

# RECORDS

## This Year's Army

### Elvis Costello and The Attractions Armed Forces Radar

Quite frankly, if Elvis Costello *had* come out with an album to top his last effort, *This Year's Model*, I couldn't have found the words to do him justice. As it is, the new album is still a triumph if not of those epic proportions. Not only does Elvis maintain the consistent quality of his previous albums, he daringly continues his policy of constant musical development. At the moment it seems that the only thing he *can't* do is disappoint.

On his first L.P., *My Aim Is True*, Elvis brooded upon his own feelings of inadequacy, jealousy and frustration. With the arrival of his second album these elements had become a secondary matter while he damned the jet set, the fashion industry and British neo-fascism. The change of emphasis had the ring of authenticity to it. Becoming an overnight sensation (as Elvis Costello did after his debut album) is inclined to take the edge off anyone's bitterness. This time out Elvis widens the scope and reduces the personal element still further, launching an attack on the military, resurgent fascism and middle class foibles.

Admittedly my little summary looks a bit vague so I'd better own up to not having a clue

what half the lyrics on the album are about. It seems I'm not alone, as some of the reviews I've read of *Armed Forces* have been more baffling than the album itself. Suffice to say that Elvis' word play has lost none of its edge. All those "brash new Dylan" comparisons still overstate the case, but they are getting harder and harder to dismiss as wishful thinking.

Musically the radical step has been to opt for reggae-style dubs on several tracks, with bass and drums dramatically thundering in and out of the sound mix. This technique, employed to great effect on "Watching The Detectives" works equally effectively here. Unavoidably the development has somewhat restricted the gorgeous pop keyboards of Steve Young which were such an asset on *This Year's Model*. The fact is that Elvis Costello and The Attractions are in the enviable position of having more talent than can be accommodated on one album.

Taking a run through the stand-outs on the first side, the opener "Accidents Will Happen" is an exquisitely crafted pop tune. Curiously the version featuring only voice and piano accompaniment, which is on the free EP which comes with the album is even more successful. "Oliver's Army" the new single matches delightfully exuberant keyboards and peerless Costello melody with a lyric involving a young soldier's

realisation of his entrapment. To close the side there is "Party Girl" a wistful love song in the mould of "Alison", where Elvis' breathless vocal cuts straight to the heart.

Flipping the record, the second side kicks off with "Goon Squad" a political diatribe powered by one of Costello's patented melodic hooks, almost in the class of the repeated guitar lines in "Chelsea". Better still is "Sunday's Best", an incisive commentary on English middle class, set to a melody reminiscent of the waltzes that play on fairground carousels (I'm not kidding). The set closes with "Two Little Hitlers" a song so addictive its bound to grace the Top 20. Some see it as a grim political forecast but for my money its about the struggle to dominate a personal relationship by two equally unyielding people.

Without a doubt Elvis Costello is playing a very dangerous game. His consistent excellence creates ludicrously high expectations among his audience which he must continue to fulfil. Even perfection gets taken for granted eventually. So don't be fooled, listen to what Elvis Costello has to offer now, it is inconceivable that there could be better to come.

**Dominic Free**

### Johnny Winter White, Hot and Blue

*Epic*

The collaboration of Johnny Winter and his childhood idol Muddy Waters is proving immensely rewarding. Under Winter's guidance Muddy found a new lease of life, making his best (and biggest selling) records in years. For Winter, the effect of working in the presence of the Great Man has been equally gratifying.

Winter's work has at times been marred by a frenzied overkill verging on the ludicrous. Working with Muddy has taken him back to his roots, the blues, and while he seems incapable of restraining an impulse to punctuate his solos with rebel yells, Johnny Winter has a new dignity.

At the time of Muddy's *Hard Again*, Winter recorded an album with the group on the session. Unfortunately, *Nothin' But the Blues* was available here only on import. It was a good-humoured set, but very much the Muddy Waters Band.

*White, Hot and Blue* finds Johnny with a new band (his brother Edgar is on piano) and in command more than in any recordings since his 1973 *Still Alive and Well* set.

