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## On the Road Again

### Live Reviews:

#### Elvis Costello

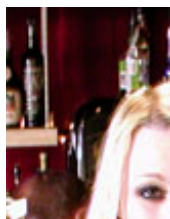
June 16, 1999  
Massey Hall, Toronto, Ontario

It had been 21 years since Elvis Costello last played Massey Hall. That was back in the heady days of 1977-78; what people like to refer to as his angry punk days. Back then, he had a chip on his shoulder the size of London Bridge and he and his band the Attractions performed their frenetic songs of guilt and revenge like they had everything to prove. Contrast that with his last Toronto appearance — three years ago at the Warehouse (after fresh paint fumes forced a move from the Government) — when he was carrying in his suitcase the collection of deftly crafted songs from that year's *All This Useless Beauty* album.

The evening consisted of songs he had originally written for others to sing, and which he performed not with the Attractions, but with only his long-time keyboard player from that combo, Steve Nieve, providing accompaniment on grand piano. This time around, though (still just he and Nieve), Costello was holding in his pocket a bevy of songs from last year's acclaimed collaboration with Burt Bacharach, *Painted From Memory*. And while the '96 show was brilliant, there was something about the new songs, the sparse arrangements, the minimal stage setting and subtle lighting, and the feeling inside old Massey that just seemed right.



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What struck me about these songs is that they are numbers that a performer needs to live in — to inhabit. And on this night, Costello was right at home. Nattily attired in a black suit with hair closely shorn and the ever-present dark-rimmed glasses (he was way ahead of everyone when it came to fashionable specs), Costello performed more than half a dozen songs without his guitar, when he would adopt what I came to call his Sinatra Mode: Relaxed stance, left hand nonchalantly tucked in his pants pocket, right hand resting on the microphone stand or stirring the air with sympathetic gestures. I'm sure there's a framed crooner's diploma hanging on the wall of his den back home in Dublin.

But Costello really played the songs, like one would play a room, using all the tools at his disposal — inserting dramatic pauses, jerking away from the microphone after delivering an emotionally charged line, or accenting a sentiment with demonstrative hand gestures. He ended "This House Is Empty Now" by stepping beyond the microphone toward the audience, singing without aid of amplification into the rapt silence of the hall, conjuring the acoustics of the song's barren rooms. (This was a trick he would revisit later in the evening, to great effect.)

Throughout the evening, Nieve's accompaniment added flesh to the bone of these sparser arrangements. Leaping stylistically from opera house to barrelhouse to bawdy house, the shaggy-haired, poker-faced Nieve played the keys like a mad professor one minute, and a love-struck muso the next.

While the evening held many highlights, including "Man Out Of Time," "Indoor Fireworks," "Pads Paws and Claws" and "Everyday I Write The Book," Costello's triumph was in the way he presented the mature *Painted From Memory* material

alongside his own stellar back catalogue, including several choice rubies from his early days such as "Watching the Detectives" "(I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea" "Accidents Will Happen" and "Little Triggers." The effect of the stripped-down arrangements was to underscore his own diverse and accomplished track record as a composer.

After all, this is the man who's worked with collaborators as disparate as the Attractions, the Brodsky Quartet, Paul McCartney, the Jazz Passengers and Bacharach. As if to show that his recent work with the Burt-ster was not a sudden whim, and that he was not merely the lyricist in the partnership like some latter-day Hal David, Costello offered up a few of his own noteworthy creations in jazz-pop balladry and classic songwriting craftsmanship. The lovely "Baby Plays Around" (co-written with his wife, former Pogue Cait O'Riordan), the mesmerizing melancholia of "Almost Blue" from 1982's *Imperial Bedroom*, and the smoky R&B of "Inch By Inch" (with Peggy Lee's "Fever" tacked on the end for good measure).

He also provided what were in effect career bookends; performing the first song he ever recorded, "Radio Sweetheart" (seguing into Van Morrison's "Jackie Wilson Said" as a sort of point-of-origin-reference and leading the audience in a call-and-response sing-along), and a new song written with Nieve but not yet committed to tape called "You Lie Sweetly," a tale about dealing with morning-after fall-out.

The set closed with the chestnut "Alison," and as the song wound down, Costello backed away from the microphone while repeating the "my aim is true" refrain as if it was receding into the past. Then, keeping the song's coda alive on his guitar, he drifted back to the microphone, shifting seamlessly into "In The Darkest Place," the forlorn lead-off track on *Painted From Memory*. One was struck by how the older song dovetailed into the newer composition not only literally, but musically and emotionally as well. The protagonist from "In The Darkest Place" could very well be the guy from "Alison" 20 years hence, perhaps a little wiser but no less sadder.

Then came the encores, which are always a treat at a Costello show. Wrapping up the first encore set with "Watching the Detectives," Costello and Nieve engaged in a game of musical cat and mouse, each trying to trip the other up, before ending the song together in a dramatic flourish. The second encore set gave us a pair of recent movie tunes: a cover of Charles Aznavour's "She," which Costello sings over the credits of the Julia Roberts-Hugh Grant romantic comedy *Notting Hill*, and a wonderfully charming and well-received take on Bacharach's "I'll Never Fall In Love Again," which the duo perform in a cameo in *Austin Powers 2: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. The mini-set ended with the incredible triumvirate of "Almost Blue", "Beyond Belief" and "I Want You," the latter a stunning display of emotional and musical dynamics.

But the crowd would not let him leave; they called him back for a third and fourth encore. For the finale, they were rewarded with a rendition of the wistful "Couldn't Call It Unexpected #4" from 1991's under-rated *Mighty Like A Rose* album. The performance was notable not only for being a capella, but sans amplification as well. Without a microphone, Costello stood at the lip of the stage and delivered the song using only the acoustics of the hall. It was startling to hear a song this way, with nothing between his voice and my ears except the pin-drop silence of an enthralled audience. Not your everyday concert experience, even in the most intimate of settings. Simply amazing.

Costello will probably never again be this year's model, but he's proven himself to be something much better: a composer and performer for the ages with a rich musical legacy of his own, a fan's appreciation of the legacy of others, and the temerity and ability to combine the two into an astounding evening of music.

**Set list:**

- **Temptation**
- **Man Out of Time**
- **Talking In The Dark**
- **Toledo**
- **What's Her Name Today?**

- (I Don't Want To Go To) Chelsea
- Baby Plays Around
- Little Triggers
- Girl's Talk
- Everyday I Write The Book
- You Lie Sweetly
- Painted From Memory
- This House is Empty Now
- Pads Paws and Claws
- Indoor Fireworks
- Radio Sweetheart/Jackie Wilson Said
- God's Comic
- Accidents Will Happen
- Alison
- In The Darkest Place

**Encore 1:**

- Inch by Inch/Fever
- Shallow Grave
- Watching the Detectives

**Encore 2:**

- Veronica
- She
- I'll Never Fall In Love Again
- Almost Blue
- Beyond Belief
- I Want You

**Encore 3:**

- I Still Have That Other Girl In My Head
- (The Angels Wanna Wear My) Red Shoes
- God Give Me Strength

**Encore 4:**

- Couldn't Call It Unexpected #4

— review by Jim Kelly

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