



Armed Forces

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Thirty-Three and a Third is a series of short books about critically acclaimed and much-loved albums of the past 40 years. Over 50,000 copies have been sold. Passionate, obsessive, and smart. Nylon an inspired new series of short books about beloved works of vinyl. Details Franklin Bruno's writing about music has appeared in the Village Voice, Salon, LA Weekly, and Best Music Writing 2003 (Da Capo). He has a Ph.D. in Philosophy from UCLA, and his musical projects include Tempting: Jenny Toomey Sings the Songs of Franklin Bruno (Misra) and A Cat May Look At A Queen (Absolutely Kosher), a solo album. He lives in Los Angeles.

Armed Forces Details

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Patrick says

Another of the continuum 33 1/3 series. I got this for a plane ride and it was an excellent choice.

I've been a big fan of EC since way back and i've listened to Armed Forces a billion times. Also, over the years, i've played and performed some of the songs on it. However, i haven't thought much about it in ages and I thought Bruno did a great job of making me reconsider this old favorite again.

I've always found this album to be somewhat slippery. It is chock full of wonderful phrases, at the same time, it's not always clear what Elvis is getting at. The personal and political are intertwined in ways that are difficult to disentangle. The perspective often seems unreliable (Accidents Will Happen?--as a sort of pop ballad, no less!) and he uses political and economic jargon throughout to describe emotional states. "Emotional fascism" is so evocative, but what is it getting at, precisely?

Bruno is perceptive and has an excellent ear. He puts the album in context--in terms of the late 70s politics in england, in terms of the columbus incident, in terms of EC's other work. Bruno provides lots of interesting info. He addresses the ambiguities and uncertainties head on...but does not attempt to resolve them. The organization is somewhat goofy--it is organized alphabetically, but it is a serendipitous alphabet, with only the surface appearance of order. However, it does provide a mechanism which he uses to follow whatever threads he wants in thinking about the album.

The technical musical information cuts both ways--sometimes it is important to a point he is making, sometimes it just seems like gratuitous info not really germane to anything else. It didn't bother me, but i can also see how it might be irritating. This book is less-straightforward than the other book i read in this series (kinks, village green preservation society), but I thought it was an excellent, slippery take on an excellent slippery album.

Amy says

I tend to prefer my 33 1/3 books with a more linear organization -- Bruno's is arranged encyclopedically (song titles, last names of historical figures, place names) with the occasional random noun thrown in as an entry (ambition, bodyguards, etc.). The result is a jumpy little book, which in turn made me a little jumpy. There's also quite a bit of professional-musician geekery about chord changes and such that was lost on me.

However, Bruno provides a considerable amount of historical information that places "Armed Forces" (working title: "Emotional Fascism") in the proper context. Bruno explains the various fascist and nationalist movements that have gripped Britain in waves over the years, the cultural reactions to those movements, and Costello's likely inspirations for the militaristic/romantic themes on the record.

There's also a thorough discussion of the "Columbus incident" -- during which one of the original supporters

of Rock Against Racism called Ray Charles a "blind, ignorant nigger," thus tainting his career forever in the States.

Overall an interesting read, although I quibble with Bruno's analysis re: "Tiny Steps" (one of my favorite EC songs). In explaining the line "She's almost human beneath that Cuban heel," Bruno writes,

"The distinction between this figure and his projected counterpart ultimately dissolves, clearly in 'she's your friend and she's your double,' but more subtly in the chorus. 'She's...beneath that Cuban heel,' but wouldn't she be the one wearing it? Domination crushes both master and slave: very dialectical."

Interesting, but probably wrong -- Cuban heels are associated with men's shoes (e.g., Beatle boots, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beatle_b...), not women's. Once again, obsessive knowledge of Beatle ephemera saves the day!

C.J. says

This was written pretty much in an encyclopedia style, with every subject pertaining to the album (directly or indirectly) running the gamut. While it makes for an almost confusing read the first time around, a second go-round would probably be best if one were to start with, say, the entry on the album's first cut and then go through the book randomly from there, since everything is alphabetized neatly enough.

