

# Records

## Elvis Costello Punch The Clock RCA

As far as this reviewer is concerned, Elvis Costello provided 1982's best pop album (not to mention best live gig). So how does he follow up a masterpiece, particularly one that didn't sell too well?

Whereas *Imperial Bedroom* was a logical progression from *Trust*, *Punch The Clock* appears a conscious side step, an assessment of certain past approaches and their future potential, both creative and commercial. Consequently, more than on either of its two predecessors, *Clock's* tracks tend to fall into two broad types. Six of the 13 numbers — value for money as usual — are upbeat dance songs incorporating punchy assistance from the TKO Horns. Costello's love for classic Stax/Motown is once again on display (recalling, of course, his *Get Happy*). This time though, the mix isn't as pervasively dense and all tracks have

a bright, bouncy production. A populist move perhaps? These songs are invariably catchy, although TKO (Boxing Day) comes rather close to simple formula — usually the last criticism one would level at Costello.

The remainder of the tracks fit more easily into his recent song-writing modes. Largely reflective ballads, they all offer further evidence of the man's towering talent. Beautiful winding melodies that haunt the mind for days are set in shimmering arrangements — the Attractions are a marvellous band — all of which serve to offset Costello's sharply crafted language.

His much-discussed anger remains evident in many of these lyrics but there's a certain distance and control evident these days. If we no longer get so many spluttering bouts of vindictive rage there's definitely a bleak bitterness (eg 'Pills And Soap') and a mocking sarcasm (eg 'The World And His Wife'). 'Shipbuilding', originally written for English singer Robert Wyatt, is the major exception here. Surely one of a great wordsmith's greatest lyrics, it encompasses an emotional complexity that brilliantly captures the dilemmas of quiet tragedy. Costello's tender, yearning vocal receives



Elvis Costello and the Attractions

perfect complement from Chet Baker's trumpet solo.

It is tracks such as this (and several others here) that remind one yet again that Elvis Costello is a musician at the top of his profession, if not the charts. When one considers Costello's work it can finally only be against his own extraordinarily high standards. So to say that, overall, *Punch The Clock* may not be as great an

album as *Imperial Bedroom* simply means that instead of being authoritatively the year's best, it will merely be one of the best five. Peter Thomson

## The Undertones The Sin of Pride EMI

While people have been queuing up to worship false gods like U2 and Stiff Little Fingers, Ireland's best bet, the now defunct Undertones, have been left at the altar these last three years.

Fashion shifts and apparent band lethargy have led to misguided critical dismissals of their first three albums as "mere pop."

On *The Undertones and Hypnotised* comparisons with the Ramones were rife but largely unfounded as Damian and John O'Neill's songs and Feargal Sharkey's vocals were always distinctive byproducts of love and strife in Ireland fired up by pop/punk enthusiasm. Listen again to 'Here Comes the Summer' where the sense of release and relief is damned near tangible.

Their last album, 1981's *Positive Touch*, provides the bridge between the formative speed of the first two and the current unrivalled mastery of *The Sin of Pride*. And mastery is the word. To begin with accept the fact that Sharkey is one of THE vocalists of the last ten years and that the O'Neills can write great songs blessed with triumph, release and true pathos. Understand these and



Aztec Camera, Roddy Frame on right.

you're half-way to realising the quality of *The Sin of Pride*.

The O'Neills have written haunting love songs in the past but none as assured and evocative as 'Love Before Romance', 'Soul Seven' and 'Conscious'. Plus their cover of Smokey Robinson's 'Save Me' is a perfect vehicle for Sharkey's trembling pleas. Typical Undertones' flourishes still exist but are more melodic and sophisticated than ever. 'Luxury', 'Bye Bye Baby Blue' and 'Chain of Love' are great tunes with irresistible attack and background harmonies, and the title track with its change of pace and controlled punch confirms just how good they've become.

The Undertones have produced a masterpiece, an authentic melting pot of 60s to 80s soul and pop. Unless there's nothing short of a miracle, *The Sin of Pride* will walk away with my vote as album of the year.

George Kay

## Aztec Camera High Land, Hard Rain Powderworks

Elvis Costello has said that Aztec Camera's Roddy Frame is the only singer-songwriter he's really scared of. Figures. Frame sounds like a back-country Costello, the songs are a little barer, more naive.

The sparkling single 'Oblivious' is the opener and the first to make an impression. If there were any justice it'd be on radio stations all over the country.

The remainder of the songs aren't as happy-sounding. Still pop, but tinged with difficulty. The difficulty of growing up, of relationships, of trying to make your music say what you want. It's a complex world out there, kid.

It's low-key but definitely not smooth. There's a sparseness between the instruments that makes the music sound as jumpy and awkward as Frame's singing, as his words. It's very much the Postcard Sound but Frame always avoids dipping into tweeness in the manner of, say, Orange Juice. And can he write a melody! Just listen to 'The Bugle Sounds Again' or 'We Could Send Letters'. Like Costello, Frame is guilty of a good deal of theft, but it's all to the best of ends.

I think this young man has a future. Russell Brown

## The Creatures Feast Polydor

If you haven't yet realised, the Creatures are Siouxsie Sioux and pal Budgie. This half of the Banshees sometimes converts into the Creatures as a vehicle for less conventional musical pursuits. Using voices, noises and percussion instruments, they recorded an EP, *Wild Things* in 1981.

The songs here were written and recorded in Hawaii and the sounds of the island are often a heavy burden. In a strange way it forces this record into the concept category, an old habit favoured by bands the Banshees fought to destroy. There aren't many decent songs on *Feast*. The dynamic single 'Miss the Girl' and the hypnotic 'Gecko' both employ a form of glockenspiel to hold the melody, they remain faultless. Elsewhere, jungle drums and Hawaiian chanters prevail with little enduring effect. 'Flesh', a vicious dig at the island's partygoers and 'Festival of Colours' would have rejoiced in further instrumentation.

The commercialisation of ethnic music is growing in popularity. McLaren made his pseudo-African beat the hit of the party, put the Creatures on at your next beach party and you're liable to get hung from the nearest palm tree. Mark Phillips

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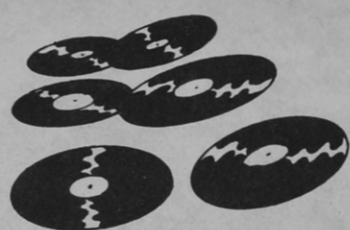
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