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## Elvis, Rearranged

Elvis Costello has built an illustrious career around not being a conformist. He has dipped his fingers into so many musical genres and collaborated with such a wide range of music legends that it is hard to know which Elvis will show up during his annual summer stop at Wolf Trap. Will it be [angry, loud, rocker](#) Elvis (2002)? [Romantic](#) Elvis (2004)? [Country and bluegrass-infused](#) Elvis (2005)? It is precisely that uncertainty that makes the anticipation of an Elvis Costello concert so much sweeter. However, not all Elvises are equal.



Last night's concert was, quite simply, the best Elvis Costello and the Imposters concert this region has seen in several years. In a 34-song, two hour and forty-five minute set, Costello and legendary New Orleans songwriter Allen Toussaint put together a diverse mix of pieces from their new album, *The River in Reverse*, as well as from their extensive catalogues of work spanning four decades of prolific songwriting. Sure, there were the requisite Elvis Costello hits - rocking versions of "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding" (which kicked off the set), "High Fidelity," and "Pump It Up"; new arrangements of "Watching the Detectives" and "Clubland"; and a sweet rendition of "Alison" featuring an almost orchestral-sounding horn opening and seamlessly segueing into "Tracks of My Tears." But Costello also picked lesser known tracks off albums ranging from 1980's *Get Happy!!* to 2004's *The Delivery Man*.

But it was Toussaint's touch that made the evening so interesting for Costello fans. Toussaint's fresh arrangements renewed such past Costello songs as "Clown Strike" (from 1994's *Brutal Youth*), "Tears Before Bedtime" (from 1982's *Imperial Bedroom*), "Deep Dark Truthful Mirror" (from 1989's *Spike*), "Dust 2..." (from 2002's *When I Was Cruel*), and "Clubland" (from 1981's *Trust*). His four-piece Crescent City Horns (Amadee Castenell, Brian Cayolle, Joe Smith and Sam Williams) added new depth and polish to Costello's material, alternately playing a supporting role to biting lyrics, and shining brightly on such pieces as "That's How You Got Killed Before." Particularly notable were "Big" Sam Williams' trumpet trombone solos - aggressive and captivating, conveying the wide range of emotions that were on view during the concert.

From the audience's perspective, it is evident that Costello and Toussaint are two men who truly love music in all its forms. They love to play with melodies, hooks and lyrics. The two performers seem to work seamlessly together, riffing off each other and the horns to create at times an almost improvisational jazz vibe. They also crafted a set list that flowed seamlessly back and forth from old to new. Costello overcame some initial hoarseness and pitch problems on the new arrangement of "That Day is Done" - originally a collaboration between Costello and Paul McCartney - to shine on such songs as "The River in Reverse," "Nearer to You" and "Ascension Day." The Imposters and the Crescent City Horns ably supported and complemented the vocal talents with clear, polished music that projected well through Wolf Trap's superlative sound system.



The specter of Hurricane Katrina hovered over much of the concert, as it does the album, recorded late last year in the wake of the devastation in New Orleans. The new songs excoriate the governmental response to the catastrophe (*So count your blessings when they ask permission/To govern with money and superstition*) - underscored last night by Costello's characterization of the response to Katrina as being "ably assisted by a handful of jackasses. . .and numbskulls" - while the repurposed Toussaint songs, such as "Tears, Tears and More Tears" and "Who's Gonna Help a Brother Get Further?," evoke the sadness, melancholy and regret felt by the many thousands of New Orleans residents displaced by the flooding. "Oh, Lord, you got to help us find the way," pleads Costello on "Freedom for the Stallion." The mood onstage shifted gears, though, following Toussaint's bluesy rendition of the Three Dog Night hit that he wrote, "Play Something Sweet (Brickyard Blues)."

Beginning with the urgent and increasingly discordant Bedlam, ending with competing, overlaid horn solos, Costello, the Imposters, and the Crescent City Horns worked the crowd into a frenzy with a jazzy, improvisational feeling version of "Dust 2..." with its signature Wilco-esque keyboard work; a radically different arrangement of "Watching the Detectives" that Costello debuted earlier this year on *My Flame Burns Blue*, an album recorded with the Metropole Orkest at the North Sea Jazz Festival in the Hague; and rocking versions of "I Can't Stand Up For Falling Down," "High Fidelity," and "Pump It Up."

For the first encore, Costello and Toussaint took to the stage without their backing bands, with Toussaint paying homage to New Orleans blues legend Professor Longhair on the piano, followed by Costello singing "Ascension Day," a new song inspired by Toussaint's minor key variation of Professor Longhair's "Tiptina." The bands then joined the two singers on stage for a mix of songs from *The River in Reverse*, as well as crowd favorite "Alison/Tracks of My Tears," and a Latin-infused jazzy version of "Clubland."

Nearly two-and-a-half hours after the start of the set, the musicians retook the stage with a fun version of the Dirty Dozen Brass Band's "That's How You Got Killed Before," a swinging, big band-sounding song that features smokin' horn solos from each member of the Crescent City Horns, followed by several Toussaint-penned hits from the 1970s and 1980s - "Yes We Can Can" (popularized by the Pointer Sisters), "Working in a Coal Mine" (a hit for both regular Toussaint collaborator Lee Dorsey and 1980s new wave pioneers Devo), and "Fortune Teller" (recorded by the Rolling Stones and the Who). Finally, the evening closed on a somewhat off note, as Costello tried somewhat unsuccessfully to prod the audience into a sing-along on "The Sharpest Thorn," a new song from *The River in Reverse* with which the audience was generally unfamiliar. Despite this final misstep, the show was still a standout effort, featuring gems for both the long-time and casual Costello fan. And on a perfect early summer night, this DCist couldn't think of anything she'd like better.

Photos by Andi Kling/Courtesy of Wolf Trap.

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