

But accidents will happen Costello's aim remains true

Elvis Costello
Armed Forces
Record review by Gary McGowan

I don't know if Elvis Costello hates women. Perhaps no one will know for sure until his wife or children sell their stories to the *Daily Mail*. Hotel No. 2 Bans Child Sex Groups!!! But from whatever traumas the songs on *Armed Forces* stem, they form as complete an evocation of male angst in the 1970s as anything recently recorded. Costello's third album in eighteen months (second with *The Attractions*), finds him poles apart from the dominant themes of 70s rock and roll.

Bands like Queen promise rock nirvana with one more spin of their latest hit, you know, good dope, legions of submissive women . . . but don't look in the mirror. Costello looks and finds the reality of his situation wanting. Even cutting your hair just like Freddie Mercury won't help. It is this concept of male as victim that Costello explores with such devastating effectiveness in *Armed Forces*.

On "Accidents Will Happen," one of the album's best tracks, Costello sings "You used to be a victim/Now you're not the only one." He's a male failed by images of his own creation. The ladies are helpless no longer. Now what? Falling in love won't help. "I knew right from the start/That we'd end up hating," he sings in "Two Little Hitlers", a song which reduces romantic love to a totalitarian contest. "Two little Hitlers who'll fight it out until one little Hitler does the other one's will." Those of you eyeing the fox across the aisle are hereby warned to beware the chilling outcome.

Not only is the macho facade crumbling in many of the songs, it has given way to a world of female domination in others. "You tease, you flirt, and you shine all the buttons on your green shirt," sings Costello in "Green Shirt" while the Attractions produce a

wistful, aching melody. A lady like this spells doom. "She's picking out names/I hope none of them are mine." Like Vietnam, it's a no-win situation. "Party Girl" portrays a similar individual. "Nothin' but a party girl/Just like millions all over the world." Costello is in a "grip-like vise," he wants more from this relationship. I mean, "I don't want to lock you up girl," but all this runnin' around?

Feminists might write Costello off as the first in a long line of boors to recognize the new realities in sexual politics. But this ignores the man's genuine interest in understanding what those new realities are. "You watch her legs through seven service stations," he sings in "Busy Bodies" not brazen enough to stroll on over, nor confident enough to forget her and walk away, he remains fixated at the edge of the chasm. "You want to kiss her/But she's busy with her maker."

While the bulk of the album is occupied with sexual realities, there are a couple of tunes for those like *Macleans*' editor Peter Newman, who believe that rock in the 70s has lost its "ideological undercurrent." "Oliver's Army" and "Goon Squad" detail the cruel realities of the disaffected in Britain. No jobs and no future leads to such charming outlets for the nihilistic as the National Front and a bit of "paki-bashing" before tea. It isn't put as succinctly as the Tom Robinson Band might have done but "If they want you to come out to play/Better say goodbye," gets the message across.

In case the spiritual vibes of this review have brought your karma to your knees and you've gotten the impression that *Armed Forces* is really *Highway 61 Revisited* with better organ playing, take heart. All of the above can be ignored at your leisure. With a strong echo on his voice and layered instrumental tracks you really have to work to pull the guts from the tunes. But don't ignore the album if you're put off by pretentious record reviewers. The Attractions have matured into



one of the finest rock and roll units of the decade. When these miracle men pump it up there's plenty of action for everybody. Those lucky enough to see the group live can relive a few memories with a special limited edition EP recorded live at Hollywood High (how appropriate), which features "Accidents Will Happen", "Alison" and the concert-length version of "Watching The Detectives." The studio work finds the Attractions playing with a maturity and depth which deliers their short time together. None of the tunes quite reach out and grab like "Miracle Man" or "Radio Radio" from the two previous albums, but after two plays you're guaranteed to be rocking along. High or low brow, *Armed Forces* will banish those disco blues. The year's first definitive album.

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