

'IN CONTRAST TO THE MAINSTREAM'

Elvis Costello digs in to the serious stuff

by MARK BASTIEN
The Canadian Press

His made-up moniker conjures up all that is kitschy and kooky in American pop culture, but singer Elvis Costello is anything but light-hearted and zany when he talks about his music.

Instead, he's serious. So serious.

Serious enough to believe that no singer-songwriter with anything even mildly provocative to say has broken into the pop music world since he did in 1977 with his debut album *My Aim is True*.

Serious enough to lash out at anyone who suggests his music — especially on his wildly diverse new album, *Spike* — is eclectic, political or remotely autobiographical.

And serious enough to warrant a name change to something more, well, SERIOUS.

So just for fun, let's rename the British singer Garbo Bergman for a few minutes and listen to him explain in winning Swedish-art-film-angst style exactly what's wrong with the music business and the world.

For added ironic pleasure, let's keep in mind what Bergman looks like as he sulkily answers a reporter's questions: he's wearing his trademark oversize black-rimmed spectacles, a lawn-green shirt sprouting red blossoms, a glittery bolo tie, a tent-like black sports ja-

cket and black pants.

His socks are dotted with tiny guitars and his black shoes look built for kicking.

A serious look for a serious man.

Mr. Bergman, you write so many different types of songs and yet you don't like your music to be described as eclectic. Why?

"It's the easiest review in the world to say my album is eclectic. You can fill out the rest of it with a thumb-nail sketch of who I'm supposed to be and a little bit of amateur psychoanalysis as to why I keep changing my name and you've got the damned article. We don't even need to do the interview."

How would you rather your music be described? After all, on *Spike* you have gritty rock tunes like *Let Him Dangle*, boppy ditties like *Veronica* and even a music-hall song such as *God's Comic*.

"Why does music have to be categorized? Categories are really just a convenience, don't you think, so you don't go into a shop and accidentally buy a Barry Manilow album because you found him in the hard-core bin."

But Mr. Bergman, haven't you often categorized yourself by assuming such weird personas as Napoleon Dynamite, The Imposter and even your real self, Declan McManus, over the years?

"I know why I use different aliases from time to time. They're quite obviously to me



Elvis Costello: Anything but fun and zany.

theatrical devices to present different parts of the work in a slightly different light."

You mean like on your last concert-parodying concert tour when you played a game-show host. But that doesn't help explain who Elvis Costello is.

"Well, it's a brand name, isn't it? I really can't answer these questions, they don't make sense to me. You're concentrating on the wrong thing."

But you don't want to talk about your music or your image, Mr. Bergman, which makes interviewing you difficult. And you don't seem to have much regard for other musicians or music critics.

"Critics don't know anything. (They) have to listen to the good, bad and indifferent. Some of the cynicism and neuroses that build up in critics is due to too much exposure to bad music. It's like some records should come with health warnings on them."

Or explanations about the content. Because your *Almost Blue* album was country while *Blood and Chocolate* was vicious rock.

And although you've said you don't write them, *Spike* includes some political songs.

"What songs are political? Which ones?"

Well, in *Tramp the Dirt Down* you say England is the world's whore and Margaret is its madam.

As in Thatcher. That's political, isn't it?

And in *God's Comic* the Almighty drinks cola, sleeps on a water-bed and wonders if he should have given the world to monkeys rather than humans.

Well, Mr. Bergman, I'll try something else. You're 34 now. Are there any young musicians out there ready to shake up the music world as you did a dozen years ago?

"The likelihood of a 17-year-old turning the music biz on its head just by his brilliance is really very remote now, because I just don't think he would get through. A really, really original person would get shown the door."

That wasn't your experience. "Yes it was."

But you came through anyway.

"That's because I'm tougher than the rest."

Who's to say there aren't other tough young musicians out there?

"Well, where are they then? I'm still waiting for them to arrive. There haven't been any for a while. Just me. I mean, I haven't really come through, have I? I didn't change anything."

What did you do?

"Nothing. I just exist in contrast to the mainstream."

WAS (NOT WAS) HAS GOAL

Offending everybody equally

by MARK BASTIEN

TORONTO (CP) — David Weiss and his songwriting partner Don Fagenson have a goal that to some might seem less than honorable.

"Our grand hope is to write a song that will offend everyone uniformly," says Weiss, one-quarter of the Detroit dance band Was (Not Was).

He confesses he's already created a few transgressing tunes.

"I once wrote a song called *White People Can't Dance*, which is meant to be a critique of western man," he said with a straight face during a recent interview.

"But people think it will offend white people who like to dance and are good at it, as well as black folks to whom it reads as a negative statement that black people have rhythm but they're not intellectual or something."

So the rap song will probably never make it onto radio, and North Americans will be denied an opportunity to be outraged.

Weiss, 36, says that's just as well, since he'd much rather upset people over something other than race.

After all, he and his band have already had more than their fair share of race-related slights when it comes to their music.

While Weiss and Fagenson are white, the group's two singers — Sweet Pea Atkinson and Sir Harry Bowens — are black. That fact made their former record company so nervous it refused to send out



Was (Not Was): From left, David Weiss, Sweet Pea Atkinson, Don Fagenson and Harry Bowens.

photographs along with the band's first two albums.

"These pundits over at Warner Brothers thought, 'We don't want to turn black radio off when they hear black-sounding music and see white guys,'" Weiss says.

They were also afraid of turning

off white radio stations who liked the group's "rockish-sounding funk" but might have been confused by seeing black men in the photograph.

And so nobody saw Was (Not Was) — named for Weiss and Fagenson, who call themselves the

fictional Was brothers — and few people heard the group's music.

The band has now come out of the closet with the PolyGram-distributed album *What Up, Dog?* which has found color-blind fans in both North America and Europe.

While its songs are not the all-offending ones Weiss and Fagenson hope to write someday, some apparently have important social statements hidden in the blend of jazz, heavy metal and dance sounds.

The group's current hit, *Walk the Dinosaur*, for example, is not just a humorous ditty about a happy suburban family of 40 million years ago.

Instead, says Weiss — a former journalist with an acid wit — it's about nuclear war.

Pardon? You mean those references to taking the dinosaur for a stroll and Elvis Presley returning to Earth in a rocket actually mean something? And the song's repeated chant "boom boom acka-lacka boom boom" is a social statement?

"Well, maybe one out of every 100 listeners will get it," Weiss says, smiling.

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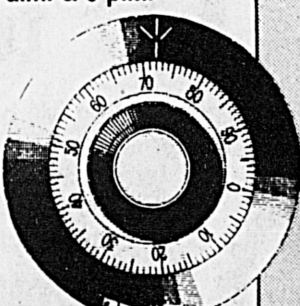
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