

Elvis Costello Opens His Mouth Almighty

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From his explosive 1977 arrival as the English New Wave's angriest young man, Elvis Costello has evolved into one of the most eclectic, most tirelessly innovative figures in popular music. Indeed, his 1993 collaboration with the Brodsky Quartet, *The Juliet Letters*, was taken by many as a virtual renunciation of his very status as a popular musician. Costello's efforts to overcome the image that developed during the glorious first years form one of the most complicated aspects of a complicated career. With the 1986 album, *Blood and Chocolate*, Costello's frustrations with this struggle spring to artistic life in one of his subtlest, least understood albums.

The mid-nineties were as good a time as any for Elvis Costello's career to take an uncharacteristic turn toward retrospection. The young decade had been inundated with backward-looking musical projects: the reunion of such legendary bands as the Eagles and Steely Dan; a new production of Pete Townsend's *Tommy*; Neil Young's sequel to *Harvest*; a surprising recrudescence for Tony Bennett; the list could go on. Elvis Costello and the Attractions' return to road and studio together after nearly a decade apart seemed fully in keeping with the temper of the times.

The band's 1994 U.S. tour seemed dedicated to the promotion of two new releases, in roughly equal measure. The appearance of their first album together in eight years, *Brutal Youth*, afforded the most obvious occasion for the tour, and

indeed over half of this record was performed in concert.¹ The bulk of the evening's material was drawn, however, from an altogether different release, the 1993 retrospective boxed set entitled *2 1/2 Years*. This collection included Costello's first three albums, the "classic" records that had vaulted him to the head of the New Wave in the late seventies (see Figure 1). The second of these albums alone, *This Year's Model* (originally released in 1978), contributed almost as many songs to the concert as *Brutal Youth*.

This joint promotion goes well beyond market strategizing; it is a close reflection of the position of *Brutal Youth* in Costello's career. Many of the songs from this new album sit so comfortably in concert beside those composed a decade and a half before, that without prior knowledge of Costello's output, one would be hard-pressed to discern any stylistic break at all. True to its title, *Brutal Youth* finds Costello and the Attractions not only reassembled, but sounding as raw and angry as they had in their earliest years. A characteristic headline, appearing on the cover of the April 1994 issue of *Q* magazine, proclaimed, "Elvis Lives! The Real Costello Returns," a sentiment echoed by critics everywhere.

A great deal had occurred, however, in the years that separated the material of *2 1/2 Years* and *Brutal Youth*. Over a decade's worth of music was essentially ignored on the 1994 tour, music created by a figure who was not, if the above headline is to be trusted, the "real" Elvis Costello.

With *Imperial Bedroom*, a highly ambitious concept album released in 1982, Costello made a decisive break with the aesthetic orientation that had attracted so many fans in his earliest days. The uncompromising ferocity that was a poetic

1. Technically, only five of the album's fifteen tracks feature all three of the Attractions. While drummer Pete Thomas and keyboard player Steve Nieve are present throughout, bassist Bruce Thomas—no relation to Pete—is supplanted by Nick Lowe or Costello himself on nine songs ("Favourite Hour," the last track, has no bass).

Figure 1
Selected Elvis Costello Discography:
Albums of New, Original Material^a

<u>Title</u>	<u>Date</u>	<u>Label</u>	<u>Producer(s)</u>
<i>My Aim is True</i>	1977	Stiff	Nick Lowe
<i>This Year's Model</i>	1978	Radar	Nick Lowe
<i>Armed Forces</i>	1978	Radar	Nick Lowe
<i>Get Happy!!</i>	1980	F-Beat	Nick Lowe
<i>Trust</i>	1981	F-Beat	Nick Lowe
<i>Imperial Bedroom</i>	1982	F-Beat	Geoff Emerick
<i>Punch the Clock</i>	1983	F-Beat	Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley
<i>Goodbye Cruel World</i>	1984	F-Beat	Clive Langer and Alan Winstanley
<i>King of America</i>	1986	F-Beat	"T-Bone" Burnett
<i>Blood and Chocolate</i>	1986	Demon	Nick Lowe
<i>Spike</i>	1987	Warner Bros.	Elvis Costello
<i>Mighty Like a Rose</i>	1991	Warner Bros.	Mitchell Froom, Kevin Killen, and Elvis Costello
<i>The Juliet Letters</i>	1993	Warner Bros.	Kevin Killen, Elvis Costello, and the Brodsky Quartet
<i>Brutal Youth</i>	1994	Warner Bros.	Mitchell Froom and Elvis Costello

a. I have striven not for completeness, but for clarity in outlining Costello's creative development. Thus, this list excludes releases like the 1987 *Out Of Our Idiot* (Demon)—a curious compilation of alternative versions (by Costello and the Attractions) of an array of previously released songs, none post-dating *Blood and Chocolate*—and the 1989 *Girls Girls Girls* (Demon), a greatest hits collection. I have also decided to exclude the impressive *Almost Blue* (1981), Costello and the Attractions' covers of country songs, because it contains no original material. *Almost Blue*, which appeared shortly after *Trust*, is important, however, in that it marks Costello's break with the producer of the previous albums, Nick Lowe; it was produced by Nashville veteran Billy Sherrill.

trademark of the first three albums—particularly the vengeful, vaguely misogynistic tone that had distinguished many of the songs about personal relationships—was noticeably toned down from this time on. Indeed, many songs on *Imperial Bedroom*, and on the two albums that followed, reveal what appears to be a genuine spirit of repentance (“I’m just a mere shadow of my former selfishness,” he assures us in “Human Hands”). At the same time, the versatile, hard-hitting Attractions, whose streamlined virtuosity had defined Costello’s sound on the early albums, came to be qualified—to many minds, encumbered—by orchestras, brass ensembles, female back-up singers, and a string of prominent guest artists.²

Three albums after *Imperial Bedroom*, with the 1986 *King of America*, Costello took the drastic step of recording an album from which the Attractions were effectively absent.³ As if to draw attention to the dawn of this new artistic era, Costello simultaneously reappropriated the name he was born with, Declan Patrick McManus.⁴ The years 1989-93 saw the release of three more “solo” albums: elaborately produced, generally eclectic affairs that remind one only intermittently of the early Costello. While the three Attractions now make occasional individual appearances, the band has effectively disappeared as a shaping force in Costello’s music. (A curious visual symbol of Costello’s break with his former self has earned this period the

2. Including, for example, a Chet Baker trumpet solo on *Punch the Clock* (“Shipbuilding”) and a vocal duet with Daryl Hall on *Goodbye Cruel World* (“The Only Flame in Town”).

