

Music to shake up the '70s

By MARK PEEL

Elvis Costello is a throwback. Everything about him, from his short, tussled, greasy hair and rolled-at-the-ankles dungarees to his president-of-the-high-school-physics-club white socks and immense eyeglasses, suggests the early '60s. *Armed Forces*, his third album, sounds like it could have been tugged into a time capsule at the 1965 World's Fair as an example of the music young Americans were listening to in those days.

Elvis' music owes more to the Beatles and the post-British Invasion American pop bands like ? Mark and the Mysterions than to his namesake. The songs are brief and to the point, all of them coming in at under three and a half minutes and half of them under three. And there are six of them on each side, a practice that ended in the late '60s when the obligatory guitar solo was introduced to pad and stretch thin material, reducing to five and sometimes four the number of tunes per album side.

Elvis' vocals are the center of interest—his deliberate, pleading voice resurrects the model British accent that American pop bands were so fond of imitating. There is scarcely any guitar to be heard, the bass and organ providing the principle instrumental articulation. And they seem to tease the

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listener with little scraps of melody that serve as entrances and exits for Elvis' singing—a reminder of the days when 16 necessity. The Attractions are a precise, virtuoso combo who provide a setting for Costello's vocals that is inventive and uncannily appropriate. Their greatest contribution is in the rhythmic complexity they give to essentially simple melodic material—a sense not merely of motion but of directed movement. The drums often seem to carry a song forward by compressing the density of the beat, giving one the feeling of being pushed into a corner of a crowded room. The organ eases Elvis out from the thick, churning sound and drops him down into a hushed, expectant state in which his nearly *sotto voce* climaxes (as on "Green Shirt") create a vocal tension that is very nearly tactile.

And not since Paul McCartney has a bass played so dominant a role in the sound mix—it functions very nearly as a lead instrument throughout this album. Only on "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace Love and Understanding" does there occur a distinct guitar voice, and it bears a strong resemblance to George Harrison's "I Want To Hold Your Hand" technique.

Piano and synthesizer layers are added and peeled away along with different combinations of the basic organ, drums and bass accompaniment, creating an abruptly shifting contrapuntal texture upon which Elvis' acrobatic vocal lines light and depart.

The effect of alternating density and sparseness enables Costello to display the dramatic range of his somewhat quirky voice.

If Elvis' music is straight from the '60s, the lyrical content speaks directly to the "me" generation at the end of the '70s. His songs eschew the naive kiss-in-the-dark quality of their '60s forebears. Even when he sings about a kiss in the dark, as he does on "Big Boys," he does so with a twisted obliqueness that is frightening and devastating.

Elvis Costello's songs are, in fact, riddles. He takes the commonplace and subtly refashions its familiar outlines into vaguely recognizable yet foreign objects. A favorite device is his ingenious distortion of clichés, so that he becomes locked, for instance, in a "grip-like vice." Unfortunately, these riddles sometimes become nearly indecipherable, as in "Chemistry Class," in which the listener is able to dimly make out the circumstances of the song—a modern day high school re-enactment of the beauty and the beast fable (with the physics club president as the beast, perhaps) acted out in the lab—but the word-associational quality of the lyrics defy any other than a narrowly personal interpretation. I happen to imagine a neo-Frankenstein laboratory in which a hunch-backed Phi Beta Kappa-type coerces the captain of the cheerleading team to sign



'Armed Forces'

a lovepact, but I really have no idea what Elvis intends by:

