

Costello's *Spike* is truly sharp

By DOUG EDMUNDS
Staff Writer

Elvis Costello — *Spike*

How does one begin to discuss the latest album by one of pop music's most prolific, consistent and hugely talented artists, Elvis Costello? There's so much one could say about this man, his music and his incredible songwriting ability, that trying to review *Spike*, his new 14-song LP, is an intimidating, challenging task. But as Elvis himself once said, "Spare us the theatrics and the verbal gymnastics." Let's get on with it.

It's been more than two years since Costello has released an album of all new material, an unusually long gap for the musician who put out one and sometimes two LP's per year between 1977 and 1986. Following the one-two punch of the masterful *King of America* and rip-roaring *Blood and Chocolate*, both released in '86, it seems that Costello wanted to take some time to reassess his music and his approach to making records. If *Spike* is any indication of the kind of things we can look forward to hearing from him in the coming decade, then we're all in for a richly rewarding, unpredictably good time.

Listening to *Spike* is like reading Milan Kundera — see "The Book of Laughter and Forgetting" or "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." As much as both men might cringe at this overblown sounding comparison of their respective crafts, the comparison is valid in at least one respect. Both artists create work that is extremely dense, full of imaginative imagery and thought-provoking passages, which demand repeated listenings or readings, as the case may be.

The sheer length of Costello's record, while common for him and a welcome change from most meager releases these days, is enough to make even the most attentive listener feel like he has missed something the first time through. Costello's lyrics have always been good reason for multiple plays — their richness and depth are best appreciated after two or three close listenings. But never before has the music too been so widely varied and multi-layered within the space of one LP.

Much of this is attributed to the numerous supporting players used throughout the disc. Gone is Costello's outstanding backup group, the Attractions, and in its place we find an eclectic mix of New Orleans jazz musicians, Irish folk instrumentalists, top-notch session cats and a few famous friends, including Roger McGuinn and Paul McCartney. Together they all provide everything from avant-garde funk ("Chewing Gum") and gonzo rockabilly ("Pads, Paws and Claws") to bluesy soul ("Deep Dark Truthful Mirror") and more traditional sounding folk ballads ("Any King's Shilling"). Despite the wide variety of sounds and styles, the record doesn't sound disjointed, nor does it suffer by exploring too many directions at once. Partial credit for this should be given to Costello, Kevin Killen and T Bone Burnett for their excellent production work. They manage to balance and blend a seemingly endless array of instruments, sound effects and vocal parts into a pleasing whole. In addition, Costello's unmistakable voice is the thread that sews all of this together. Without his consistently

appropriate and effective vocal treatments, the songs might not have held together as well as they do.

Having said that, I must admit that not all these songs work as well as others. The opening cut, "This Town," sounds like a leftover from the tepid *Goodbye Cruel World* LP, which Costello himself calls the song just doesn't stand up to most of the other material here. "Satellite" suffers for similar reasons, with intriguing lyrics and a nice Chrissie Hynde guest vocal failing to save the tune from a rather schmaltzy arrangement. Other than these comparatively weak moments, *Spike* contains some typically high quality Costello songwriting and a few outstanding cuts.

First among these is "Let Him Dangle," a chilling song about a real life murderer that sounds like a cross between "Watching the Detectives" and "Pills and Soap." The next is "Veronica," co-written with Paul McCartney and containing more hooks than I can count on one hand. This is about as close to a hit single as Elvis gets on this record, though I doubt many major FM stations will be kind enough to give the song a chance. "God's Comic" would have fit well on *King of America* but here it's a definite standout. The unusual call and response chorus and the way that Costello manipulates the dual meaning of the title make this one a real treat.

"Tramp the Dirt Down," on the other hand, is anything but a treat. The best track on the album, this moving folk-style ballad deals with the depressing economic and political atmosphere in England. If



With a little help from his friends, Elvis Costello shines on *Spike*.

I had to quote just one line from this powerful song it would have to be: "When England was the whore of the world/Margaret was her madam/ And the future looked as bright and as clear as the black tar macadam." The title here refers to the speaker's desire to be present when Mrs. Thatcher is buried so that he can help tramp the dirt down. Rarely has Costello made such a convincing case for

his obvious bitterness and disgust. *Spike* is an exciting start to what appears to be a promising new stage in Mr. Costello's development. It mixes some of the best elements from his past recordings and incorporates some new ones as well. There are touches here of Tom Waits, Randy Newman and Van Morrison among others, but in the end, it is undeniably good old glorious Elvis Costello.