3. That is, the Attractions appear on only a single track, the remarkable “Suit of Lights.” Steve Nieve actually performs on a few other songs as well, though his role is unobtrusive.

4. He appears on this album as Declan Patrick Aloysius MacManus. While Costello/MacManus had intended to place this album under the heading of “The Costello Show,” Columbia (his American record company) insisted on the addition of the phrase “Featuring Elvis Costello.” Ultimately, the words “The Costello Show (Featuring Elvis Costello)” appear inconspicuously on the spine of the record, and nowhere else. MacManus returned, however, to life (public life, at least) as Elvis Costello after this album.

designation "the beard years." The beard was gone on the 1994 tour.)

Thus, it is easy enough to trace, in artistic terms, the broadest outlines of Costello's relationship with his early musico-poetic persona, from the years of its establishment (1977-81), through a period of conflict and compromise (1982-84), to one of complete estrangement (1986-93), to a point of frank retrospection (1994). This succession is closely matched in Costello's own remarks about his image and his artistic identity.

As early as 1978, after the appearance of his second album, Costello had expressed frustration with the peculiar persona that had begun to take shape around his music, his lyrics, his strange stage personality, and his reclusive personal life:

It's a difficult problem, because it crosses that borderline between the personal and the professional. From a professional point of view, I understand it's important for journalists to grasp the most vivid aspect of a personality to make good copy. From a personal point of view, I find it annoying. People really think I'm some sort of psychotic weirdo hung up on revenge and guilt. It's really up to me to undermine that image now.⁵

The album that appeared a few months after these remarks, *Armed Forces*, hardly revealed any softening in poetic temperament. Nor could Costello seriously have supposed that his continued aversion to personal exposure in the press, which approached almost pathological proportions, would help allay the more bizarre aspects of his public image (cameras were ostentatiously banned from concerts on the 1979 *Armed Forces* tour, which also featured roadies dressed in green fatigues and a touring bus whose destination sign read "Camp LeJeune, N.C.").

It was only with the artistic turning point represented by the repentant *Imperial Bedroom* that Costello undertook a thorough overhaul of his image. Most important was the dra-

5. Quoted by John Rockwell, *New York Times*, 5 May 1979.

matic appearance of an interview with Greil Marcus in *Rolling Stone* (2 September 1982), Costello's first full-scale American interview.⁶ Living up to the promise of the magazine's cover, "ELVIS COSTELLO REPENTS," he spends much of the interview expressing his growing ambivalence toward his life and his art of the last few years, as in this characteristic exchange regarding the 1979 tour:

Costello: It was at that point that everything—whether it be my self-perpetrated venom—was about to engulf me. I was, I think, rapidly becoming not a very nice person. I was losing track of what I was doing, why I was doing it, and my own control.

Marcus: In your first interview, in 1977...you made a famous statement: words to the effect that all you knew of human emotions were revenge and guilt. Those words have been endlessly quoted—I've quoted them, they're irresistible. Now you're describing that as venom—as if your artistic venom, what you put into your music, had engulfed your own life.

Costello: I think it did. I think it started to take over. You see, I think that after a while—apart from anything else, looking from a purely artistic point of view—it started to become a problem for me to incorporate the wider, more compassionate point of view that I felt; I was trying to put that forward in some of the songs, and it was so much at odds with the preconception of the image.⁷

Four years later, on the release of the pivotal *King of America*, these sentiments are echoed cogently in another important interview with *Rolling Stone*, in which Costello seems to justify, at a stroke, his decision to abandon both his old name and his old band:

6. His only previous extended interview had been with Nick Kent in London's *NME* (27 August 1977). It was here that Costello had made the famous remark concerning "revenge and guilt." Krista Reese gives an interesting account of the personal motivations that may have lain behind the granting of this first interview in her book, *Elvis Costello: A Completely False Biography Based on Rumor, Innuendo and Lies* (London, 1981), 66.

7. *Rolling Stone* (2 September 1982), 17.

I was tired of the way people saw Elvis Costello; they saw this funny pair of glasses and a load of mannerisms, and they had all these preconceived ideas of what I was and who I was.... I started to think of it as a bit of a curse. I started to wonder if there were people who were not listening to my records simply because they associated me with 1978 or '79. Elvis Costello was becoming a brand name, kind of like Durex [a popular English condom].⁸

As we have seen, *King of America* was the first of a diverse and impressive series of solo projects, albums in which Costello's radical separation from his past seemed a *fait accompli*.

