Radio,” Costello introduces the cage dancer as “the former Mother Superior of Our Lady Of Perpetual Torment, Miss Dixie De La Fontaine.” It’s a nice bit of misdirection while he executes a slight wardrobe change. Now sporting a top hat and brandishing a walking stick like a vaudeville magician, Costello introduces himself as Napoleon Dynamite, our emcee for the Spectacular Spinning Songbook, “the showbiz marvel of the age.” While the Imposters pad the proceedings with a muzak-like rendition of Blood, Sweat & Tears’ “Spinning Wheel,” Costello Mr. Dynamite gives us the wheel spiel. “Look at these hits! We got songs all about love. We got songs about sex. We got songs about death—and dancing. But not necessarily in that order. Are you man or woman enough to come and spin this wheel?”

8:29 PM: We have our first contestant! Hostess Katarina Valentina Valentine (“Your guide from your place in the stalls to your place in the stars”) brings a young lady named Simoné from the audience up on stage. Costello invites her to spin the wheel, and it lands on... “Everyday I Write the Book.” The young lady takes a seat in the “Society Lounge,” a small retro cocktail bar set up in front of Nieve’s keyboards. Before long though, she takes full advantage of the moment—hopping into the cage and dancing up a storm, thoroughly enjoying herself.

8:40 PM: Costello is in crooner mode: no guitar, just microphone in hand, prowling the front of the stage. Then he descends into the audience and sings his way around the aisles of the orchestra pit. While in the crowd, Costello plucks out a man and a woman—Gord and Allison—from their seats, and they’re granted a double spin of the wheel. (They get “Turpentine” and “Long Honeymoon.”) Costello lures Allison into the cage, much to the delight of the crowd. Further delight ensues when Gord joins them. For the record, Gord—perhaps 40ish, somewhat rotund, thinning hair, glasses, probably an IT professional—shows no evidence of ever having cage-danced before. But, like all contestants, they’re having a great time. Who wouldn’t?

9:02 PM: Costello and the band abandon the wheel to play a few songs of their own choosing: “Beyond Belief” (one of his greatest tunes, rendered flawlessly, a marvel to witness), “Big Tears,” and “Shabby Doll.” During the last song, Costello leans forward and a small stream of sweat trickles out from his sleeve. The man is still wearing the suit and tie, and he’s working hard for his money. No wonder he’s slimmed down substantially over the past few years.



9:13: Back to the wheel! Our new contestant is Kimberly, all the way from the balcony, and her spin gives us “Accidents Will Happen” much to the crowd’s approval. Looking like she came to the show straight from her downtown office job, Kimberly’s business-casual self hesitates for a few moments when Costello and the band start the song—and then she’s in the cage like a champ. This prompts Mary from a few spins ago, now back at her seat in the audience, to leap to her feet and shake her groove thing in a show of solidarity. Yes, it’s the Sisterhood of the Traveling Amateur Cage Dancers.

9:19 PM: Segueing from “Accidents Will Happen” into “Leave My Kitten Alone,” the pro go-go girl, Miss Dixie De La Fontaine, now joins Kimberly in the cage, and they start mirroring each other’s moves and spontaneously working out choreography. When the song is over, Kimberly triumphantly darts back up the aisle, receiving high-fives from several people along the way. It’s one of those moments.

9:55 PM: The main set comes to a close with a beautiful reading of “Shipbuilding,” Costello back in crooner mode. By this point his entire suit is drenched in sweat, including the left leg of his trousers down past the knee. Wandering the stage as he sings the impeccably crafted tune, at one point he pauses and looks down at the damp state of his attire as if he’s just now noticing it.

10:01 PM: Encore time. Costello’s opted for a partial wardrobe change, now wearing a checked sport coat, much like a Catskills comedian.

10:12 PM: Costello has changed yet again, now sporting a gold lame jacket and a leopard-skin pork pie hat. Definitely our favourite ensemble of the night. A contestant named Betty, with bobbed black hair and dark-rimmed glasses, has spun the wheel, and with some assistance from Costello it lands on a “Joker” banner. Costello decides to throw it to the crowd, and directs Betty to press the red button that lights up the huge “Request” sign at the front of the stage. It’s determined that what everyone wants is a little “Peace, Love, and Understanding.” With Betty dancing in the cage and the Imposters in full flight for this beloved anthem, Costello gestures for people to join them. Before long, audience members are hopping onstage to dance with the band. People come flying down the aisles. We count at least 25 people up there, including what looks like filmmaker Bruce McDonald in a large stetson.



10:29 PM: Now we see why the band was conserving energy earlier on: they were holding something in reserve for the final encores. And now they're letting it all out, revving up the ska-riffic bop of "(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea," and rocking a medley of "Waiting for the End of the World"/"I Can Only Give You Everything." Many of the people who had earlier seemed a bit too staid and calm (it is a fancy theatre after all) are now dancing in the aisles.

10:47 PM: Costello brings the night to a subdued and dignified close with "I Hope," a bonus track from the Japanese pressing of his latest, *National Ransom*. A crowd-pleasing two hours and 40 minutes after it began, the Spectacular Spinning Songbook is over. It feels like the circus has folded up the Big Top and left town. But we got to dance in the lioness's cage and take the Ringmaster's wheel for a spin. The Funnest Show on Earth!

Photos by Gregory Bennett.
