

DIVERSIONS



NO GENIUS — Elvis Costello has been called a musical genius. But he believes if he was a genius, he wouldn't be singing. Above, Costello performs in SUNY-Oswego's Laker Hall two years ago. (Staff file photo)

Elvis Costello Spikes His Critics

By MARY ANNE O'CALLAGHAN
For The Associated Press

Elvis Costello has been called a musical genius by many critics in his 12-year career. He has an answer for them. "There are no geniuses in this business. If there were, they wouldn't be in this business."

An interviewer quickly discovers that Costello has an opinion about everything. But that doesn't come as a surprise. Costello's albums display his acute observations of the human condition. "Spike," his 12th, and first on Warner Brothers Records, is no exception.

The record tackles such topics as God, Margaret Thatcher, coal-train robberies and capital punishment, as well as problems with personal relationships. If that weren't enough, it contains two songs written with another famous Liverpoolian, Paul McCartney.

"McCartney called and asked if I'd be interested in writing a few songs," Cos-

tello says. "It was lyric pingpong. You go back and forth with each other. We'll just have to wait and see if it works."

One of the songs they co-wrote is "Veronica," the album's first single. McCartney also plays bass on the track "...This Town."

Another song, "Baby Plays Around," was co-written by Costello and his wife, Cait O'Riordan, formerly of the Pogues, an Irish band.

"Cait wrote it while I went out to buy a paper," Costello says, emphasizing how small his contribution was. "It was all there on tape. All I did was some musical editing."

He continues: "This album took a bit more planning. I knew the players on the other records and they were familiar with the sound. In this case, we put the musicians together." Supporting players include Roger McGuinn, once of the Byrds, former Beatle McCartney, Christie Hynde of the Pretenders, guitarist

Marc Ribot and the Dirty Dozen Brass Band from New Orleans.

"We had to get the right collection and make the right mistakes to produce this album," Costello says. It's his first album of new material since "Blood and Chocolate" in 1986.

"Spike" has been well-received by the critics, even better than most of Costello's previous efforts, which also have been favorably reviewed in general. Costello is a critical success but has not been a commercial superstar. He doesn't seem unhappy about the situation, but did leave Columbia Records for Warner Brothers.

"I don't want to go around bashing my former label," the singer says. "The people at CBS who didn't help me know, who they are and the people who did help know who they are. The Warner people know the business and want to sell the record."

"I'm successful and enjoy what I do. That and selling records are two different things, really," he laughs.

Typical Costello
"Spike" is a typical Costello mix of musical idioms. He has always been able to scramble different musical forms together, driven by the imagery of his lyrics. He finds some idioms — such as jazz — have been used too much by careless hands, saturating the public's appetite for them.

"Let Him Dangle" deals with a real British murder case. "It's a famous murder story and I grew up hearing about it," Costello says. "Now, every time someone gets murdered or something horrific happens, the tabloids scream, 'Let Him Dangle.'"

"The song states my feelings clearly on that issue," he continues. "It [execution] is wrong, regardless of the crime that has been committed. That doesn't mean that if someone in my family were murdered I wouldn't be angry. Of course I'd be, but I'd still be against hanging the guy. It doesn't bring the victim back."

The Image
His lyrics have created a public image

of anger and suppressed violence. Costello feels that's the public's problem, not his. After he has finished a song, what people do or do not read into it is in the public domain, he feels. However, Costello has strong reactions to critical reviews.

"They don't always grasp everything," he says, leaning forward in his seat. "They're saturated with free music to the point where they can only listen to eight bars of it. The people actually putting their money down to buy the record have a different relationship with it. What bothers me about critics is their telling me I can make a better record. Well, if they think so, let them go out and make it."

"An artist takes what he has and uses it with the material at hand. It's like Bon Jovi. He sells records and doesn't pretend to be an artist. I enjoy him because he does what he does well."

Costello waves his hand dismissively. "Look at Michael Jackson. I'm convinced no one is going to remember his songs. He's going to be a statistic like Rudy Vallee. Vallee sold lots of records, but who remembers him? That's going to be Michael."

Costello also wrote the highly praised lyrics of "The Comedians," which the late Roy Orbison sang on his last LP, "Mystery Girl."

The singer, whose real name is Declan MacManus, is touring, but minus the Attractions, his former backup band. They have been praised as "the perfect new-wave rhythm section" and paraded as limiting Costello's range. It seems to be up in the air whether they will play together again.

