





SOMETHING BORROWED, SOMETHING NEW

The Perfect Union
of Elvis Costello
and Jenny Lewis

By Chris Martins | Photos by Autumn DeWilde

He strides into the room seeming impossibly tall and endlessly poised. In a silk scarf and all black, he looks as sharp as his wit has ever been, and downright Dickensian, as if the word “doff” was invented solely for use in reference to the hat sitting on his head. At 54, he’s got the perfect dappling of salt-and-pepper scruff, which frames a pair of lips in a perpetual mischievous grin, ever the unambiguous counterpoint to those trademark square-framed specs. Elvis is in the building—Costello, of course—and it’s enough to keep Jenny Lewis on her toes.

Well, somewhat. She’s sitting, currently, getting a light dusting of blush before the next round of photographs with her avuncular counterpart, but her dainty feet are neatly propped by a pair of light brown pumps. Los Angeles’ favorite daughter, our eternal indie darling regardless of her record label, is rightly stunning in a red dress and feathered cap, and as Lewis moves through the room, she hardly disturbs the air. Whether this is out of respect to the dust or due to an innate grace is unclear, but to not stare—at either of this pair—is to miss history in the making.

The duet is nothing new to music. Neither is the appearance of an elder statesman on the album of a young star for posterity, nor the reverse for the sake of a little shined-up sparkle. But when a legend with three decades and 34 albums to his hallowed name is coaxed out of retirement by the sheer energy experienced in a day of studio time with an inspired young songwriter, momentousness abounds. Last October, Costello told *MOJO* magazine he wasn’t “of a mind to record any more,” that the MP3 had “dismantled the intended shape of an album” and that fans could hear him live or not at all, essentially.

But on April 22, Costello sneaked out his 35th album, and a few days later issued the following via his website: “Some of you may have heard rumours of an album called *Momofuku*... [which] came about because of an invitation I received from Jenny Lewis to sing on her upcoming record.” He’d changed his mind. “That’s what I do,” he added. “The record was made so quickly that I didn’t even tell myself about it for two weeks.” His story only added to buzz surrounding an unnamed Lewis solo album reportedly recorded in organic and speedy contrast to Rilo Kiley’s 2007 LP, *Under the Blacklight*. Costello’s record was effectively a

carry-over of Lewis’ January session, and he’d named it after the inventor of Cup Noodles because “all we had to do... was add water.”

Acid Tongue is now out, and it could be Lewis’ most immediate work yet. An all-analog rock and roll record that sears as much as it sways, the follow-up to 2006’s *Rabbit Fur Coat* trades in the alt-country scenery for further breadth and depth. Its sound is richer—a soulful mix of Southern-Gothic stomp, saturated balladry and campfire strum—and its inspiration digs deeper, with Lewis putting her pretty croon to use against the messy topics of sex, drugs, love, travel, illness and family.



Sometimes she sings in character; in other moments, she's addressing the very people recording with her: live-in beau Johnathan Rice, who co-wrote much of *Acid Tongue*; or her father, Eddie Gordon, a harmonica virtuoso estranged from Lewis until his recent cancer diagnosis reunited them.

Likewise, Costello's *Momofuku* sounds refreshed, thanks in no small part to Lewis' rag-tag gang. Though a few of her guests (Zoey Deschanel, M. Ward, and Rilo's Jason Boesel among them) had evacuated Van Nuys' Sound City Studios by the time Costello arrived, the "vocal supergroup" that lent his record so much of its particular vigor is also the core lineup behind *Acid Tongue*: Lewis, Rice, Dave Scher (Beachwood Sparks), and Jonathan Wilson (formerly of Eisley), along with Costello's bassist Davey Faragher. *Momofuku* is another sound entry in Costello's post-millennial rock catalogue, seething with the attitude and urgency he'd rediscovered with 2002's *When I Was Cruel*. His own band, The Imposters, might have something to do with that as well: keyboardist Steve Nieve and drummer Pete Thomas have been playing with Costello since 1978—though not without the occasional break or falling out.

Truth be told, Costello has been threatening retirement since he was 26, according to his own liner notes for the Rykodisc reissue of 1981's *Trust* (though when asked about it today, he asks back: "Did I say that?"). And more than their mutual passion for detailed narratives, heartfelt

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ELVIS COSTELLO

ballads and, now, double drummers (read on), Costello and Lewis share the kind of creative restlessness that can make or break a career. They approach each record anew, band members be damned; she pushed on by the persistent fear that one day her well will run dry, and he without enough time in the day to tend to the flood.