The material is straight ahead blues, with songs by Jimmy Reed, Sleepy John Estes, Little Walter, Jimmy Rogers and a handful of originals by Winter, who is featured on both electric and acoustic guitar. Gone is the tendency to clutter and sidemen, especially harp player Pat Ramsey, are allowed plenty of room.

The surprise of the album is the crooning version of Jimmy Reed's "Honest I Do," an almost Everly Brothers approach that would have been unthinkable in the barnstorming Johnny Winter of old. Definitely alive and well.

**Ken Williams**

### Johnny Lydon, Public Image.



**Public Image Ltd  
Public Image**

*Virgin*

Listening to this album by John Lydon (formerly Johnny Rotten) and his new band Public Image Ltd there is an almost irresistible temptation to make comparisons with The Sex Pistols. Though this is the angle all Pistols' fans (including myself) would naturally take, it simply won't wash in this case. The reason is that Lydon seems committed to musical developments which make such a comparison both impracticable and unfair.

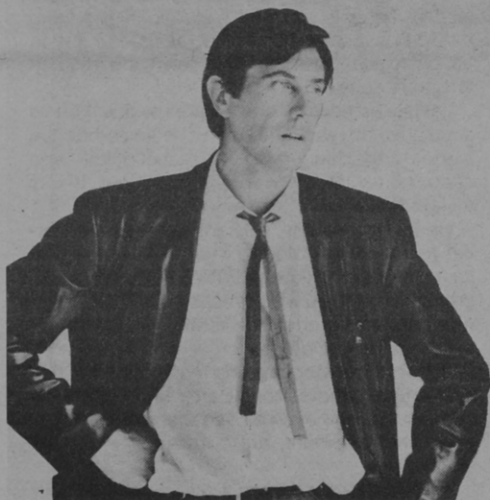
The new band refrains, and probably wisely so, from any attempt to match The Sex Pistols' blockbuster power. Led by their inventive guitarist Keith Levine, they opt for a less energetic, more stark and streamlined sound. Lydon himself is in fine voice and seems bent on progressing beyond his famous whining, sneering delivery.

All this is not to say that Sex Pistols' fans won't find plenty that's familiar about the album's potent hard rock numbers like "Public Image" and "Annalisa". But tracks like "Theme", where the band thrashes out a tortured instrumental backdrop over which Lydon repeatedly intones "I wish I could die", are more 60's progressive in flavour than 70's punk. Though his commitment seems obvious on these tracks, on another number, "Fodders-tompf", Lydon drops the line "I just want to finish this album with the minimum of effort."

Arguably John Lydon is the single most important figure to emerge in 70's rock music. As such his first L.P. since the Sex Pistols broke up is worth a listen to anyone.

**Dominic Free**

### Bryan Ferry



**Bryan Ferry  
The Bride Stripped Bare**

*Polydor*

How much bearing the split with model Jerry Hall has on Bryan Ferry's *The Bride Stripped Bare* is open to conjecture, but the man is at his most listless.

For most rock artisans this would represent a death knell. But Ferry is a fish of a different kettle. His persona is based on ennui. In some respects, he has charted his course to this well of loneliness.

The key to this portrait of depression is the doom-laden "When She Walks in the Room" — *And you know you can't leave  
You must stay  
Till her laughter has drifted away  
So you talk to the walls.*

Even Sam and Dave's urgent, hollering "Hold On, I'm Coming" is rendered as if by a tormented marionette on the hell-stage of some pre-war Berlin cabaret.

Ferry's despairing mood is given musical form through the sympathetic skills of his session band, Waddy Wachtel and Neil Hubbard (guitars), Ann Odell (keyboards), Alan Spenner (bass) and Rick Marotta (drums).

The marriage of mood and music makes for Ferry's most complete solo record. A haunting work, perhaps his best without Roxy Music.