John says

Tour de force. Captures Elvis during his attempted breakthrough in America; captures all of the lyrical references; looks forward and back; and uses a wonderful method of song analysis intermittently interrupting stories from the road, the biography, and viewpoints on the historical musical era. And it's got a through story: When Elvis drunkenly trashed black American musical legends, what did he mean? Is he a racist? How do we understand this Most Important Episode in the context of the musical moment, his lyrical concerns, and his stage persona as the Avenging Dork. Read and learn. I was most thrilled to see discussion of his album When I Was Cruel as a bookmark at the end of this graph, a point of reference for understanding Elvis' view of himself and his pop career. The flavor is tart.

Bill says

The author, Franklin Bruno, sets himself up for failure in the introductory section of the book.

He tells us that he's going to abbreviate the musician's names so that now do you not only have to recognize that Bruce Thomas is the bassist while Pete Thomas drums (not difficult), you have to spend time decoding who BT and PT are (more difficult), which takes the entire subject out of the context it's in (it's now in the "Where's Waldo" context). Worse, I think the author did this out of laziness. There's no question that it makes more a far more difficult read and belies a serious lack of editing.

Second, Bruno points out that he's no musical expert, then fills the books with statements like, "Section W runs over standard folk-rock changes (D-A-D-G, twice), complicated by melodic subtleties. The second half

moves a scale position higher than the first for just two notes..." (this is a tame example; there are many extended ramblings like this. Nothing wrong with this kind of exposition--in fact, I admire it. But don't stage the book to be one thing and deliver another. Plus, 99.9% of people won't understand it. Put this on your blog, not a mass-market book. Again, editing would have enabled this to be simplified down to where it added something to the conversation, not distracted from it.

Armed Forces is one of my favorite albums although, and I suspect this is true of many of its fans, I don't know exactly why. It's a powerful band fronted by an incredibly talented writer and distinctive singer. The songs are catchy and the wordplay a riot throughout. But it's sometimes unfocused with spots of muddy production and it's not at all clear what Costello is talking about most of the time. But still, there's no denying its genius.

Bruno tells me that it's an Abba-derived discussion of political and emotional fascism all tied up in Costello's responses to his infamous racist comments that he made in 1979, presented by a band at the top of their game. While that may be true, this book does little to advance that case.

But...it did get me to get it out, blow the dust off (that virtual MP3 dust) and go through it a few times to reacquaint myself with something I've been away from for too long. So it's got that going for it.

Paul Austin says

Man, I was looking forward to this one. Not only do I love this album, but I've seen Franklin Bruno take the stage a few times and he was hilarious, with a wit so quick no one could keep up. I'm also a fan of his songwriting, and this seemed like a can't miss. I didn't even finish it. This book is dry as a bone, and the presentation — a scholarly look at all things *Armed Forces*, including the tour, Costello's career up to that point, and the subtle differences between various fascist political groups — is so painfully arch that I kept picturing Bruno writing this bugger in a tweed coat with leather patches and puffing on a pipe. You know, getting a little freelance music criticism in before settling in to mark up a thesis or two. If you're an Elvis fan to the point of obsession, this book is worth picking up, as no amount of information is too minute for obsessed Elvis fans. But my experience was more curious; I put the album on when I was halfway through the book, and the songs sounded curiously lifeless to me. Mayday! The book had actually poked a hole in the album, and all the urgency, the tension, the pure emotion — the good stuff — was leaking out. Franklin Bruno was quoting Susan Sontag essays, and the Attractions were fading farther and farther back into a bland, academic blur. "This album embodies a critique," writes Bruno of *Armed Forces*, "but it does not present an argument. This is not a failing; it's a record, not a position paper." Sigh. Noted.

Kevin Karpiak says

This may be one of my favorite books ever, and certainly one of the most subtle takes on race, pop music and whiteness I've read in a while. And it doesn't hurt that the crux of the book's drama occurs in Columbus, OH, crossroads of many contemporary American contradictions.

