

THE BACKBEAT

Elvis Turns Tourist

By ADAM BAER

In the coolly observant Sofia Coppola film, "Lost in Translation," Bill Murray plays a has-been celebrity trapped in Toyko performing in whiskey ads. Out at a karaoke joint with his newfound friend, Scarlett Johansen, he lip-syncs to the tunes of a back-throated crank crooning about walking through a "wicked world, searchin' for light in the darkness of insanity." A driving drumbeat lays the groundwork for indifferent guitars. Our hero flaunts hipster garb, completely aware of how much funnier he seems illuminated by the cheesy glow of global commercialism.

Unsurprisingly, the ironic voice behind this moody meta-moment is that of Elvis Costello. His 1979 song, "[What's So Funny 'Bout] Peace Love and Understanding" helped establish the brand of sound for which he is rightly renowned: tight, raw, and rhythmic songs made up of simple melodies over traditional progressions. Ever since, his lyrical disillusionment has continued to seduce overeducated dreamers lost in an impersonal world of shlock.

His is an honest, if mildly pretentious, ethos. And yet it obviously wasn't satisfying. Over the last 20 years

ics writing otherwise — and there have been a few, mostly in political magazines — either haven't studied truly artful compositions or are in contrarian fevers to simultaneously mythologize a more "evolved" release and their own reviews of it. These seem to be smart, writerly fans who have decided to become critics without actually knowing much about the art they're discussing.

Mr. Costello is not ill-equipped for such a trip; possessed of all the right tools, he just doesn't quite seem to know how to use them. "North" presents honest, anti-ironic songs written around piano accompaniment. At one point Mr. Costello sings, "You left me standing alone although I thought that we could not be parted"; at another he croons, "Someone took the words away." Regardless, the words ring clear in a controlled, intimate, almost-hushed manner. The melodies are discreet. The sax solos and string section intros offer a velvety supper-club foreground upon which to improvise (Sinatra would have approved). And the modal shifts of bluesy harmonics are keenly observed.

Yet for all his technical understanding, most of Mr. Costello's melodies are too long for his expressive muscle. Moreover, they don't go anywhere, often rising a step or two away from a more promising destination. Because of this, Mr. Costello's lovelorn lyrics feel more pat, vacant, and embarrassing than they should. His forms are deeply disjunct, evocative of someone trying to force himself into a tight new pair of sophisticated shoes.

These issues pervade the album but appear most strikingly in the song "When Did I Stop Dreaming." Mr. Costello sings in a perfectly acceptable scale, "You appeared when I was lost in reverie," before segueing into a series of two three-syllable phrases — "Pardon me ... if I seem" — followed by a four-syllable conclusion — "distant and strange" — that references the hemiolias found in Bernstein musicals. It's an artificial assertion of musical pedigree, and it pulls the song apart.

Contrastingly, the song "Fallen," opens with the line: "All the leaves are turning yellow, red and brown / Soon they'll be scattered as they tumble down / Although they may be swept up so invitingly." These three long phrases are stretched into one step-wise tune that searches for a tonic or home key in the most unintriguing of ways; there aren't tasty deceptive leaps and arrivals in the strain, just boring notes that crave a native land.

Writing the kinds of rock songs for which Mr. Costello is famous may not be easy, but it's not necessarily a talent that translates to the obstacles of the world of standards. To write this sort of music, one needs more than a jazz-singer girlfriend, excellent session musicians, a computer-orchestration program, or an honorary degree in jazz harmony. One needs a gift for spinning moody chords and sappy lyrics into sweet gold.

How strange, then, that Mr. Costello's more famous music is the unoffi-

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Mr. Costello (who had no problem commercially mythologizing his alternative identity early on, going from Declan Patrick Aloysius McManus to, well, *Elvis*) has sampled from the smorgasbord of genre in search of something more so-called meaningful. Here is a respected Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee who has shamelessly teamed up with the classical Brodsky quartet, Tony Bennett, Burt Bacharach, the early-music viol ensemble Fretwork, and opera star Anne Sophie von Otter. Can you say chronic status addiction?

Happily, last year's Costello album "When I Was Cruel" was a return to his roots. It showed an Elvis who could actually reimagine the rocker constitution with maturity (something superstars like Paul McCartney haven't been able to accomplish). But this year we are faced with "North," an album of classically orchestrated, quasi-jazz ballads, evidently inspired by Costello's latest love, songstress Diana Krall, and released, strangely enough, on the tony label Deutsche Grammophon (home of the world's best classical musicians).

Elvis, what *are* we to do with you?

I ask this not as a rock hardliner who feels betrayed by a punk who went bourgeois. I ask it as a music lover with equal respect for the Met Opera, the Café Carlyle, the Blue Note, and the old CBGB. Standards, whether classical in nature (Frank Loesser, Jerome Kern), jazzy (Kurt Weill), or modernist (Stephen Sondheim) deserve respect. Their delectable turns of melody, placed atop intriguing but palatable harmonic changes, create charged poetic texts that stick in the mind. They don't need smoke and mirrors. They're simple, elevating.

"North," though, only offers a forced, glossy form of standards-tourism. Crit-

cial theme of "Lost in Translation." In the film, a world-weary performer sits in a plush hotel bar listening to bad lounge acts sing hapless melodies. Mr. Costello is far too tasteful a musician to sing that poorly, of course, and his musicians are clearly adept. But the question remains: If Ms. Coppola's lounge singer had been singing one of this world-weary songwriter's new ditties, would anyone have noticed?



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