**Ken Williams**

### The Staple Unlock Your Mind Warner Bros

The Staple Singers — Roebuck, Mavis, Cleotha and Yvonne Staples — cut their first

record twenty four years ago. At that time they were one of the top gospel groups in Chicago. The move into popular music and mass popularity began when they signed to Stax Records in 1967. With Stax they achieved an amalgam of their gospel beginnings, with current Southern soul music and social concerns that together with the unique voice of Mavis Staples, placed them at the forefront of black music.

Since those days the Staple Singers have had problems. Shortening their name to the Staples, they attempted to move more into line with the contemporary soul sounds of funk and disco and though they gained a successful single out of this move, they were more and more becoming the characterless tools of producers such as Curtis Mayfield (Mayfield has committed similar crimes with Aretha Franklin).

With *Unlock Your Mind* the Staples have returned to their roots.

Here they're reunited with the Muscle Shoals musicians who played on their Stax recordings and have taken on veteran Jerry Wexler as producer. The result is also a return to their peak — a wonderful pop/gospel combination that encompasses everything from the devotional "God Can" to a charging version of Jeff Lynne's "Showdown".

Occasionally the material lets them down — a lacklustre version of "Mystery Train" is the notable example here — but for the rest *Unlock Your Mind* revitalizes the Staples and puts Mavis Staples back where she's always belonged, at the forefront of female soul singers.

**Alastair Dougal**

### Dr Feelgood Private Practice United Artists

The departure of mad axeman Wilko Johnson two albums ago seemed to leave Dr Feelgood without an anchor. The first album without him, last year's *Be Seeing You*, was uncharacteristically tentative and the group seemed less than committed to the material.

*Private Practice* more than redeems them. The Feelgoods deliver with a knuckle sandwich wallop, eclipsing even their own previous high point, the live set *Stupidity*.

It's their most *produced* album, but producer Richard Gottehrer (Robert Gordon, Blondie) mixed for the spontaneous feel that sadly is too often lacking from recordings captured in genuinely "live" circumstances.

Wilko's replacement, John Mayo, has found his feet. His sizzling guitar work shines throughout and he's tried his hand at penning a few tunes (either alone or in company with Lee Brilleaux or Nick Lowe).

Brilleaux's vocals have seldom been better. He's all swagger and barely concealed aggression, but manages to turn in an almost gentle performance on Eddie Floyd's "Things Get Better."

Some may find the Feelgoods' brand of pared down R&B anachronistic. I find it a helluva lot of fun.

**Ken Williams.**

### Alastair Riddell Mandrill

Alastair Riddell caused no little stir when Space Waltz appeared on *Studio One* some years back.

Even though he didn't win, star quality was written all over him. His music was loud vigorous and flashy. He had one helluva band too, comprising a future Split Enz-er and a couple of Citizen Band-ers-to-be, amongst others.

Sure, the Thin White Duke influence stood out a mile, he did it so damn well!

An abortive attempt at cracking the trans-Tasman scene put him back to square one, doing pub gigs, previewing new material and trying to forget some past excesses.

After a long wait, another vinyl offering has been submitted. A bit of a curate's egg it is, but the good parts outweigh the more adverse aspects.

On the plus side, he's matured considerably from beautiful boyhood, having lost the rather mannered vocal style of old, and buried a lot of the Bowie streak.

He's writing some fine songs, too, as recent radio play has shown. Some more attention is bound to be attracted by numbers such as "Come On Over" and "Wear My Light", which will finally lay the spectre of "Out On The Streets" to rest.

His lyrics aren't as ponderous as they once were, and on "Smile" he even manages to emerge unscathed from the disco syndrome.

The production, aided by Glyn Tucker, is a vast improvement on the fishtank aura of the *Space Waltz* album.

On the negative side is the plethora of material that has already had a thrashing on the airwaves. Four all-too-familiar songs tend to drag the proceedings down a little.

I would liked to see a few more risks taken. Alastair has still-untouched potential, providing he's given a free hand, but the search for commercial success seems to weigh heavy on him.

But do buy this album, and encourage Alastair to be a little dangerous next time. He's still good, but he could be great. Here's hoping.

**Duncan Campbell.**

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