

I nearly up and danced a jig when I saw this one under my tree: Elvis Costello's new Ryko box set, *2 1/2 Years*. Originally, Costello's back catalogue got the assembly-line treatment by Columbia, his old label, but Ryko is now giving him their typical painstaking care, rereleasing his Columbia albums with loads of unreleased stuff, dazzling sonics and notation by Costello himself. As an introduction, Ryko has released *2 1/2 Years* (5), a repackaging of Costello's first three--and easily best--albums, *My Aim is True*, *This Year's Model* and *Armed Forces*, along with a live radio promo, *Live at the El Mocambo*.

In the late seventies formidable, punk-enlivened climate, Elvis C. was indeed the King of Rock'n'Roll. Displaying a discipline unknown to most punks, Costello was the archetypal Angry Young Man: smart, obsessive and alternately sensitive and brutal. With his debut, 1977's *My Aim is True*, Costello already knew all the moves; some might say his career has been one long slide since. Every track on the album is immensely memorable. Whereas the additions Ryko made to David Bowie's rereleases only confused an already erratic body of work, the additions to Costello's albums are a valuable insight and make his later directions more understandable. Ryko has added a number of pre-professional songs to the album which reveal a more traditional, if obviously gifted, singer/songwriter, whose country-ish style was not altogether suitable to his thorny material. Derivative but melodically inventive, even Costello's earliest

# ELVIS IS KING

2 1/2 Years  
Elvis Costello  
(Ryko)

sketches display a remarkable maturity. "Imagination (Is a Powerful Deceiver)" is a fine song that favourably displays what an understated vocalist Costello was. He has since become an increasingly overwrought and affected singer. Also added are a number of songs from the era which only later appeared on 1980's *Taking Liberties*, an exhilarating if bumpy collection of outtakes and b-sides that Ryko is redistributing to the individual albums. "Radio Sweetheart" and "Stranger in the House" again reveal a country-influenced songwriter, very interesting since it originally seemed that Costello's country pastiches were only a strange manifestation of his rock roots, not surfacing until 1981's lame *Almost Blue*, a collection of comatose c&w covers. The reprogramming makes it clear that Costello's punk was derived from country.

*This Year's Model* furthers *My Aim is True's* stance, upping the complexity and

power of his attack with the debut of Costello's back-up band, the Attractions, a fiery three-piece unit. The writing is a little less memorable, if meaner, but the Attractions' agile accompaniment more than compensates. In a grand tradition that extends back to the Beatles and Stones, British artists' albums are sometimes reshuffled for marketing purposes in their US incarnations, resulting in the North American consumer getting stuck with a hodgepodge. Such is the case with *This Year's Model*. Ryko has restored two *Taking Liberties* tracks to the album, "I Don't Want to go to (Chelsea)" and "Night Rally," in sequence, along with "Big Tears" and "Crawling to the USA" as bonus tracks. Also added are two demos of songs that would later appear on *Armed Forces*, "Greenshirt" and "Big Boys," along with "Running Out of Angels." ("Radio Radio" spawned the name of this column.)

*Armed Forces* is a pop album--albeit a nasty one. Costello flirts with pop song structures in a manner not unlike contemporary works by David Bowie or Iggy Pop, but more approachable. The album contains two of Costello's best songs in the ABBA-esque "Oliver's Army" and "(What's so Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding," undoubtedly the best (and least sentimental) peace anthem ever penned. Added to *Armed Forces* is a series of *Taking Liberties* songs, "My Funny Valentine," "Tiny Steps," "Clean Money," "Talking in the Dark" and "Wednesday Week," along with the *Live at Hollywood Bowl EP*.

*Live at the El Mocambo*, originally a Canadian-only promo, is a rare shot of Costello live. Like most live albums it's actually just a collection of inferior renditions. Fans, however, will relish hearing the Attractions heat up a tiny club.

Besides the musical bonuses, Ryko has also restored the original British cover art to all three releases, most significantly *Armed Forces*, which now has a herd of stampeding elephants on the cover. The set's photo booklet is a gimmicky, brightly coloured eyesore. Lyrics would've been a nice addition.

For Elvis C. fans, Ryko's rereleases are cause for celebration and a welcome reintroduction to Costello's most focused period. However, the live tracks and demos may not be such a revelation to the previously uninitiated, who may be better off with the original albums, which should now be widely available in used shops and at slashed prices in regular stores.