Only months after the release of *King of America*, however, appeared an album which has gone unmentioned up to now, whose position in the unfolding of Costello's career seems utterly inexplicable. With *Blood and Chocolate*, Costello returned with neither apology nor explanation to his old pseudonym. The Attractions reappear as well, stripped of the orchestra, brass, back-up singers, and saxophones that had transformed them on their last three albums together, generating a sound as spare (and frequently brutal) as they had produced since *This Year's Model*.⁹ Even Nick Lowe—who had produced all of the early albums, but had been absent since *Trust* (1981)—returns on *Blood and Chocolate* with the “crisp, got-live-if-you-want-it” sound (as one critic has termed it) that distinguished the band's early work.¹⁰

8. Quoted by David Fricke, “This Year’s Model,” *Rolling Stone* (10 April 1986), 23.

9. I am overlooking the presence of Nick Lowe’s acoustic guitar on a handful of these albums for the simple fact that its impact on the Attractions’ sound seems negligible to me; Costello could have performed these guitar parts himself. Only slightly more obtrusive is the appearance of the voice of Cait O’Riordan, Costello’s fiancée, on two songs, “Crimes of Paris” and “Poor Napoleon.” In the latter, her contribution consists of nothing more than whispering “poor Napoleon” once in each chorus.

10. Ken Tucker, “‘Trust’ never sleeps,” review of *Trust*, *Rolling Stone* (2 April 1981), 58.

Perhaps most unsettling of all was an apparent backslide in subject matter and lyrical style, a phenomenon that seriously threatened to undercut the credibility of the reforms of the previous four years. David Gouldstone, in his book, *Elvis Costello: God's Comic*, observes that

we're back with songs and sentiments that could have come from the first three albums.... In particular the songs about relationships—which make up the bulk of the album—are distinctly stale and mouldy. Women are again seen as spiteful viragos.¹¹

Coincidentally or not, *Blood and Chocolate* was considered an artistic failure by most. According to Gouldstone, "*Blood and Chocolate* vies with *Goodbye Cruel World* for the unenviable title of Costello's worst album (I'd say that *Goodbye Cruel World* is marginally the better of the two, since at least it has a fair amount of thematic variety)."¹² *Billboard* found it "a lack-luster batch of tunes...[that] will have difficulty finding an audience beyond the faithful."¹³

If *Blood and Chocolate* testifies to an obvious interest on Costello's part in an artistic engagement with his own past, I suggest that it is a mistake to take it—as critics almost universally did—as a sentimental glance over his shoulder, a final effort to recapture the old spirit before setting off once and for all down a new path. Viewed in the proper light, this album emerges not as a fond tribute to the past at all (a characterization which may not be inapt in connection with *Brutal Youth*), but as an ingenious, critical reconstruction of the past, an artistic expression of Costello's own ambivalence toward the figure he once was.

11. *Elvis Costello: God's Comic* (New York, 1989), 149, 155. The title of the book is a reference to a song on *Spike* (1988), the second of Costello's albums without the Attractions.

12. Gouldstone, 154-5.

13. *Billboard* 106, no. 7 (26 September 1986), 76.

I argue that *Blood and Chocolate* represents a full-scale effort to revisit the “load of mannerisms” that defined Costello’s former self, but only in order to establish his distance from them and to reveal the impossibility of continuing in that vein. In countless subtle ways, this album seems bent on undermining this image from within. I hardly set out to claim the status of masterpiece for an album that has drawn disfavor from so many sides, yet *Blood and Chocolate* does offer ample opportunity to observe the resourcefulness and meticulous craftsmanship that made Costello one of the most interesting creative forces in popular music through the mid-eighties.

As critics have often pointed out, *Blood and Chocolate* appears to suffer from an uncharacteristic lack of thematic variety. Where many earlier Costello albums struck a balance of near equality between “private” songs about relationships and “public” songs about various social or political ills, *Blood and Chocolate* has only one track, “Tokyo Storm Warning,” which fits at all persuasively into the “public” category, though even this sprawling apocalyptic fantasy deals, to some extent, with private crises.¹⁴

Imperial Bedroom—the album that, among other things, had ushered in a new era of seriousness in Costello’s approach to the “concept” album—was distinguished by a similar slant, dedicated almost entirely to snapshots of various romantic relationships in various kinds of trouble.¹⁵ But *Blood and Chocolate* stands in stark contrast to this album in that the majority

14. Even this song turns, in its final verse, to a look at a troubled relationship. Though the relationship between a landlady and her long-absent husband forms the focus of “Battered Old Bird,” the landlady’s room-by-room description of the house’s bizarre occupants may contain elaborate political and social allegories. But these remain rather obscure, and of secondary importance.

15. This was the first album whose cover gave credit to the creator of the concept itself—just below the producer’s name on the album cover come the words, “from an original idea by Elvis Costello.”

of its songs are dedicated to a single kind of relationship in a single kind of trouble. Six of the album's eleven songs depict the same scenario: a man has lost his lover to another, and his obsessive preoccupation with the situation drives him to bitterness and anger. Two more songs appear to deal with the same circumstance in passing, though their focuses are less clear. The execution of this "theme"—particularly through the album's first side—is sufficiently complex that it is worth examining in some detail.

"Uncomplicated," the ferocious opening track, is a warning to the speaker's lover that the tidy conclusion she wishes for their relationship is impossible. "You think it's over now, but this is only the beginning," runs its final section, with a threatening undertone that reverberates through the rest of the album. In "I Hope You're Happy Now" (track 2), the speaker, once more addressing a former lover, describes in revolting detail the unsavory sort of man he takes her new lover to be. The closing lines of this song present a wholly characteristic amalgam of rage and delusion: "Well, I knew then what I know now/I never loved you anyhow."

But with "Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head" (track 4), the theme begins to take on a considerably greater clarity of focus. The verses, in the third person, paint a portrait of an obsessive, demented figure by the name of Mr. Misery, a man so distraught by the apathy of the woman he loves that he is reduced to "standing in the supermarket, shouting at the customers." What immediately becomes apparent is that this might well be an outsider's view of the speaker of the first two songs, a suspicion that is as much as confirmed in the song that follows.