"When you perform, it's the chance to do a song in a different way than the recording. So you end up with a totally new sound," Costello says. "There aren't any of my songs that I'm humiliated to play. So I'm not editing them out of my life. However, there are some songs I don't like and others that I would rather play."

He laughs. "But I'm not telling which ones."

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The Rating System's Evolution Detailed

By JEFF STRICKLER

Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune

The minute actors in movies started talking, people started worrying about what they were going to say — and worrying about ways to keep them from saying it.

The rating system we have now, established 20 years ago by the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), is only the latest in a string of attempts to monitor — and sometimes control — the content of films.

The industry's earliest movement toward self-regulation was an effort to keep outsiders from seizing control. Religious leaders, upset by what they considered morally depraved content in some movies, organized boycotts of films they didn't like.

It didn't hurt their cause that Hollywood had become known as a center for scandal. With reports of drug use, sexual mischief and even murder in the 1920s, the industry left itself open for an assault by those arguing that people needed guidance in dealing with the notorious purveyors of the medium.

Hollywood already had a National Board of Review but it was basically powerless. When Congress started to talk about imposing federal guidelines after several states already established censorship boards, the studio bosses realized that they needed something, and someone, with more authority.

Enter Indiana politician Will Hays, President Warren Harding's campaign manager and later his postmaster general. The film studios formed an organization called the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America and appointed Hays its president.

Through the late 1920s, Hays worked mostly from a political standpoint, glad-handing congressional representatives, encouraging filmmakers to restrain themselves and mounting publicity campaigns to counterbalance the bad press Hollywood was getting. But it soon became apparent that talk was only a stopgap measure, that it was going to take more than polite nudging to make filmmakers follow Hays' concepts of proper movie content.

In 1930, Hays oversaw creation of the Production Code, a document that spelled out the words and actions movies could and could not contain. Four years later, he put into action the Production Code Administration (PCA) to enforce the rules.

Often called the Hays Office, the PCA ruled with complete authority. Not only were all movies subject to review before release, but the office felt free to interfere anywhere it saw fit during the creative process.

It summoned scripts and studied lists of proposed camera shots. According to censorship historian Gerald Gardner, author of "The Censorship Papers," the Hays Office went so far as to tell filmmakers not even to think about making movies of some books and plays they considered risqué, because they'd never be approved, no matter how much they were watered down.

Although the Hays Office officially existed until 1966, its power started to crumble in 1951 when the Supreme Court overturned a 1915 ruling that had denied movies First Amendment protection because they were a "novelty."

Ruling that films had become a legitimate form of mass communication, the court refused to block distribution of Federico Fellini's "The Miracle," in which a deranged woman was im-

Top Weekend Movies

May 5-7 grosses national

1	"K-9"	\$6.44 million
2	"Pet Semetary"	\$6.34 million
3	"Field of Dreams"	\$5.42 million
4	"Major League"	\$3.59 million
5	"Criminal Law"	\$1.92 million
6	"Listen To Me"	\$1.79 million
7	"Dream Team"	\$1.76 million
8	"Say Anything"	\$1.68 million
9	"Rain Man"	\$1.59 million
10	"Scandal"	\$0.98 million

Source: Exhibitor Relations Co.

When United Artists pulled out of the consortium supporting the Hays Office, the agency started an era of judicious backpedaling. But the more it retreated, the more ludicrous its function became, with the censors turning a blind eye to symbolism that grew increasingly more obvious. In "A Streetcar Named Desire," Marlon Brando jammed his thumb in a beer bottle, shook it up, stuck it between his legs and then shot it toward Kim Hunter.

In 1966, new MPAA President Jack Valenti put the Hays Office out of its misery. A temporary rating system — basically, the warning "suggested for mature audiences" that was applied to many films — was replaced by the current format late in 1968.

The ratings panel works in anonymity to prevent its members from being unduly influenced by outside forces. The number of people on the board varies, but it's generally 10 to 12 appointed to terms of one to three years. Only Richard Heffner, the board's permanent chairman, is identified. No information on the other members is released, but he describes them collectively as "average people who are not part of the movie industry."

Submitting a film for rating is voluntary. Heffner said the board will "try to make an educated estimate which rating most parents would feel is appropriate for a film. We're not saying if a film is good or bad, just how the average parent might feel about its content."

Heffner notifies the producers of the board's decision and the reasoning behind it. If the producers don't like the rating, they have two choices: re-edit the film to eliminate the parts the board objected to, or file an appeal. The appeal is heard by a different panel than the one that judged the film originally.

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