Song Exploder
Elvis Costello - Alison
Episode 322

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and, piece by piece, tell the story of how they were made. I'm Hrishikesh Hirway.

Elvis Costello is a singer and songwriter whose career spans five decades and over 30 albums. He's a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the Songwriters Hall of Fame. He's won Grammy Awards, and Ivor Novello Awards, a BAFTA, and he's on Rolling Stone's list of the greatest songwriters of all time. He put out his first album, *My Aim Is True*, in 1977. And this month, he released a 49th anniversary edition of the album. So for this episode, I spoke to Elvis Costello about the making of the song "Alison," from that debut album. Coming up, you'll hear the isolated tracks from the original recording, as well as some additional parts that didn't make the cut. And, in discussing the origin story of his song, we also ended up talking about the origin story of Elvis Costello himself.

("Alison" by ELVIS COSTELLO)

Hrishikesh: Could I just ask you to introduce yourself? What's your name?

Elvis: That's a good question, isn't it? I'm, I became Elvis Costello around the time that I wrote this song. So I don't know properly how I should answer that.

Hrishikesh: (chuckles) Yeah.

Elvis: It's not something everybody has to say by way of introduction, (chuckles) you know? They usually just answer the question.

But I had adopted my great-grandmother's name, Elizabeth Costello, as we would say it in, in Ireland. And I had decided that my given name, Declan, was just too confusing for people. They always wanted to amend it in some way, put a K in the middle of it, a D on the end of it. So I became D.P. Costello, and that looked pretty good on a poster, you know?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Elvis: It rolled off the tongue pretty well, as it just did then.

And I was working. I was working in a day job. I was a computer operator for a cosmetics company. I was 21. I was married to my first wife, Mary, and our young son had been born. It wasn't a very big apartment we lived in. So I would find the quietest place and play to myself. And I had been writing all the time.

As I picked up the guitar, I was taking cues from all over the place. I became particularly enamored of songwriters who wrote lyrically complex songs, particularly Joni Mitchell, who wrote, like, unprecedented romantic scenarios. And it all became part of the emotional desire to communicate something in my own voice. By the time I got to be, you know, 20, I thought maybe I had something.

I'd been demoing when I had the opportunity. And I would take my little home-recorded demo tape round every publisher and record company that would let me through the door, only to be told the songs were not of interest to them.

Until the day that I arrived and knocked on the door of Stiff Records. This was an independent record company founded in the summer of '76, and I didn't realize that I was actually the first person to even try to do business with them. They, they had released one single, and I imagined it was a full working operation.

And I found one very nice young woman who patiently took my tape and took my number and my name down, and I went away thinking, "Well, maybe I'll never hear from that again." But Stiff Records were the one place that showed an interest and wanted to see it through, to see me record those songs. And at some point the founders of the record label called me to the office, and I honest to God thought, "They're gonna tell me that they don't see anything in it," 'cause that's what I'd been told repeatedly.

And they said, "Oh no, we're intending to release a record, but we've got something to tell you." And I said, "Well, what's that?" And they said, "We're going to change your name to Elvis Costello," not D.P, as I had written on my demo tape. *Elvis*. Uh, you can imagine I took a big, deep breath when they said that. You know, I couldn't have looked less like Elvis Presley, so there was some humor and some insolence to that decision.

But within a month, I was put in the studio with Nick Lowe, who had played in a band called Brinsley Schwarz that had broken up, and he was actually launching a solo career with Stiff's first release. When Stiff Records proposed Nick to be producer, I could not have been more delighted. You know, he was somebody I'd looked up to, kind of a songwriting hero and I loved his bass playing as well. He played bass on the first session. So they said, "He will be producing, and you will have John McFee on guitar." And I went, "John, you mean the same John McFee who was on "Tupelo Honey" by Van Morrison?" That guy, you know, whose records I already had?

Hrishikesh: His records as part of the band Clover?

Elvis: Clover, yeah. They'd made two records in the early '70s, which I owned. Then they said, "Well, we want to introduce you to the rest of Clover, that could be featured on this." That is, Johnny Ciambotti on bass, John McFee was on the guitar, Sean Hopper on keyboards, and MMickey Shine, the drummer from Clover. I would play rhythm guitar. And I was sent to the place where they were rehearsing, which, they were living in a house outside of London.