The closing song of the first side, "I Want You" (track 5), serves as the spiritual center, such as it is, of the album. Here the speaker treats us to an obsessive, tortured confession—nearly seven minutes in length—of love for a woman he knows is lost to him; the words "I want you" are repeated some twenty-nine times over the song's sprawling eight-verse span.

While the speaker is obviously aware of the futility of his situation, this knowledge expresses itself only through a kind of relentless emotional masochism:

...I'm not ashamed to say I cried for you
I want you...
I want to hear he pleases you more than I do
I want you...
Did you call his name out as he held you down?
I want you...

As a pair, “Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head” and “I Want You” solidify our suspicion that this album may not be centered on the sort of loosely defined theme familiar from earlier albums,¹⁶ but on an actual character, sharply etched and fairly consistent in his centrality. The chorus of “Home is Anywhere...,” begins with the words, “But you know she doesn’t want you, but you can’t seem to get it in your head./Oh, and you can’t sleep at night, and she haunts you when you go to bed.” The speaker of “I Want You” ultimately frames his emotional impasse in such similar terms that it is difficult not to take this for the same obsessive persona: “I want you, no one who wants you could want you more./I want you, every night when I go off to bed./And when I wake up, I want you.”

If the first side appears systematic in its generation of a main character, his appearances on the second side become less frequent. “Blue Chair” (track 7) finds him in a bar, and in a considerably better mood, addressing the new boyfriend himself. Though the speaker ultimately admits his continued desire for the woman at issue, he seeks a grim solace in the certainty that she will bring her new lover as much psychological unrest

16. Noteworthy examples would include *Armed Forces*’s frequent use of military metaphors for sexual relationships, or the often insightful songs about aging and the tragedy of mundane life, that occupy so much of *Punch the Clock*. Nearly all of Costello’s albums can be taken as thematic in some sense, though this would obviously form the subject of a separate study.

as she has brought him. The album's closing number, "Next Time 'Round" (track 11), sounds like nothing so much as a suicide note, its chorus closing: "You'll be someone else's baby, but I'll be underground/The next time 'round."

Though "Crimes of Paris" (track 9) and "Poor Napoleon" (track 10) are both distinguished by nearly incoherent lyrics, each seems to contain references to the album's central scenario. A great deal is suggested, for example, in the opening verse of "Poor Napoleon": "I can't lie on this bed any more, it burns my skin/You can take the truthful things you've said to me, and fit them on the head of a pin." A familiar tone appears, as well, in the break of "Crimes of Paris": "And I tried to hold on to you, but I don't know how/And I find it hard to swallow good advice" (this is an important moment for a number of reasons, and one to which we will return below).

The clarity of this album's theme serves a much more important function, I suggest, than affording an abstract unity to its lyrical contents, for this theme may hold the key to the album's problematic aesthetic underpinnings. Though Costello here appears to return to the vengeful, bitter language of his early years, this language, as we have seen, is put in the mouth of a central character, an obsessive personality whom Costello is fully capable of viewing from a distance. Once these songs begin to resolve themselves into a psychological study, the poetic style itself takes on an objective character—an ontological distance, we might say, is generated between the obsessive, slightly deranged character on the album and Costello himself. It becomes possible, in short, to view the entire, strange return to a former style as a thematic conceit.

This realization hardly saves Costello entirely from the charges that have been leveled against the album. It was his prerogative, after all, to create an album around a vindictive, mean-spirited figure like "Mr. Misery"; he could easily have chosen a character with more redeeming qualities, inclined to more dulcet poetic tones. But it is in the objectionable nature of this figure, I think, that the true function of this album's

thematic premise lies. This possibility might best be approached, however, through a preliminary glimpse of a curious lyrical principle which had fascinated Costello for some time.

The first song on *Armed Forces* (1978)—the much anticipated follow-up album to the acclaimed *This Year's Model*—begins with Costello's purposeful cry, "Oh, I just don't know where to begin." Here the poetic discourse briefly transcends its syntactic context to emerge as commentary on a larger artistic issue—in this case, the task of undertaking an album. The first verse of "Tears Before Bedtime," from *Imperial Bedroom*, offers a different aspect of what seems the same process, wending its way to the refrain thus:

I know the name on the tip of your tongue,
And I know that accusing look.
Everybody knows I've been so wrong,
That's the problem, and here's the hook:
[Chorus:] Tears before bedtime...

The speaker's comments on the troubled condition of his personal life suddenly come to represent commentary on the musical process unfolding—no one has trouble identifying the "hook" of this song with the catchy refrain, "Tears before bedtime," that here appears for the first time.

Three songs later, "Man Out of Time" culminates in a similar device. Its chorus—"To murder my love is a crime/But will you still love/A man out of time?"—is performed (not surprisingly) exactly the same way three times over the course of the song. But on its final repetition at the song's close, Costello sings the last phrase, "a man out of time," two beats too late—that is, out of time.

While these isolated instances (and there are many more) appear less profound than impulsively clever, they attest to an impulse that seems to underlie *Blood and Chocolate*'s entire conceptual enterprise. This album's first song, "Uncomplicated," begins with a familiar tone of poetic ambiguity. The

first sound we hear is a sort of fanfare, in the form of three chords (D–A–E) pounded out twice on a heavily distorted guitar. Suddenly the Attractions are there, too, settling into a grinding, relentless E chord. (The next chord change—not counting the addition of a minor 7th at the top of the E triad—comes thirty-six measures later.)¹⁷ Costello, sounding as angry as he has for years, comes out swinging:

Blood and chocolate,
I hope you're satisfied what you've done.
You think it's over now,
But we've only just begun.