Will Costello quit? Not likely. He's touring like a teenager these days, has a variety show debuting on Sundance Channel, and is finishing up a new album with T-Bone Burnett. Will Rilo Kiley split? It doesn't matter. Lewis remains, and anyway, that's a subject for another article at another time.

As we sit down to talk in one of the odd little atriums that dot a large woody yard, Elvis Costello removes his hat, while his unflagging cool and smirk remain. At his left, sharing a small divan, Jenny Lewis appears more petite than usual and a little bit nervous, despite the fact that she's directly responsible for Elvis' return to the studio. It's hard not to marvel at the sight.







A conversation with Elvis Costello and Jenny Lewis

The beginning is a fine place to start... How did you two meet?

Elvis Costello: It was mainly the doing of Tennessee Thomas [drummer for The Like]. The Imposters and I were down in Mississippi recording *The Delivery Man*, and Pete Thomas said his daughter had hipped him to [Rilo Kiley's 2004 album] *More Adventurous*. He played me the record and I thought it was fantastic. [To Lewis] I think I got your number and called you.

Out of the blue?

Jenny Lewis: Oh, yeah. My phone rang and I didn't recognize the number. I picked it up and it was Elvis. I truly thought it must have been some sort of mean prank.

Costello: I was in this cottage I was renting right by the woods where Faulkner used to walk. It was quite a good spot and I had a lot of time to listen to records. I became a fan, and when Jenny made her first solo record... it was a different world. The storytelling on that album is amazing.

So you instantly thought, "This young talent needs to be in my new music video."

Costello: [Laughs] We filmed the "Monkey to Man" video in L.A., at the old Ambassador Hotel, and I thought it'd be funny if Jenny walked across the set like she'd gotten lost while on a Universal Studios tour.

Lewis: The awkward walk-by. Clutching my purse. Sweat on my brow.

Costello: We'd decided the video would be populated by girls in bikinis and people in monkey suits. It was very tasteful; we were going for the feminist vote.

...And then one day in January, Jenny called you?

Costello: And then it was fun for the whole family. I was at home in Vancouver and The Imposters' bassist Davey Faragher—he lives in Southern California and was in the studio with Jenny—called and asked if I would sing a song on her new record.

Lewis: And I emailed you a clip of myself, Johnathan Rice and a puppet doing "Carpetbaggers."

Costello: Obviously, I was being asked to do the puppet's part. I told 'em I loved the song, but I thought I would sing it differently than the puppet.

So you flew out to record. At what point did you decide to stay and make a record?

Costello: I didn't stay actually. We cut "Carpetbaggers" in three takes, and the band didn't have anything planned for the rest of that day. So I said, "Maybe we can cut something of mine." I had two songs—"Go Away" and "Drum & Bone," which I'd written literally the night before—and we just laid them down, Jenny and I in that little vocal booth, I'm playing rhythm guitar with a line out to the hallway, she's reading the lyrics off a piece of paper. And I couldn't believe

it—she nailed every line.

Lewis: I was thinking, "This is your big shot, kid, don't blow it."

Costello: I had decided I was done with recording. Everything I'd have to do after the release of a record was making me miserable, but working with them reminded me of the bits that I liked. A week later, back in Vancouver, I called everybody up and said, "That was too good—let's do it again." That's when the vocal group came together. Davey is the only person in The Imposters who can sing, and with The Attractions, I used to track myself for all the vocals. These guys were coming up with killer parts, and the will to do them, at 11 p.m. We made the record in six days, with the same live feeling as Jenny's.

Lewis: I was so impressed with your pace. Is that how you've recorded in the past?

Costello: I think bands make more of a meal of it now because they can. We're all guilty of it. I recorded *Spike* [1989] in four cities [Dublin, London, New Orleans, Los Angeles]; I had a ridiculous budget. But it's gone around in one big circle—my first record [*My Aim is True*] was made in just 24 hours of studio time. The second album [*This Year's Model*] took 11 days. We thought we were being decadent taking three weeks for *Armed Forces*, and with *Imperial Bedroom*, we were making our big statement in the studio, hiring harpsichords and glockenspiels: "Let's take six entire weeks!" Now you hear of bands spending six months on a single.

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Acid Tongue was done at an impressive clip as well, Jenny. What inspired you to make that record in only three weeks' time?