Meanwhile, I didn't have a band, so I was completely astounded to be in the company of these people. I'd only played with very modestly skilled players up until that point. You know, I wasn't a very good guitar player myself. I'm still not. But I could write the songs.

This is the, maybe the last song written for *My Aim Is True*? My guess, it was written in 1977, before the last session of what became that album.

Hrishikesh: And what prompted you to first write the song?

Elvis: Well, I saw a supermarket checkout girl who wore a look of disenchantment. just doing a, a mundane job, you know? And somehow, something about her expression made me think of this quality of disenchantment, that somebody who was very, you know, that had a beauty, but one which was already kind of a little frayed by experience.

That's what I saw. It was something you may have done yourself, that you see somebody and there's something about their appearance that draws your attention, and you try to work out their story. Like, how did they get ... Why is that expression on their face?

I don't know whether you've ever played that game, but it’s one that songwriters, I think, benefit from, is trying to imagine somebody else's experience. And I just focused on this one girl who had a slightly disenchanted look, and that's what the song is really about. That's the word, really: disenchantment.

I think that's how I came up with the name, 'cause the name Alison wasn't a specific person, but I wanted a name that sounded like, not like a ... You know, if you're called Ava Gardner, you know that that's the name of a dramatic person. It just sounds dramatic, you know.

Alison somehow seems a sweeter name, and I thought there was more poignancy to it. It's ... I don't say it was a younger girl's name, 'cause that wasn't the thing I was trying to convey, but it just seemed innocent. And that's what I wanted. I wanted it to be somebody whose innocence was challenged, not in a inappropriate way, simply that the disappointment of life would be visited on this person who was at one time idealistic.

There were demos for most of the other songs on the record, but there was never a demo for "Alison." The only stepping stone to that song is this other, completely different composition, "Imagination".

(“Imagination (Is a Powerful Deceiver)” by ELVIS COSTELLO)

(Vocals: “Imagination is a powerful deceiver / I go out of my mind if I’m losing your touch”)

I had attempted to sing a number of songs written, say, in 1975, in the intimate way that I heard lots of songwriters I admired perform. But what I was missing was that those songwriters had won the confidence of their audience to speak intimately like that. I had to learn how to speak up for myself, because I was playing clubs, and if you played something too restrained, dynamically, they would just talk over you.

“Imagination" was the first song that I wrote that could stop people, that could get attention. And weirdly enough, it wasn't a, an exciting, rhythmic song. It was a ballad.

So that's as close to a demo for "Alison" as I have. It's a different melody, it's a different lyrical perspective, but a similar theme.

Hrishikesh: When it came time to record “Alison,” was there a specific approach that you wanted to take?

Elvis: You know, we had such modest resources. This sounds like name-dropping, but the very first occasion I met Bruce Springsteen, in Nashville, in the middle of 1978, we said our hellos, and then we were both of us, I think, actually weirdly shy, and we're looking at our shoes, and suddenly Bruce said, "How did you get the sound on *My Aim Is True*?"

And I said to him, "No money."

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Elvis: 'Cause that's the actual truth. You know, the reason why the record sounds immediate is because we didn't have either the means in terms of studio hours or even the format to over-elaborate the arrangements.

This record, "Alison," was recorded in Pathway Studios in Highbury in Islington, which was an eight-track studio. Tiny room, and by the time we put the full band in there, there wasn't a lot of space for air, let alone anything else, you know?

It's like, it was really small. and some of the sound is because of that intimate space, and you had to tell the story just with these eight channels.

(drums)

Drums are on two tracks, bass is on one,

(bass)

Lead guitar is on another,

(lead guitar)

My rhythm guitar is on another.

(rhythm guitar)

And electric piano,

(electric piano)

And my voice.

(Vocals: “Oh it's so funny to be seeing you after so long, girl / And with the way you look I understand / That you are not impressed. / But I heard you let that little friend of mine / Take off your party dress”)

In my dream, I wanted to have a motif in this song, and of course that motif is actually provided by John McFee, who's playing the lead guitar that's in the mix.