Two completely different interpretations of this opening stanza are invited at once. The words "Blood and chocolate," dropped into a sort of grammatical no-man's-land, do little more than sit there, waiting to have their presence explained (this is not a small point, and we shall return to it at length below). While most would conclude, from these four lines, that sexual jealousy is the topic of the song, the last couplet stands

17. If the lyrics of these eleven songs form as tightly unified a poetic cycle as those of any previous Costello album, the same could be said of their music in at least one respect. The first and second sides of the album each present closed, internally coherent tonal systems:

Side 1: E–A–D–A–A/e
Side 2: G–D–D/C–G–C–G

The first four tracks of the first side represent, respectively, the tonalities of E major, A major, D major, A major. The last number on the side, "I Want You," includes an A-major introduction to an E-minor song. The first two songs of the second side are in G major and D major, respectively. The third, "Battered Old Bird," spends roughly equal time in D major (where it begins) and C major (where it ends). The tonalities presented in the remaining three songs are G major, C major, and G major. Thus, viewing the album as a whole, there are two pairs of songs related by unison (tracks 4 and 5, and tracks 7 and 8) and one pair related with a move to the relative major (tracks 5 and 6, with the album flipped in between them). The rest are related by fifth. This design is quite exceptional, for Costello or anyone, and highly suggestive of an interest in creating a musical parallel to the album's poetic unification.

open to an entirely different reading. Perhaps Costello is talking about the musical and poetic events themselves as they unfold. Suddenly the ensemble that had apparently been disbanded a few months earlier is pounding away again, as forcefully as in the old days, headed once more by a bitter, angry Costello we thought had been left behind for good.

The ambiguity becomes more tantalizing in the lines that follow:

I asked for water,
And they gave me rosé wine,
A horse that knows arithmetic,
And a dog that tells your fortune.

The replacement of the faceless “you” with a faceless “they” seems to put the matter of sexual jealousy on hold for a time (if indeed it ever was the topic). At the same time, the possibility that Costello is meditating on the larger issues surrounding the song itself becomes more plausible. His basic needs (accompanimental needs?), he seems to say, could not have been simpler—he and the three Attractions undeniably had a good thing going. These needs were met, so claims our speaker, with an unnecessary degree of sophistication that seemed appealing enough at first, but quickly descended into useless, bizarre novelties. This could easily be an account—albeit a most unsympathetic one—of the Attractions’ last three albums together, on which, as we have observed, the tight, virtuosic combo with punk sympathies had been qualified and softened by an assortment of external forces.

With the second verse, we return unambiguously to the realm of sexual jealousy (quotation seems unnecessary). But with the words that close its chorus—“Uncomplicated/Uncomplicated/You think it’s over now but this is only the beginning”—our two interpretations appear to have reached a state of coexistence, both equally available.

Thus, in our first glimpse of the album's main character (whom we take, at this point, to be identical with Costello himself), his blind, self-destructive obsession with a defunct relationship is aligned with the artistic premises of the album itself. That is, the words that appear to constitute a defense of Costello's return to his former poetic style and his former band (with their former sound) are conflated with the confessions of a personality whose inability to overcome the past is held up—here and through the rest of the album—as a pathetic delusion. Thus, the motivation behind Costello's mysterious final brush with his former self begins to take shape—Costello may be making this journey down an overtly retrogressive path only in order to reveal it as a dark, unsavory cul-de-sac. This possibility takes on greater focus if we consider the manifold aspects of a single, album-spanning metaphor whose complex lyrical, musical, and iconic implications form one of the album's most subtle processes.

On the front cover of *Blood and Chocolate* is a painting by Eamonn Singer entitled (as the album credits tell us) "Napoleon Dynamite."¹⁸ The title is extrapolated easily enough from the words "NAPO DYNA," which appear in large, red letters terminating in the right edge of the picture. Apart from this, the painting is largely abstract, though a number of recognizable objects are suggested. Extending from a dark semi-circle at the top of the picture—this may be Napoleon's trademark head-gear—is a pink, phallic protrusion that terminates in a gaping mouth. The mouth is the only unmistakable object of the painting, one of its most memorable features.

18. As a Singer painting ("Pat and Mike") had also appeared on the record sleeve of *Goodbye Cruel World*, it seems likely that both were originally created for these albums, though this point is ultimately immaterial. Singer would still be working on Costello's material in 1994, when he receives credit for the sleeve design of *Brutal Youth*.

Across the back cover of the album (the first opening of the CD liner notes) are tight, black-and-white portraits of the four band members, each picture with a name below it: Pete Thomas, Bruce Thomas, Napoleon Dynamite, and Steve Nieve. "Napoleon Dynamite" is, of course, Costello himself. In marked contrast to the sober, composed trio that flanks him, Costello's photograph captures him in a moment of apparent frenzy, his mouth thrown open wide. This gaping mouth constitutes the only obvious visual link between Costello and his assumed namesake on the cover; the mouth becomes, in other words, Napoleon Dynamite's sole distinguishing feature.

Viewed in the proper light, the cover alone helps to locate the album within the history of Costello's struggle to overcome the image of his past. We can take it, first of all, as a purposeful inversion of a visual metaphor associated with the Attractions' first album together, *This Year's Model*.¹⁹ On the cover of the 1978 album, Costello appears crouched behind a large camera, which is trained on the viewer. Costello's mouth is entirely obscured from view behind the camera—more to the point, there is an unsettling sense that the camera descending from his gaunt face has come to serve as a surrogate mouth. At a most basic level, the camera functions as a symbol for Costello's effort—through the songs on the vinyl within—to capture without remorse the foibles of the society that surrounds him, the fashion-driven, record-buying public not least among its ranks. At the same time, the mouth that pours out the invective remains hidden from view, well in keeping with Costello's famous antipathy, through these years, to personal exposure of all kinds.²⁰

19. The Attractions were assembled only after the release of Costello's first album, *My Aim Is True* (1977). Though the latter was recorded with a displaced California band called Clover, the Attractions did join Costello on the American tour promoting the album, and even backed Costello on one song included on the American release of the record (the masterful "Watching the Detectives").