Lewis: I think everything I do is a reaction to the thing before it. Having come out from under the polished intention of *Under the Blacklight*—which took quite a bit longer—I just wanted the vibe to run the show. I was finally able to connect with a band and have it go down like a live performance. It was really liberating.

Costello: There's nowhere to hide in that room. When you listen to *Acid Tongue*, there's nothing there. It's just a voice and a couple of instruments, and it works perfectly. The more you went on with the record, the more confidence you seemed to gain. To open with "Black Sand"... it's the kind of confidence that marks great records. You know, "How could they open with that? That's ridiculous!" But soon you can't live without it.

You're both artists who have continued to surprise us over the years, approaching each

album with different angles, different sounds and, often, different bands. Is creative restlessness part of what makes a great—or at least an enduring—artist?

Costello: I think too much is made of it—like it's some sort of puzzle where eventually the pieces will all fit and there'll be this big, smiling picture of Jenny going, "I told you so." The reality is: that was just the way the artist was feeling at that moment, and now you're in danger of missing what's actually being said and the genuine feelings that are in those songs. It's a trap that journalists fall into, which funnily enough never comes up with groups that have a strong, signature sound. It just doesn't occur to anybody to compare their records: "This one's got all those things that we already love!"

Lewis: All I know is that I just tend to get a little bored and I like to try new things. And, really, anything is good subject matter for a song. But I don't think that quality is exclusive to "the good artist."

Costello: Van Morrison has a signature sound, for instance, but he's a singular artist. I don't know that there's one better way to do it. When I was younger, I was guilty of being more confrontational for the sake of getting attention, saying things like, "We're here to completely ruin your life!" [Laughs] It's true there was some dull music out there and we were coming along with a bit of attitude—trying to get it right, where just

playing was really the thing—but tearing others down wasn't the intention.

Neither of you have shied away from expressing the deeply personal on record, and you've dealt with an array of reactions to your public persona, from fan adoration to being dissected by the press. How does one stay level through all this?

Costello: It's true that since the mid '60s, people have based their songwriting more overtly on their life's experience than, say, Ira Gershwin did. In his day, they wrote songs that faded to black when the stickier subjects of love—physical love in particular—came up. But with people like Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, that started to change. That was passed on to the next generation, then the next generation, then to me, then to Jenny, and we're writing about these things that are increasingly raw.

Fair or not, people associate you with these songs, and to whatever extent that you're putting your experi-

ences in there, your mistakes are in public view. Your heart is broken, the band splits, you find a new way to go in life, you have a drug problem, you sober up. There's a fascination with human frailty and an entire industry that makes entertainment out of it. I got disenchanted when I was younger, but then I realized that's just show business, and show business is based on the Menuo principal: They kick you out of the band when you're 18 and get someone else to appeal to the 11-year-old girls who, in turn, hit 15 and peel off to go to the new thing. That's not real life.

Lewis: I've just started, over the last couple of years, to receive feedback in that way, as well as from people that assume songs are about them, and it's all very uncomfortable. I still don't know what to make of it, and I try not to acknowledge it. I'd rather just write songs without having to think about where they'll end up or who will be offended.

Costello: I've gone through my less glorious periods and other times where I've felt on top of the world, but it's important to remember: You're not living in real time by writing songs. Even if you think you're writing the honest diary of your love affair, you're not—you're writing an edited version of it. Otherwise the album would be 20-years long.

So, 2003's *North*, for instance...

Costello: *North* is a very specific album about recognizing the end of one way of living and the beginning of another, but it's a song-written *explanation* of what it felt like to go through that. It's not the same thing, and it certainly doesn't take into account the feelings of the other people involved. Art is selfish; it's not a democracy, not even in a band. But if you're smart, you take the best of what people bring you—to a collaborative form like recording, for instance. I was just the beneficiary of that, when Jenny said, "Why don't we get Tennessee in here to play with Pete?"

Lewis: The fantastic father-daughter drumming duo.

Costello: I never knew that was going to sound so good. Next thing I knew, we had a record. And you know, Tennessee joined us onstage at the El Rey in Los Angeles after we played the Hollywood Bowl with The Police. I've been turning around to see Pete playing behind me for 30 years, and I look back that night and see him and his daughter. I've known her since she was born but, more than being a matter of pride, it just sounded fantastic. [To Lewis] Thank you for that.

Which is your favorite song from each other's new album?

Lewis: "Go Away," because it was the first.