Tar Heel artists' works displayed for Fine Arts Festival

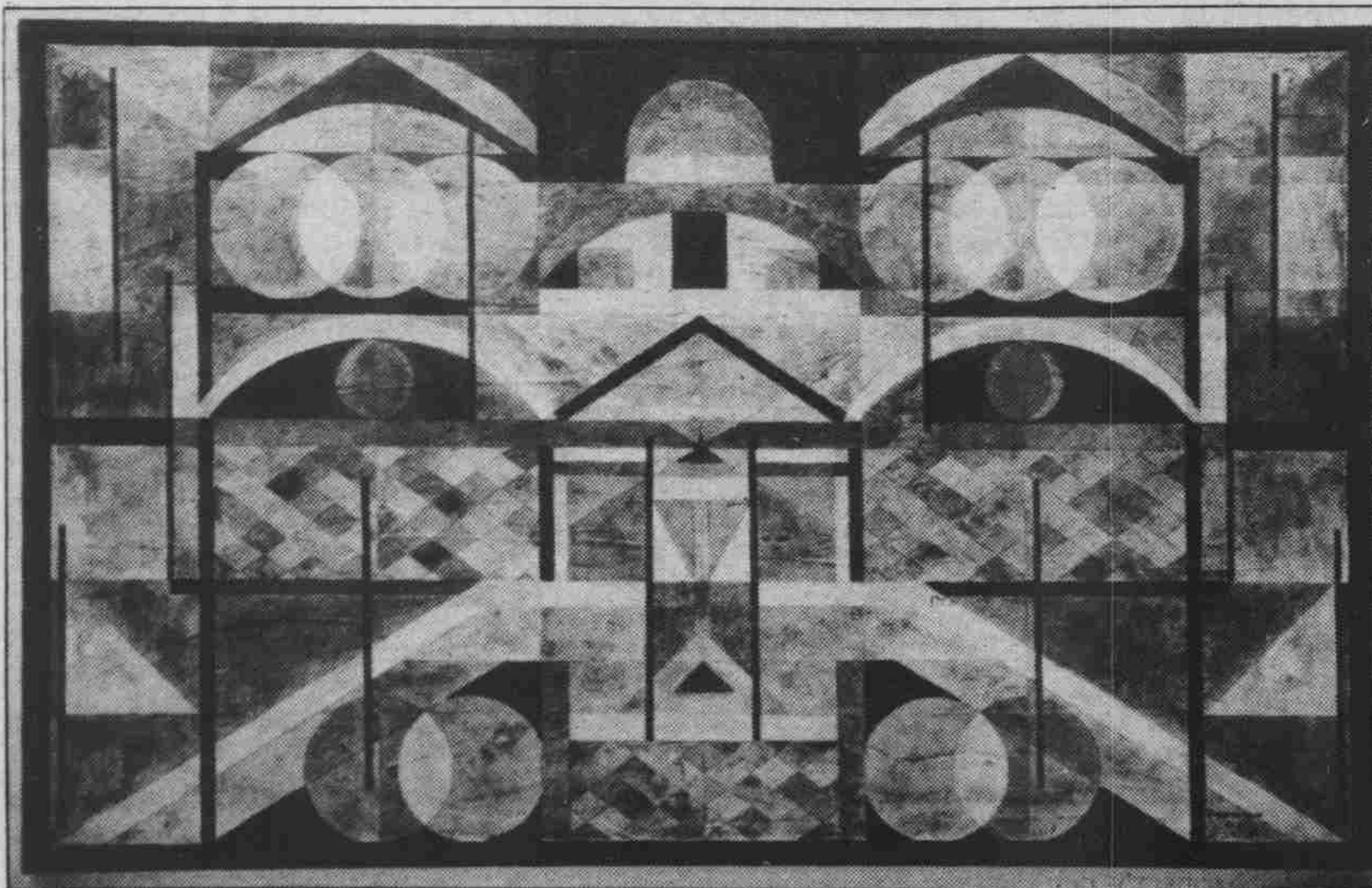


Photo courtesy of Lee Hansley

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As part of the UNC arts festival, the theme of which is "Flashback: The '60s," the Union Gallery will house a new exhibition starting February 24. The gallery will feature works created during the 1960s by 22 artists who lived in North Carolina in the same era.

The paintings to be exhibited at the Union Gallery are only half of a larger show organized by Lee Hansley, an independent curator. He says the only qualification, other than great artistic ability, is that the artist "lived and worked in North Carolina both during the '60s and the '80s." The remaining half of the show, paintings by the same artists but executed during the 1980s, will be set up at the Horace Williams House on East Rosemary Street. The public opening reception for the artists will

be held at the Horace Williams House on February 24 from 5 to 7 P.M.

Hansley calls the exhibition a "reunion show," since several of the artists have shown together previously. He says, "All of these artists have extensive exhibition records and many are known nationally." UNC faculty members Robert Barnard, Richard Kinnaird, Marvin Saltzman and Dennis Zabrowski are among the artists who will submit works to the exhibition. The remaining artists range from S. Tucker Cooke of Asheville to Claude Howell of Wilmington. Hansley states that, since the artists come from such varied backgrounds, the exhibition has only one theme. "There will be but one common thread running through this exhibition and that is quality. It should prove to be a very interesting show for the University and for the Triangle."