The near title-track of *This Year's Model*, "This Year's Girl," picks up this strand. The song is a character study of a fashion model who—as the most obvious subject for the photography taking place on the front of the album—serves to complete the governing metaphor of the album; she is the very model, so to speak, of fashionable banality, and Costello is the one taking the picture. As if to drive the point home, the song's second verse includes the remark, "You want her broken with her mouth wide open, 'cause she's this year's girl." Though apparently both violent and sexual, the precise meaning of this line is difficult to pin down. It is, in any case, a symbol of vulnerability, a symbol that the interior has been made accessible, and an apparent affirmation of the significance of Costello's own pose on the front cover as a position of strength and authority.²¹

With all of this in mind, the open-mouthed Costello on the back of *Blood and Chocolate* takes on a potent symbolic function. Here, Costello has placed his own mouth in front of the camera, not only visible, but vulnerable, the target of the same sort of scrutiny to which Costello once subjected the rest of the world.²²

20. This point is driven home powerfully on the back cover of the album, a photograph of the band taken in a hotel room. The picture is taken with extremely low-speed film—the camera shutter must have remained open for at least half a second. While the three Attractions appear fairly clearly against a back wall, Costello is shown diving across the room toward a bed. To the camera, he appears as an indistinct blur, reasserting his apparent immunity to the scrutiny to which he is only too eager to subject the rest of the world.

21. The model's mouth is the focus of attention again, in a more approximate sense, in the fourth song on the second side, "Lipstick Vogue." Though characteristically elliptical, its chorus—"It's you/Not just another mouth in a lipstick vogue"—appears to identify all that is treasonous and deceptive in fashionable culture with the mouth. The open mouth returns as a symbol of sexual vulnerability in "Accidents Will Happen," the first song on *Armed Forces*, in which the narrator undercuts the purported confidence of the female main character with the words, "your mind is made up, but your mouth is undone."

This reading gains focus if we take into account the role of the mouth in the song, "Mouth Almighty," from *Punch the Clock* (1983). This song is one of the crowning confessions from Costello's penitent albums, an apparently frank acknowledgment of the destructive, self-defeating power of his own intemperate verbal manner. Told from the point of view of a man who has just lost his lover because of his temper, its chorus closes with the words:

Mouth Almighty that's what I've got,
Mouth Almighty, giving you what's what,
Mouth Almighty.
I wish I'd never opened my Mouth Almighty,
Wish I'd never opened my Mouth Almighty,
Wish I'd never opened my Mouth Almighty.

With *Blood and Chocolate*, Costello opens his mouth almighty one last time, but only in order to give us a glimpse of its terrible interior, to hold up that old mouth and its characteristic utterances for criticism and scorn. The infusion of this image throughout the album, with its multi-faceted symbolic function, is one of the record's most impressive aspects, animating our understanding of the project at every level.

The first effect—and it is an essential one—of the mouth that gapes at us from the album cover may be to shape our un-

22. Two years before, Costello had laid himself bare to photographic scrutiny in a most powerfully symbolic way in the video of "I Wanna Be Loved" (*Goodbye Cruel World*). Recorded at the height of his "repentant" years, this song comes as one of Costello's most painfully frank pleas for, well, love. In the video, Costello is shown in a close frontal portrait, staring at the camera as a succession of people of all races, ages, and sexes peek in from the side to kiss his cheeks. All we can see of his surroundings is a red vinyl surface behind his back. At the end of the video, he stands up; the scene cuts, and we see him leaving a "Take Your Own Portrait" booth in a dark, crowded city plaza. The same audience that, consensually or otherwise, formed the subject of Costello's critical photographic scrutiny on the cover of *This Year's Model* now unwittingly plays the role of the camera as Costello unburdens his soul.

derstanding of the album's title. With the poetic themes of the album in mind, it does not take a great deal of imagination to make some sense of the words "blood" and "chocolate" independently. Blood might serve as a symbol for violence or passion, an ambiguity underlining the central psychological conflict of the album. Chocolate, though a bit more inscrutable, might be significant for its conflicted dual identity—sweet, but dangerously addictive. Their union in the title obviously packs a revolting, visceral punch of its own, closely in keeping with the poetic contents of the album. But the significance of their pairing takes on a greater clarity with the mouth thrown into the mix (as it is from the first time we lay eyes on the album). Taken together, the three concepts—blood, chocolate, and the mouth—begin to resolve themselves at once into a sort of apocalyptic image of tooth decay. The matter is clinched on the album within.

The third song, "Tokyo Storm Warning," is a six-minute stream of seemingly unconnected impressions of a corrupt, nihilistic world; prostitutes, governments, and armies are set adrift in a sea of complete amorality. In the sixth of its eight verses, Costello tosses out an image so unsettling that, even in this environment, it is likely to stick (I don't offer any poetic context here—it wouldn't help): "They say gold paint on the palace gates comes from the teeth of pensioners."

But ultimately the appearance of this image in this setting emerges as only a prelude to its more purposeful return in the song that follows. As we have seen, "Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head" (track 4) affords our first glimpse of the album's main character in the third person—it is here, indeed, that the character begins to materialize as such. In the second quatrain of the first verse, Costello offers this curious characterization:

Here Comes Mr. Misery,
He'll never be any good
With a mouth full of gold and blood,
He's contemplating murder again, he must be in love.

The mention of “blood” may either lend a surrealistic dimension to the tooth decay implied by the presence of gold, or it may be a symbol for Mr. Misery’s verbal assaults, which are amply detailed throughout the song. As elsewhere, much of the potency of this image lies in the ambiguity itself. But with this vaguely surrealistic moment, many aspects of the album’s purpose, and its thematic metaphors, begin to slip into place, a sense furthered considerably by the rest of the song.