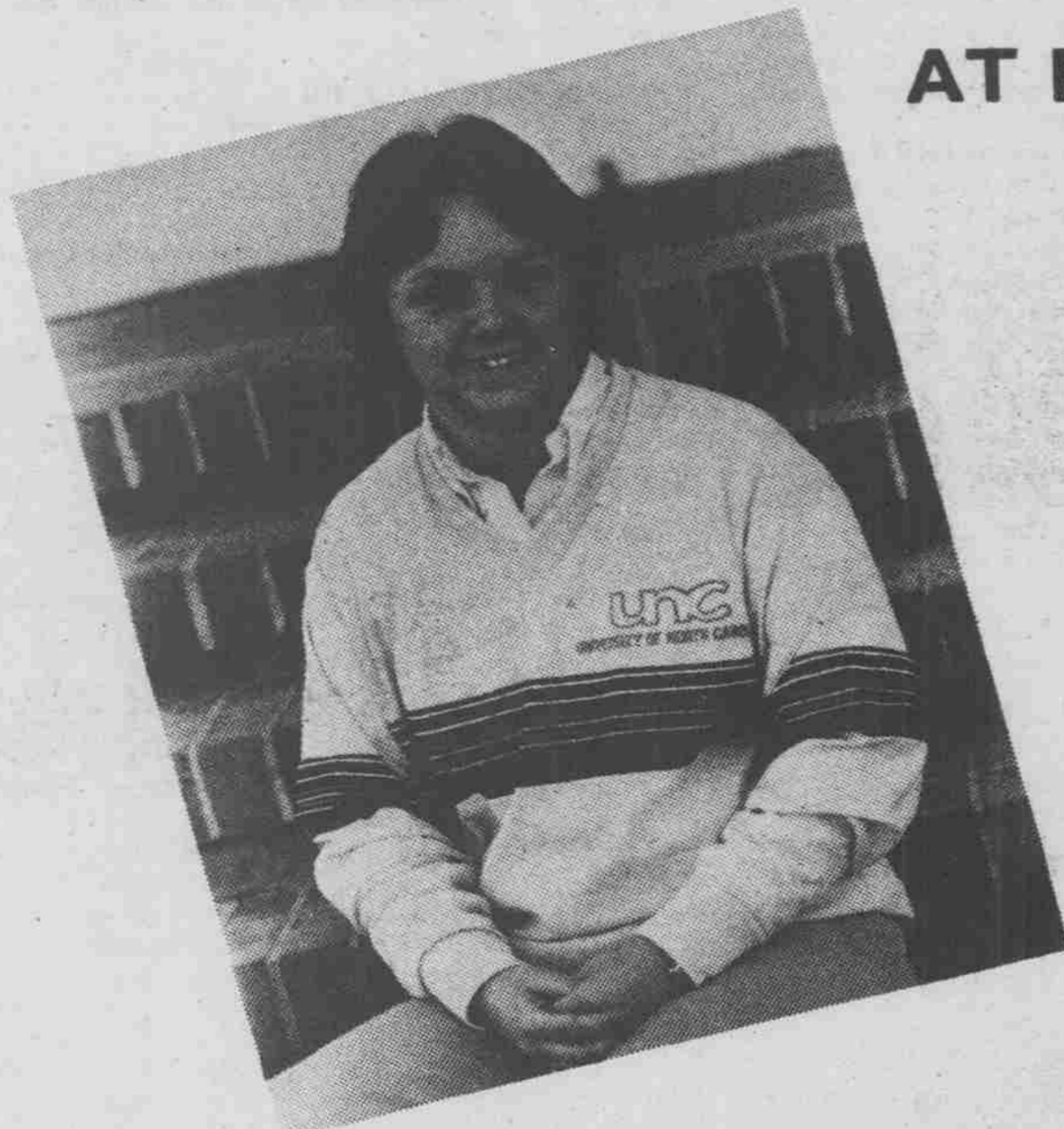
*Sparks are flying from electrical pylons
Snakes and ladders running up and down
her nylons...*

*You've got a chemistry class, I want a
piece of your mind
You don't know what you started when
you mixed it up with mine
Are you ready for the final solution?*

It is this puzzling quality that keeps Elvis Costello's music from being merely a nostalgic reproduction of a pop style that was picked up and dropped in the experimental '60s. Elvis Costello (along with the album's producer, Nick Lowe, the great archeologist of power pop music) has reworked a style so that it is able to make us as uneasy now as rock did in the last decade. I'd say that's just what our comfortable generation needs right now. ■

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