Costello: "Godspeed," because it's got such beautiful melody and mood. I was startled the first time I heard it. I also love the long, multi-parted songs like "The Next Messiah," and I think "Sing a Song for Them," the up-tempo one at the end of the album, is tremendous. And of course, "Carpetbaggers," because we got to do that together. I also like the other version of it that we cut—a live take with the double drummers ...

So basically, you like everything, including the outtakes.

Costello: "Godspeed" is definitely my favorite, but I'm attracted to ballads, so you're asking the wrong guy. I mean, I *really* love ballads—more than any other kind of music.

Lewis: I actually wasn't going to include "Trying My Best to Love You" because I was worried about *Acid Tongue* being too ballad-heavy—I wanted it to rock more than *Rabbit Fur Coat*—but Elvis was so set on it being on the record that I included it.

Elvis, were you impressed with Jenny's use of double entendre for the album title?

Costello: [Laughs] Old habits die hard. **F**

"SHE" & HIM

Our cover stars may have more in common than we thought. Here, we break down Miss Lewis' catalogue to the tune of some choice E.C. selections.

SHIPBUILDING



Rilo Kiley

Take-Offs & Landings (2001)

VS.



Elvis Costello

My Aim is True (1977)

Rilo Kiley makes a decidedly lo-fi debut with a clever set of songs that proves highly catchy, putting them in the running to join the bleary-eyed back-to-basics Saddle Creek crew. Elvis Costello arrives as a harbinger of the "pub rock" scene, whose intent is to undo prog with stripped-bare R'n'R that packs its smartness into its lyrics.

COMPLICATED SHADOWS



Rilo Kiley

The Execution of All Things (2002)

VS.



Elvis Costello

Trust (1981)

Both Rilo and Elvis get darker and weirder, the former adding electronic elements to the fray, and the latter becoming prone to aggressive guitar jabs and dissonant piano attacks. Lyrically, Jenny tells wordier tales of unhappy events, while Elvis (drug-addled and considering quitting music) sings like a stalker plotting the death of his own shadow.

BABY PLAYS AROUND



The Postal Service

Give Up (2003)

VS.



Elvis Costello & The Attractions

Get Happy!! (1980)

Jenny collaborates by email with two dudes to

make an album of unabashed pop designed specifically for the contemporary scene (glitchy beats, major synths, cloying harmonies). Elvis and his bros mail themselves to Holland, where they make an album of specific pop unabashedly sourced from '60s R&B (raw bass, major organs, less-cloying harmonies).

PUMP IT UP



Rilo Kiley

More Adventurous (2004)

VS.



Elvis Costello & The Attractions

Imperial Bedroom (1982)

Signified by their album's title, RK go big, enlisting Jimmy Eat World's producer to help flesh out their sound into a highly crafted style-hopper with strings. Likewise, The Attractions work with Beatles engineer Geoff Emerick and add orchestral flourishes for the first time, trading in the urgent bluster for something more adult and artful. Jenny disses Bush; so does Elvis (different bush).

AMERICAN GANGSTER TIME



Jenny Lewis with The Watson Twins

Rabbit Fur Coat (2006)

VS.



The Costello Show

King of America (1986)

Attempting Americana, each artist contracts specialists for the job: Lewis grabs the Kentucky-born Watson Twins, and Costello wrangles Elvis Presley's TCB boys. Jenny also ditches Rilo for a spell, recording under her real name, while Elvis legally changes his handle back to his birthright (Declan MacManus). Both write plainspoken songs about love, desire and family. Also, Elvis looks furry.

CLEAN MONEY



Rilo Kiley

Under the Blacklight (2007)

VS.



Elvis Costello

Spike (1989)

In their respective official Warner debuts (and with appropriate budgets), Rilo and Elvis pull out all the stops to make their most extravagant albums yet. Costello travels to four cities and works with as many bands (including Paul McCartney). Lewis and Co.—after forming four separate side-bands—buy glittery outfits and collaborate with members of Maroon 5 and Jackson Browne.

A FRIEND IN NEED



Jenny Lewis

Acid Tongue (2008)

VS.



Elvis Costello & The Imposters

Momofuku (2008)

Aside from sharing band members, singing on each other's songs, using the same studio, recording within a couple of weeks of one another, going for a more live sound, and becoming great friends in the process, it's hard to imagine what commonalities exist between Jenny Lewis and Elvis Costello via their most recent releases. Ho-hum.