In the second verse, we find Mr. Misery “looking for a place for his mouth to shoot.” At the same time that the improbable grammar tends to strengthen the impression of this line, it seems to amplify the association between this character (and the artistic project he occupies) and the confessional stance of the earlier “Mouth Almighty,” whose chorus begins, “But I used to shoot my mouth off till you’d had enough of me/ Once or twice nightly.”

Nor does the significance of Mr. Misery’s mouth end here, this song’s own chorus culminating in a cluster of mouth-related images: “Now you’re tired of talking, and you can’t drink it down/So you hang around and drown instead.” This particular group of activities for the mouth—“talking,” “drinking,” and “drowning”—aids, among other things, in identifying Mr. Misery with the character whose appearances become more intermittent on the album’s second side. In the chorus of “Blue Chair” (track 7), the speaker, addressing the man who now enjoys the affections of his old lover, summarizes their situation:

Now it’s my turn to talk, your turn to think,
Your turn to buy, my turn to drink,
Your turn to cry, and my turn to sink
Down in the blue chair.

If we sort out all the things that it’s “my turn” to do, we are met once more with talking, drinking, and sinking—the fact that the sinking turns out to be into nothing more fatal than

the blue chair (whatever that means) hardly affects the potency of this connection.

Two songs later, in "Crimes of Paris," we come across what may be an elliptical reference to this same triumvirate. The break, to which I have already referred, concludes with the lines, "And I tried to hold onto you, but I don't know how/And I find it hard to swallow good advice/Like going down three times to only come up twice." The second line makes reference to speech (obliquely, in the form of advice), and to swallowing, the third to drowning.

There are, as well, more vague associations between mouth functions and death. In the introduction to "I Want You," for example, the speaker preludes his futile, rambling declaration of obsessive desire with the words: "I want you so it scares me to death/I can't say any more than 'I love you'/Everything else is a waste of breath." If the association here between death and breath wasted on futile affection remains veiled in this instance, a similar pairing is made more explicit in the last verse of the album's closing number, the suicidal "Next Time 'Round": "You used to take the breath out of me, now I think you'll be the death of me."²³

As in so many other respects, "I Want You" emerges as a song of critical importance in this connection. Here, in the song which does more than any other to bring the character's self-destructive obsession to the surface, the lover's mouth, too,

23. There are, apart from these, other unsettling associations of the mouth and its functions with love of one kind or another. In the second verse of "I Hope You're Happy Now," for example, as the main character attempts to communicate to his former lover all that is unworthy about her new boyfriend, he observes, "He's got all the things you need and some that you will never/But you make him sound like frozen food, his love will last forever." The reduction of the lover to something edible, if simply comical in this instance, is driven to a revolting extreme in the final verse: "He's acting innocent and proud, still you know what he's after/Like a matador with his pork sword, while we all died of laughter." It is difficult not to be reminded here of Mr. Misery's first appearance—"standing in the supermarket, shouting at the customers"—in "Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head."

rises unsettlingly to the surface as a physical object in the sonic background.

About a minute and a half from the end of the song, the acoustic guitar, organ, and bass (against a minimal beat from bass drum and high-hat) settle into an uninterrupted series of repetitions of the four-chord progression—e—G—C—B⁷—that has occupied them, with periodic breaks, for about four-and-a-half minutes. Thirty seconds later, Costello delivers a line that sounds for all the world like a closing gambit to this obsessively repetitious lyric: “I want you/Every night when I go off to bed, and when I wake up/I want you.” With this, the guitar and organ begin to fade out, and to all appearances the song is drawing to a close.

Yet suddenly, the voice is there again: “I want you/I’m going to say it once again ‘til I instill it/I know I’m going to feel this way until you...kill it.” By the end of this couplet, the organ and guitar have faded considerably, and the bass and percussion lines (while their recording level has not changed) have been reduced to minimal punctuation. But the voice has not faded at all. Indeed, it enters once more, explosive even at a near-whisper, “I want you.” And once more, “I want you.” The accompaniment is barely audible as it arrives at a final cadence on E minor. Costello’s voice, undiminished and unbearably loud by contrast, sings his last word on the second scale degree; for him, it appears, the song will never really end.²⁴ The mouth that is gaping at us on the album cover here emerges as a dreadful, senseless presence in the sonic landscape, as well.

But to suggest that it is here that the mouth takes a sonic form for the first time may be to sell short the most fundamental level at which this metaphor operates. The sonic “theme” of this album, as we have defined it, is Costello’s return to the

24. This might be overstating the case. The vocal part of “Let Them All Talk,” the irrepressibly cheery opening number of *Punch the Clock*, also ends on the second scale degree, as does “Battered Old Bird” later on *Blood and Chocolate*.

unadorned combo with which he was associated from the start. The mouth forms a perfect symbol, it would seem, for the stripped-down Attractions sound itself. The sound of this band was Costello's original, irreducible sound-generating apparatus—as one critic termed it, the sound “so closely identified with Mr. Costello's songs and his singing that it's difficult to imagine one without the other.”²⁵

A vital dimension is added to this reading by the fact that the sonic substance of the band appears to be undergoing its own version of the tooth decay which animates the mouth metaphor in its more literal aspect. Special recording effects had never been a consequential part of Nick Lowe's work with Costello in the past,²⁶ but they appear in manifold forms on this album, of which the crisis of balance at the end of “I Want You” is only a single instance. A few selected examples will illustrate the point.

