

Still rocking the detective

by Mike Grinter

After more than three decades in the business there's nothing Elvis Costello wants to do more than keep playing in front of live audiences

WHEN ELVIS COSTELLO arrives straight off a plane from Tokyo to Hong Kong he's as bright as a button. He's all warm handshakes and conviviality apart from a dead fish handshake. This might reflect tiredness or fear of injury to a hand that has penned the soundtrack to those that have followed his progress for over a generation.

Costello has come a long way on his journey to finally debut in Hong Kong on 5 March this year. He was first heard by an English audience of millions when, at the age of 20, he accompanied a musical father as the voices behind the R White's TV advertisement *I'm a secret lemonade drinker*, in 1974. This did not bring instant celebrity.

Costello worked the pubs and clubs before gaining recognition three years later, after having ditched his own moniker, Declan Patrick MacManus, with debut single *Less Than Zero* and the follow up album *My Aim is True* in the Punk summer of 1977. Since those early days Costello has undergone as many musical transformations as Bowie. In a 30-year, 50-album career he has veered from punk to pop; from country to rock; from jazz to classical. Surprisingly

- in an interview to coincide with his one night performance at the 39th Hong Kong Arts Festival - none of it was planned.

"I didn't know when I released my first single that I would be sitting here. I didn't know what I would be doing next week. I still don't know. The consistent thing in my career has been playing in front of people," he says.

"There is a degree of momentum in the early part of your career where there is still the element of surprise. Later on people come to expect things from you and want you to repeat things. But my sense is not to want to do that.

"So what if people are horrified that you didn't play all the hits they know you from. Others are pleasantly surprised that you're better than they expected."

Having collaborated with the likes of Paul McCartney, Burt Bacharach, Tony Bennett, Lucinda Williams, Brian Eno, Nick Lowe, Leon Russell, John Mellancamp and Green Day, it would seem disingenuous for him to suggest that it

all happened by chance but he insists: "I never made any list. Everything just happened by chance.

"I don't really have ambition in the conventional sense. It's





not like having a business plan – I must be at this point by the time I'm this age. When I was young maybe I thought that I wanted to achieve this or that but even when you get near it you find it's not what you thought it was.

"I have had thirty years of wonderful experiences. But it wasn't planned I didn't make a list of people I wanted to work with famous or not. In fact I'm not sure the things I've enjoyed the most were necessarily the big collaborations with the likes of Paul McCartney or Burt Bacharach. After all, they amount to just 12 songs each compared with a backlog of more than 300 songs.

"I've been involved in lots of other collaborations with less well-known musicians but many of them have been equally rewarding, just not headline news.

"Some of them have actually been more of a challenge because they have been in another area of music and required new skills, such as show music or difficult new approaches. You can't learn that out of a book, you have to experience it," he adds.

So how seriously should he be taken when he drops a bombshell mid-interview?

"I am not going to make any more records," he states boldly as if he'd just said he wasn't going to holiday in Blackpool, if he ever had done. "It takes up too much of my time when I could be touring, as I am here in Hong Kong." And we're off on a critique of the evolution of music recording.

"It's not that I object to the current situation. There's plenty of future in recording. But that doesn't mean it lies in records.

"As I see it the situation is in flux. Somebody in the early 1940s or 1950s confronted with the shift to vinyl from shellac found themselves confronted with a format that allowed for much longer pieces of music. Personally I think it was better when you could only get three or four minutes of music. It would have saved us from all that Pink Floyd.

"Coming from the period I come from, personally I'm very fond of vinyl records. CDs are a strange compromise, like filming in 3D. Life is in 3D why do you need to film in 3D," he says.

"Compact Discs were presented as this innovation. Actually they are not that expensive to produce. As a result there was a lot of profiteering when they first came on the market, just reselling old music, some of which was great. I'm glad that such a lot of classical music has become available because of the CD boom, but it doesn't actually sound better because it's on CD, it just sounds brighter."



Photo by James Omara

Costello doesn't touch on the latest, often illicit, "download" phenomenon, where recorded music ceases to reward the artist. But there is a sense of simmering resentment, when he compares the days where he had to pay his dues before obtaining success, and the instant stardom available today.

Over the last 10 years he has quietly contributed time and money to the Jazz Foundation of America that provides emergency funds and instruments, and free or low-cost medical care in the New York area, but any suggestion that he should be out there assisting young musicians in getting signed up to labels is quickly dismissed.

"The label situation is now completely different to what it was when I started out. Young people don't need my help. We started with an independent label [Stiff] because the major labels had no interest in what we were doing. The minute we had a tiny success they became interested. That's a story repeated over and over again but I don't think that forming new labels is going to be the solution. People are doing fine just making records in their bedroom. They don't need help from anybody. I understand there are Apple devices that you can easily make a record on."

When it's pointed out that this is his first concert in Hong Kong despite being around for over 30 years – and that if he doesn't record again local fans are unlikely to ever hear from him again – his resolution appears to diminish a little, although perhaps just to smooth the way to the end of the interview.

"Well, as I said earlier, I often don't know what I am doing from one week to another."

Hope springs eternal.