Having said that, I would recommend this book to almost no one. To get through it imagine you need to have: (1) a deep deep pre-existing love for Elvis Costello, generally, and *Armed Forces*, specifically; (2) at least an advanced undergraduate familiarity with classic cultural studies, particularly of the English Marxist

variety; (3) a desire to find more subtle language to talk about racism and injustice

If you don't have the first, you will put down the book early into his fourth extended analysis of how a particular bass line and chord structure on a particular take of a particular track reference two other songs (not explicitly refenced in the lyrics themselves) of which one is an obscure Merseyside cover of a no longer existing Stax single.

If you don't have the second, you'll probably be confused by the book's structure, get glossy eyed at discussions of Adorno and Barthes, and, most likely, unconvinced by many of the connections Bruno (and Costello) are making between capitalism, authoritarianism, and contemporary racial-sexual politics.

If you don't have the third, you'll most likely put the book down in disgust at its apologetics for a narcissistic racist aggressor (which is not to say you shouldn't).

Having said all this, again, (and probably offering telling details about myself) it's one of my favorite reads ever

Michael Fuller says

Much like Elvis Costello himself, his songs, his body of work, even his actual career trajectory is meandering, this album is muddled with a pinch of unique genius that will generally confuse the average listener of music. In my opinion, his best album is "Armed Forces" (which was originally titled "Emotional Fascism".) And, this is why I'm starting this review of this book here, because you need to know a bit about the history of Fascism in Europe as well a great many things to get into the subtext the author is trying to reveal. Ironically, the author of the book refuses to even try to define what he thinks is meant by "Emotional Fascism." But both words and their implications about and not-about each other seem to be fluid throughout the album. So much so, that many references didn't make sense until I read this.

Much like many fans, this is my favorite album Elvis Costello ever made. Many come close, but there is something lurking on this record that both haunts and rocks this listener. It will be handy for the reader to have the album at hand to listen for some of the musical critiques and comments. I often think it funny when people "complain" that "What's so Funny About Peace Love and Understanding" was tacked on to the end of an album that starts with a song called "Accidents will Happen" ... this "accident" actually pulls off a wicked trick in making a cohesive piece of music out of what could have been random songs with thematic issues. To think this was Elvis Costello's big stab at getting into the upper-tears of rock stardom and that songs are influenced with pop radio sensibilities (ABBA on AWH, for example.)

As for the overall message, it seems that the Columbus Incident was a distillation of a man from England, steeped in its culture but also steeped in the music from everywhere being brought home daily for his musician father to learn (see British musician's union rules that mess.) The Columbus Incident seems to be born out of the frustration of the young, overly intelligent man, suddenly famous and imploding from the inside out. What he ended up saying was probably the nastiest thing he could think of, though it definitely did not make his point. Over all these years, Elvis still plays these songs even though he views the first 3 albums as his "pop star" period and it's probably the guilt or "Emotional Fascism" that came from the destruction of that young, arrogant person into an established artist. Where ever he went after this album, it was always away from it.

Brian says

This book struck on a really interesting way to write about music. It's an abecedary of the album's song titles, motifs, themes, important figures in 20th century fascism, etc., with only passing regard to the singer-songwriter's private life (beyond those things that illuminate or problematize items listed above). By organizing the book alphabetically by key terms, Bruno can deal with the album's themes of militarism and imperialism in both the political and personal arenas in a way that connects by inference and foregrounding and callback. The album itself isn't Costello's best, and may not even make it into my All Time Favorite Desert Island Costello list, but it's probably the most worth examination and consideration in exactly the way F. Bruno goes about it. I hope more of these 33 1/3 books approach their subjects in this way, rather than in a "How They Made It" or "What the Lyrics Mean" sort of way.

Jamison Spencer says

While I eagerly devour every book in the series, this, like many of the ones that try to take advantage of the do whatever you want openness of the series, wasn't one of my favorites. It's arranged alphabetically by seemingly random topics, including things like song titles, but also entries on political figures and fascism. It was very focused on racism, to some extent because of themes in the songs, but mostly because of a notorious incident (that I had never heard of before) where a very drunk EC said some very racist things, specifically about James Brown and Ray Charles. The ugly story was an interesting read for awhile, but by the time we got deep (with no transition because of the structure) into British post-fascist movements, my interest waned somewhat.