(Vocal with lead guitar: “I'm not going to get too sentimental / Like those other sticker valentines / Cause I don't know if you are loving some body / I only know it isn't mine”)

He's either leading out or leading into every vocal phrase. He's never playing at the same time as I'm singing, which — given that it's a live take, and what he plays as a complement to the vocal melody — is so perfectly chosen. You couldn't really praise him enough. It’s a really tremendous piece of spontaneous, interpretive playing.

John was kind enough to write a reminiscence of playing on this track for the liners of this new 49th anniversary edition. And he's so self-effacing even to this day. I mean, he's, he's in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and yet he's still kind of,

"Well, I just tried to do what I thought felt, and I just listened to the song and played that."

Hrishikesh: More with Elvis Costello after this.

Elvis: I think the lyrics of "Alison" are quite specific, so they're not borrowed cliches from romantic songs, are they?

There are many songs that work effectively doing that. "I Will Always Love You," for instance, which is a really beautiful sentiment, and it's a beautiful song. But there's a particular skill, which I don't have, to communicating very deeply felt things in simple language. And I tended to look for the contrary view of romantic entanglement and I remember arriving at the lyric.

It's just painting a picture of meeting somebody years later after the love affair. And then it's lamenting all these things while sort of kinda sounding a little bit critical, you know. "I hear you let that little friend of m-"

You know, they're like, I say, "I see you chose that guy. You thought he was better than me," you know. It's that, you know, feeling of disappointment.

(Vocals: “Well I see you got a husband now / Did he leave your pretty fingers lying in the wedding cake? / You used to hold him right in your hand / I bet it took all he could take”)

Hrishikesh: If there were a photograph of the scene where this song is taking place, what would it look like? What’s the setting?

Elvis: I think it would be at a party. You know, it would be at a party, and the lights would be low. And maybe in that darkness, a gesture of, you know, welcoming could be mistaken for a caress. So, the singer could be observing something that he reads into the significance of it much more, because it's under low light, and maybe there's some doubt about those two people in the scene that he's observing.

That's, you know, why it sort of ... The first verse is sort of tearing down Alison or the person in it that it's directed to's lover, you know, or husband or whoever he is supposed to be. He, he doesn't really know.

But in time, I think by the time the song gets to the second verse, that disappointment is in oneself.

(Vocals: “I think somebody better put out the big light / ‘Cause I can’t stand to see you this way / Alison / I know this world is killing you / Oh, Alison / My aim is true / My aim is true”)

The disappointment is that of the singer. Because he realized that something has happened between them that the singer is responsible for, so that's why he's saying, "My aim is true. I know this world is killing you.."

You know, it’s not, "I'm gonna kill you." And some people heard that in the lyric, and I, I always said, "You're reading this all wrong. It ain't a murder ballad." It's quite the opposite. It's a love song, but it's a regretful love song.

(Vocals: “My aim is true”)

It takes a lot for me to even say this because I never unpicked all of these emotional things. I was writing very fast. I was 21. The ideas were all new. I had no audience that I knew of, so I didn't have any self-consciousness about what the audience was expecting from me.

I just was singing stuff that I imagined and hopefully was from some part of the heart, even the doubtful heart, you know. And that's what you hear in "Alison.”

(Vocals: “I know this world is killing you / Oh, Alison”)

Elvis: The chorus is musically influenced by a Thom Bell song for the group you call The Spinners, the group we call The Detroit Spinners 'cause there was already a Spinners in England, so they had to add Detroit to the front of their name.

Uh, a record called “Ghetto Child”: "Life ain't so easy when you're a ghetto child." So you can hear, you know, the “I know this love is..." You know, that stutter to the admission that, I know that love is not eternal, and perhaps it's me that's gonna be the cause of your, your heartbreak.

The singer is saying that, you know? That halting way as if you were almost struggling to get the words out.

So, uh, I thought that Thom Bell song was a beautiful one. And that's how you learn. By imitating and perhaps failing to copy something exactly, you end up with your own sort of idea.