The “guitar solo” in “Uncomplicated” is characteristic of Costello's contributions to the genre insofar as almost nothing happens. Its entire sixteen-measure length takes place on an E chord, and each measure is identical to every other except in one crucial respect. An electric guitar, which appears to spend the duration of the “solo” in an undifferentiated, sixteenth-note strumming,²⁷ simply drops out every so often, then reappears as quickly as it vanished. There are seven such gaps, of apparently random duration and spacing, over the course of the sixteen measures. The quality of the attack at each end of these gaps negates the possibility that the guitarist (Costello) is actually performing it this way; the guitar is being “punched” in and out of existence at the sound-board.²⁸

25. Robert Palmer, *New York Times*, 2 February 1981, in a review of a performance on the *Trust* tour.

26. The brief introduction to “Hand in Hand” (the first song on the second side of *This Year's Model*) features unidentifiable machine noises of some sort and backwards singing, but this is an anomaly among the early albums.

27. Assuming a 2/4 bar.

The solo of “Poor Napoleon” creates a similar impression, though its context, and the musical process itself, are quite different. The break of this song concludes with one of the album’s more gruesome (and seemingly gratuitous) images, “I’ll bet she isn’t all that’s advertised, I’ll bet that isn’t all she fakes/ Just like that place where they take your spine and turn it into soap flakes.” The sense that reality itself has fallen a bit out of joint at this point is played out in the eight-measure solo that follows, where a clever bass part (which might otherwise have been taken as the real solo) is overshadowed by the events in the organ line. Wobbling away with the heavy vibrato which appears often on this album, the organ sustains a single C-major chord through the whole “solo.” But the recorded track—that of the organ alone—is alternately sped up and slowed down slightly, distorting both pitch and wobble in three gentle, nauseating waves.

The break of “Crimes of Paris” (already discussed in another connection) includes a distinct echo of the final moments of “I Want You.” At the start of the break, a small chorus enters for the first time in the song, doing nothing but shouting a quick, indiscernible syllable—perhaps simply, “oh!” During the last two lines of the break, these shouts are brought up higher and higher in the mix until the rest of the ensemble is drowned out almost entirely (“...like going down three times to only come up twice?”). These voices disappear instantly with the onset of the final verse.²⁹

Taken together, these effects—and this is only a selection—generate a strong cumulative sense that the sonic integrity of the band itself is at risk, that their old sound is in a state of decay. There is, in this highly uncharacteristic aspect of the album’s production, a strong parallel to the images of tooth decay that are so closely bound up with the “mouth” metaphor in

28. The term (I’m not making it up) comes from the simple action of pushing the little button on the mixer that engages and disengages the input signal.

its other aspects, particularly in the album title itself. If, as I have suggested, the mouth(/voice) of the obsessed ex-lover can be taken as a symbol for Costello's musical mouth(/voice)—that is, the Attractions themselves—mouth and band alike appear to be fighting the same losing battle with time.

In sum, *Blood and Chocolate* does indeed represent a return to the severe lyrical style of Costello's first albums, as critics have often observed, but it is a return which purposefully frames this poetic conceit in thematic terms. By the end of its first side, the album's lyrical brutality has been revealed as the utterance of a speaker, not identical with Costello himself, whom we are invited to objectify, to view—with the author—from a safe distance. The return, too, to the old band and its old sound is bound up with this character and his obsessive inability to escape from the past; at the same time that we are invited to pity and loathe the album's central character, the album as a musical project emerges as a corollary subject of the critique. Meanwhile, the whole is bound up with the governing metaphor of the mouth, a symbol at once of lyrical ferocity, of the basic musical ensemble, and, perhaps, of an entire way of confronting the world. The tooth decay suggested in the album's title (and elsewhere) serves as the most fundamental metaphor for the corruption and pain brought on by unhealthy excess that underlies the entire project.

I close with a consideration of one final detail of the album's visual presentation, one whose symbolic significance

29. We might point, as well, to the guitar solo of "Tokyo Storm Warning," which features two electric guitars, one of them recorded backwards. Similarly, the extended coda of "Home Is Anywhere You Hang Your Head," an instrumental afterthought with no discernible relationship (except tempo and key) to the material of the song that came before, is punctuated intermittently by two acoustic guitars, one recorded conventionally in the right channel answered by one recorded backwards in the left. The material is nondescript enough that it is difficult to tell whether this is, in fact, a single recording answering itself in reverse.

should probably be put forth as no more than a provocative possibility. While the name "Elvis Costello and the Attractions" appears on the front cover of the album, this is the only place either of these designations—"Elvis Costello" or "the Attractions"—appears. As we have seen, Costello's photograph is labeled after the painting (portrait?) on the cover, "Napoleon Dynamite," and this is the name by which the musician is known throughout the album credits; the name occurs a total of five times.³⁰

Whatever we are to make of the "Dynamite" part, and possibilities certainly leap to mind, the pseudonym, "Napoleon," can be understood as a concise encapsulation of the entire project. This is, after all, practically the only self-appellation that is actually more presumptuous, more outrageous, than "Elvis." Like so many other aspects of this album, Costello's appropriation of this ridiculous pseudonym seems to address a central facet of his old identity, but only in order to exaggerate, to defamiliarize, and to critique.

A more important question remains, however. If Napoleon Dynamite—pictured and effectively named on the cover ("NAPO DYNA" is plenty to go on)—is the author of this album, what are the words "Elvis Costello and the Attractions" doing there? As always, much of the delight lies in the ambiguity. Perhaps the title itself is one of the many aspects of this project which have been misunderstood; the album may, after all, constitute singer/songwriter Napoleon Dynamite's critical examination of a now-defunct band, a complex musical, poetic, and iconographic study entitled *Blood and Chocolate: Elvis Costello and the Attractions*.

30. For obvious legal reasons, the compositions themselves are credited to MacManus, except "I Hope You're Happy Now," which goes to Costello; perhaps it is an earlier work.