J Murnaghan says

Came to Bruno through an Absolutely Kosher Records sampler in 2003. Same with John Darnielle, who said this was the best one of these books. I don't know another book on pop music that's this technical, informed. As a music fan and non-musician, this book made me realize how much I must be missing.

Mrsreader says

Eh. I'd only recommend if you eat up every last sentence you can find about the guy/his music. And for goodness' sake, Jake *Rivera* over and over again...

Patrick McCoy says

Armed Forces by Franklin Bruno, was the first book in the 33 1/3 series that I've read that is a critical study of the album chosen. Elvis Costello has long been one of my favorite artists because his music is usually rife with metaphors, challenging lyrics, and catchy choruses and guitar hooks. 1979's Armed Forces is one of his

masterpieces and luckily Rykodisk has been re-releasing his albums with added tracks that were recorded in the sessions but didn't make it onto the album or were kept off the original album. It also includes the excellent live versions of "Accidents Will Happen" and "Allison" recorded at Hollywood High that was originally a special edition single that came with the first 1000 pressings of the American release of the album. Bruno has Ph.D. and writes about this album with the technical and critical precision of a musician/historian as he examines the music, lyrics, and themes of the album that was going to be called emotional Fascism. The structure is a bit haphazard as he jumps around from point to point. He discusses the musical references that inspired the music, everything from R&B classics to Abba, and Cheap Trick. He also examines the record in context to his career, and the social and political climate from which it was born. He also discusses quite thoroughly the fascist references and imagery used in the album ("You'll never make a lampshade out of me." / "...just another white nigger..." / "Two Little Hitlers" / "...is this the final solution?"). He also spends a lot of time discussing the infamous "Columbus" incident where Elvis Costello got into an argument with Stephen Stills' band and insulted James Brown and Ray Charles to upset his American antagonists. He lists references from such diverse sources as Adorno, Barthes, Sontag, and Arendt. Throughout the book he boldfaces words that act as a sort of A-Z of the album. It is a fascinating and thorough look at one of the best albums of the last 25 years.

P.R. Ryan says

This was okay. Of course 'Armed Forces' is a classic record. This book was plenty informative but didn't hold my attention the whole way through. In any case, it sort of made me want to read more about fascism. Though I'm not a fan, it's an interesting subject.

This was my first 33 1/3 book, and I've already bought a second one that I'm excited to read (one on the Pixies' duh-classic 'Doolittle').

Edmole says

The thing that a lot of people don't like about Elvis Costello is that he's a verbose, pretentious bastard. The thing I love most about Elvis Costello is that he's a verbose pretentious bastard. This, however, is a verbose, pretentious book, which is all right and proper, but I didn't like it too much.

That said, it did what Good Rock Books should do, sent me back to the album listening again, and more, and deeply. And what struck me is how *deliberate* Elvis is, how many of his choices in song - lyrics, construction, melody - have a *point*. And even if half of them are happy accidents retrospectively assigned, what a gift of a mind to get the other half right.

There's a great defense of Oliver's Army as not being an Abba Rip Off in here, pointing out that there's an extra bar of piano in the riff, but I could care less. If ripping off Abba and throwing jittery lyrics about imperialist traps on top make the best pop songs ever, I hope someone does it every week.

The book weaves in thoughts, reflections (but no flat out justifications) for Elvis' off-the-record argument with Stephen Stills and Bonnie Bramlett where, in a drunken attempt to be provocative, he called James Brown a "jive-ass nigger", and Ray Charles a "blind, ignorant, nigger". As much as anything this just made me glad I was never famous in my 20s. The idea of being called to account by the world, your fans, your foes

and (this seemed to hit Elvis particularly) yourself for every dumb thing you said to get a reaction in those frenetic years, oy vey. (More about the row here - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elvis_Co... - just ctrl f 'nigger'.)

So, on reflection, an okay book that slowly reveals itself as pretty good about an album that starts off pretty good and slowly reveals itself to be great.

Whilst I was writing this something beautiful happened. I was playing the album on Spotify and just as Oliver's Army came on a pop up ad switched my laptop over to Spotify from my browser with an ad inviting me to join the Navy Reserves.

You all know what Oliver's Army is about, right? And that it's sung from the P.O.V. of some deranged meta army recruiter? Well, that just made my day.
