

# Rock 'n' roll, romance and a string quartet for Juliet

## Elvis Costello and The Brodsky Quartet

The Juliet Letters

Warner Bros.

●●● 1/2

Elvis Costello, rock's resident iconoclast and social critic, has skipped some highly eclectic stones through the years. Yet he has never made the big commercial ripple in the music world that he should have.

The man who begat gems like "Watching the Detectives," "New Amsterdam," "Radio Radio" and "Less Than Zero" has done a great service to the world, and he really deserves respect outside of isolated critical circles.

Though Elvis Costello has pursued many tangents during his career, his latest venture away from the cult of the singer-songwriter is quite unexpected and hard to figure out.

Elvis recently shed the mantle of the misunderstood, angry young man he has carried since his earliest sides with Stiff Records in the mid-70s. His musical collaborations with Paul McCartney and his marriage to Cait O'Riordan of

music

JON ALLEN

The Pogues have brought out a kinder, gentler Elvis than we have ever known.

The new album, *The Juliet Letters*, is a decidedly highbrow collaboration with The Brodsky Quartet that is quite unlike the scathing postpunk sensibility of his past. The Quartet is a London-based group of young virtuosi better known for playing Shostakovich and Haydn than "Oliver's Army." But rather than turning into "Costello With Strings," *The Juliet Letters* proves to be a unified, interesting and organic piece of work.

The album is a song sequence for string quartet and voice; brief song-like forms are linked to form a unified, pseudoclassical piece. Despite this unusual instrumental arrangement, the form presents diverse moods and tone color contrasts effectively.

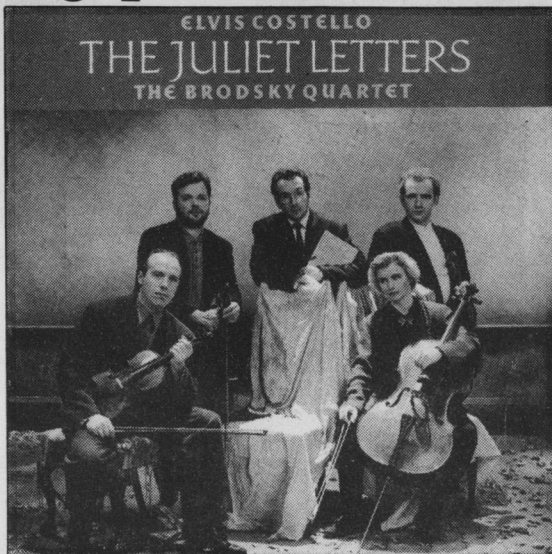
The thematic unity of the lyrics is the glue that holds the album together. Costello said the songs were inspired by a newspaper story about a Veronese professor. The professor, it seems, has for some time collected all mail addressed to "Juliet Capulet," and each song in *The Juliet Letters* is written in the form of a letter.

As usual, Elvis attaches a cleverness and literacy to his words that's hard to find anywhere else. Case in point: "This Offer Is Unrepeatable" is junk mail for the ears, a song that confronts the reader's neuroses with blaring vocal klaxons.

True, it's not as entertaining as "She speaks double dutch with a real double dutchess," or "I step on the brake to get out of her clutches," but Elvis's past wordplay would have little place in this new framework.

The music blends some modern and neoclassical backdrops with melodies that are alternately soaring and understated. Shades of Bartok in the instrumental "Deliver Us" and Prokofiev in "I Almost Had A Weakness" bring to mind some decidedly non-Costello influences. The ensemble work is highly refined and well-played, and even Elvis is on his best behavior, replacing his standard wail with a pleasing melodicism.

The best material includes the somber "For Other Eyes," the melodically tricky "I Almost Had A Weakness," the pop song "Jacksons, Monk and Rowe" and the spooky, pizzicato "Romeo's Senance." The material works, but generally fails in some of its more outlandish filler. It's hard to criticize Elvis for taking this ambitious step toward a more "respectable" type of music. He is will-



**If you played the cello, would you want to play with a guy named Elvis?**  
ing to pursue classical forms with complexities which, at first, seem to be beyond the scope of his earlier work. I applaud his effort.  
But, y'know, in my heart of hearts, I'd rather hear "Allison."



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one woman's fluff is another woman's fire. —amini

## Whatever you do, don't pigeonhole

### Thelonious Monk

San Francisco Holiday

Milestone/Fantasy

●●●● 1/2

Jazz's great pianist, composer and eccentric, Thelonious Monk has often been pigeonholed as a bebopper. But Monk is all angles; the boppers, curves. His tunes are compositions, theirs improvisations. Monk stands at a tangent to every style, but wherever you place him, he is of towering importance to modern jazz. As the club and concert takes on San Francisco make clear, Monk's music can only be compared to other Monk. Critic Joe Goldberg got it right when he called Monk's music "a jagged, humorous, powerfully swinging music that always sounds like a wryly amused commentary on itself."

Milestone's new disk collects 10 Monk performances from 1958-'61, none before available except on the *Complete Riverside* box set. All but "April in Paris," an old standard, are Monk originals, instantly catchy but endlessly complex. Soprano sax Steve Lacy said the key to Monk's music "is the way that it rhymes."

One number, a take of "Bye-Ya" and

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review

SCOTT TIMBERG

"Epistrophy," from Monk's legendary tenure at New York's Five Spot Cafe, has never seen the light of day in any form. This track is some of the loosest, most spontaneous and free-wheeling Monk on record anywhere. It features both drummer Art Blakey and Johnny Griffin, self-proclaimed fastest tenor saxophonist on earth, and at the very least one of the cockiest. This take was left in the can because it's a little sloppy. But picking at Monk for missing notes

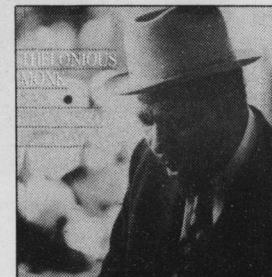
*"...a jagged, humorous, powerfully swinging music that always sounds like a wryly amused commentary on itself."*

—Joe Goldberg

and playing poorly tuned pianos is like taking James Joyce to task for his punctuation.

The other cuts on *San Francisco Holiday* were recorded at San Francisco's Black Hawk club or concert halls in Paris or New York. Their quality is uniformly excellent, and Monk is well-supported by the tenors of Harold Land and Charlie Rouse. I usually find Rouse disappointing; on these tracks, though, he plays with a rough, bluesy, full-throated tone and a logic that matches Monk's own.

Throughout, Monk demonstrates his signature exuberance; use of space, play-



San Francisco Holiday

ful hesitation, unexpected accents and obscure voicings. The record is not just a collection of oddities — the heart of Monk's legacy, along with his early Blue Notes, are his Riverside years.

Few musicians liked to play with Monk, mostly because they couldn't. Miles Davis got in a fight with him after they tried to team up on "Round Midnight," and Coltrane said accompanying Thelonious was "like falling down an empty elevator shaft." But both, like Sonny Rollins, call their brushes with Monk catalysts to their own innovations. Monk may be the most continuously fascinating musician in modern jazz; *San Francisco Holiday* is a must for Monk nuts and a good place for newcomers to start, as well.

ratings

- — forget it
- — wait for a bargain bin buy
- — tape it from a friend
- — buy it
- — buy two copies