



ELVIS COSTELLO ON *SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE*

by Mark Spicer

Live television and rock music have often worked hand in hand to provide us with some of the most defining moments in the history of popular culture. Who can forget, for example, the Beatles' performance, live from Abbey Road, of their brand-new single "All You Need Is Love" as part of the *Our World* global television spectacular on June 25, 1967? The event single-handedly ushered in the Summer of Love and introduced some 400 million viewers worldwide to the hip, new psychedelic fashions of swinging London. More recently, there was the infamous "wardrobe malfunction" at the Super Bowl half-time show on February 1, 2004, where a fleeting glimpse of Janet Jackson's bare breast during her dance routine with Justin Timberlake

sparked an outcry. It resulted in stricter censorship laws that, for better or worse, have since affected all mainstream television and radio broadcasts in the United States.

Although the viewing audience was far more selective, Elvis Costello's December 17, 1977, performance on the NBC sketch-comedy show *Saturday Night Live* surely ranks as another of these defining moments. For more than thirty-five years, *SNL* has been well known for its cutting-edge comedy and biting political satire, serving as the launching pad for many of North America's most beloved superstar comedians. (Dan Aykroyd, Eddie Murphy, Adam Sandler, and Will Ferrell, to name but a few, all began their careers as members of the "Not Ready for Prime-Time Players," as the *SNL* cast is sometimes called.) Yet the show has always been as much about popular music as comedy, regularly featuring dead-on parodies of rock musicians (such as John Belushi's and Gilda Radner's respective impersonations of Joe Cocker and Patti Smith during the show's early years) and inviting important new artists to perform as the weekly musical guest. The show often gave these artists—and the new styles they represented—their first real national exposure, much as the *Ed Sullivan Show* had done for pop and rock artists in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Such was the case with Costello's debut appearance on *SNL*, which, as it turned out, was also one of rock history's happy accidents. While punk rock was enjoying its peak in the UK in 1977, the style remained largely insular, with no British punk group able to crack the charts on the other side of the Atlantic. To capitalize on the growing buzz surrounding the new style, *SNL* producer Lorne Michaels had invited none other than the Sex Pistols—the notorious darlings of British punk—to perform on the show. But the Sex Pistols were unable to secure their work visas in

time, so Costello and his backup band the Attractions were brought in as last-minute replacements. It is customary for the musical guest on *SNL* to perform twice during the ninety-minute live broadcast, and for their first number, Elvis and the Attractions played their UK Top 20 single, the reggae-tinged “Watching the Detectives.” What transpired during their second performance, however, is now legendary: after singing only a few bars of “Less Than Zero,” Costello abruptly stopped the band, announcing “I’m sorry, ladies and gentlemen, there’s no reason to do this song here.” He then led the Attractions into a snarling rendition of his as-yet unreleased song, “Radio Radio,” written as an angry reaction against mainstream radio stations in Britain, particularly the BBC, and their practice of banning punk songs with politically charged or unpatriotic lyrics (most famously, the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen”). Michaels was reportedly furious with Costello for changing the song without having first sought his approval, and he chased the band out of the studio, threatening that they would “never work on American television again.”

For many American viewers, this *SNL* performance by a gangly Buddy Holly look-alike was their first glimpse of the UK punk outrage that rock critics had been raving about for months. Although punk as a style would soon be on its way out, a whole “new wave” of British and American groups quickly emerged, following Costello’s lead in their willful and ironic appropriation of past rock styles. Costello himself, of course, would go on to become one of rock’s most eclectic and prolific chameleons, deftly changing styles from R&B to country to classical and everything in-between over the course of a remarkable career that is still going strong. Many rock fans, however, will always remember him most fondly for that moment in 1977 when he assumed the role of Britain’s punk ambassador.

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