

Albums continued

Costello croons . . .

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"I don't want to be around to witness my artistic decline." —Elvis Costello, circa 1977.

Back on records such as This Year's Model and Get Happy, Costello was able to combine sharp lyrics with a musical sound as majestic as the Beatles or old Motown records. Costello had the best knack for turning a phrase since Dylan in the mid-'60s. Now, where were Newsweek and Rolling Stone when those records came out? Probably waiting for the Linda Ronstadt cover versions — those running dog lackeys of FM radio.

Rolling Stone is losing its credibility as it edges closer to People magazine everyday. If they want to hear a masterpiece, they should listen to any number of Costello's earlier records, instead of Imperial Bedroom. The album is very pleasant and tasteful, but Fleetwood Mac already has fulfilled that function nicely. Costello is something special — or at least he was.

Only one cut really jumps out. "Man Out of Time" is the sole rocker here, indicating Costello still can turn it on when he wants to.

Every other song blends into the scenery with lots of strings, horns and harmonies, though Elvis sings nicely. Perhaps Costello is emulating his professed hero, country giant George Jones, and wants to be known as a "great voice." He also has been palling around with the guys in Squeeze who appeared on Trust and Imperial Bedroom. They seem to be leading Elvis into the role of a pop craftsman, instead of his angry young man stance. Come back, Elvis.

Creole lacks . . .

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The obvious question a longtime (two albums worth) fan might ask is, why the change? The reason is this: Fresh Fruit was the story of Kid Creole (Darnell) and his search through a fictional South Pacific for Mimi, the woman who left him during the band's first album. Wise Guy picks up the story when the survivors of the expedition are washed ashore on a land called B'Dilli Bay, where they are forced to assimilate the law of the land.

According to an interview with Darnell in Rolling Stone, B'Dilli Bay is actually Warner Brothers records, the distributing company of Kid Creole's label, Sire. Warner Brothers was not pleased with the record sales of the last two albums, so this time around, Darnell and Hernandez opted for blatant commercialism to accommodate the parent company's wish.

That's why the writing on the inside label, though appearing humorous, is a tip off toward the album's shortcomings. Here is the true, untold story of the survivors, the sacrifices they had to make, the music they were forced to play and the mates they were allowed to choose.

The result of the sacrifices is a collection of modern disco, with a Third World tinge, that just might be good enough to earn the group the recognition it so richly deserves and the money Warner Brothers feels it should earn. The album's best song is its first release, "I'm a Wonderful Thing, Baby," an example of the smart dance beat the group has shifted toward. The big band in the background is an example of the unexpected that make Fresh Fruit move. "Annie, I'm Not Your Daddy," has a calypso-like beat and the album's brightest lyrics ("See, if I was in your blood, then you would not be so ugly"). "Loving You Make a Fool Out of Me" is better than a lot of the dance songs on the charts.

But from that point on, there isn't much memorable about Wise Guy. The rest merely is recycled dance material, with the exception of the final track, "No Fish Today," which explores the question of corporation domination. But unless you know what they're talking about, you easily get lost.

There is hope, however. The final line on the inner sleeve is "The escape they were bound to make." Hopefully, when the next Kid Creole album comes around, the escape will be complete, the irony ended and the Kid back to his unpredictable self.

Busboys' premise . . .

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All of the songs are merely OK, because it seems like I've heard them all somewhere before, and together, the album is actually not that bad.

But it's not really anything you'd rush out to buy, and certainly will disappoint those who bought the first album for its sly racial commentaries (only the Beach Boys parody "Soul Surfing U.S.A." nears that) and party music. The commentaries here concern the lost American dream and a few references to a president and actor "who we pray will not blow this part," as O'Neal sings in "Yellow Lights."

While the Busboys are content to do a sound-alike for now, the album raises serious questions about the band's future. Once white America has stopped laughing at all this, can it ever accept a black rock 'n' roll band? Blacks already dismiss the group as a "black punk band."

Perhaps O'Neal is being philosophical in "Opportunity," where he writes "There is something that escapes me: What does the constitution mean by freedom for every man? Everyone who is listening to this song feels the sadness instead of gladness."

Or perhaps O'Neal is talking about himself.



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