(drums)

Everything on, on Alison is live. The only thing that's overdubbed is the vocal harmony.

(vocal harmony: “Alison”)

At some point, I guess this must have happened later in 1977, around the time that we were preparing My Aim is True for the American release on Columbia Records. Somebody, like perhaps a radio promo guy, somebody said, "We could get this played on FM radio if it had strings on it."

And of course, we had no money for a string section. So the idea was proposed that we try and put a string synth on it, which were in their infancy, I have to say then. These were not the kind of sounds you would have now or would have just a few years later in the early mid-'80s.

This was a ghastly sounding instrument.

(synth strings)

And here's the other thing, in order to achieve this, the tape had to be transferred from eight-track to 24-track, which means we were accepting the loss of quality, to come over from eight-track to 24, allowing us to have a few more tracks to play with.

In an attempt to make it a little warmer, because of the tension between my voice and the subject matter, and this comparatively strained music, I think there's a track of harmonies as well.

Hrishikesh: Yes, there's two tracks actually.

Elvis: Let's hear that. L- I'd like to hear that.

(harmonized vocals: “Alison”)

You sorta hear how it sounds a little bit more Californian, with that harmony in there?

Hrishikesh: Yeah.

Elvis: I mean, can I say the E word here?

Hrishikesh: (laughs)

Elvis: It's kind of a dangerously Eagles-sounding thing, you know, (laughs) once you add that in.

(more harmonized vocals: “Alison”)

I was kind of allergic to that kind of music completely. But, I think it was put on a single, just a few, and then we said, "No, this is just too terrible." But, you know, we, we were trying to play the game of, like, let's see if we can infiltrate FM radio, you know, or even AM radio at that time. That didn't happen.

For 1977, to go with a ballad as your single was a little bit of a bold choice, because it put you in competition with all the ballad singers who were already in the hit parade, like Kenny Rogers or Rod Stewart. All these people that were, you know, were-- It was a world away from what we were doing.

And when it was released as a single, it bombed. You know, it came out and a couple of nice things were said about it in reviews, but it didn't catch the, the public's imagination at all.

Linda Ronstadt's cover of this song was by far and away the best-known recording of "Alison" and the only one that was successful.

("Alison" covered by LINDA RONSTADT)

(Vocals: "Well, it's so funny to be seeing you after so long, girl / And by the way you look, I understand that you are not impressed")

And I was terribly rude about it when it came out, and I'm really ashamed of that now because she sings the hell out of the song. She sings it so beautifully. But you know what I didn't like? Was that when it hit the chorus, instead of John McFee, it was an alto saxophone.

("Alison" covered by LINDA RONSTADT - alto saxophone)

Something about that alto saxophone put me in a world that I couldn't accept. At that time, I was so possessive about my own songs, I just couldn't accept it.

But, I got to apologize to Linda face to face for be- being sarcastic about the recording. I apologized from the stage at the Hollywood Bowl, by saying, "You know, I just wanna say this is for Linda," (laughs) and sang "Alison," you know. Because, you know, I was a brat. I was 23 when, by the time that her recording came out.

So that was the song finally reaching a wider audience. It wasn't my version of it initially. It was never a hit in England. It was never a hit as a single in America.

But it did weirdly enough register with people, which is why we're here talking about it, isn't it? You know. Strange. And because the song actually speaks about

time passing, that's probably been in my favor, hasn't it? Because I actually lived long enough to look back on these things that happen in this song the way it's described in the lyric.

Ah, see what I did there was, (chuckles) I made it possible to sing the song for longer, you know.

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Alison," by Elvis Costello, in its entirety.

("Alison" by ELVIS COSTELLO)

Visit songexploder.net to learn more. There are some notes that go along with the episode, and you'll also find links to buy the 49th anniversary box set of *My Aim is True*.

This episode was produced by me, Craig Eley, Mary Dolan, Kathleen Smith, and Tiger Biskup. The episode artwork is by Carlos Lerma, and I made the show's theme music and logo.

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I'm Hrishikesh Hirway. Thanks for listening.

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