

JESSE MALIN

How Elvis Costello & the Attractions' *Armed Forces* changed my life. BY JESSE MALIN

I GOT *ARMED FORCES* A COUPLE OF YEARS after it was released. An older kid in my neighborhood who played bass had a copy of it and I was searching for something new that would upset my peers. I was drawn into the trippy Jackson Pollock cover and the fact that this guy, who my Zeppelin friends made fun of, looked like Buddy Holly and had a name bold enough to take from the King of Rock as well as one of the Kings of Comedy.

Listening to the record, it had a fast, quirky-type feel, no guitar solos, and two-minute songs that seemed to match my Ramones ADD appetite. Though I didn't always understand all the lyrics, I could tell there was a lot of anger and funny wit fueling them. They dealt with issues that seemed political and somewhat foreign to me ("Oliver's Army," "Two Little Hitlers"). Yet somehow, they also seemed to fit into my whole junior high school mentality of being an outsider, yearning for more, not understanding America, or women, or my own sexuality at the age of 14. It seemed to me like Elvis Costello was that kid that got picked on in school, the one who was real smart and got a guitar and suddenly was getting his revenge on the world. With Woody Allen being one of my favorite directors, I thought of him like, "If Woody Allen was punk rock, he'd be Elvis Costello."

Armed Forces kicks off right away with a vocal intro of, "Oh I just don't know where to begin!" ("Accidents Will Happen"). Right away into action—it's still an opening that, on the radio, is very signature.

Over the last few years of touring I started to cover different songs. Two songs from *Armed Forces* have ended up in my sets over the years: "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding?" and "Oliver's Army." I had read the former song was written as a satire of the '60s hippie culture, but it has now taken on different meanings in these current times of war and strife. "Green Shirt" sounds like it could have come out yesterday and appeared on a *Widespread* album. The cover art and sleeve seem fashionably fresh as anything out today. Elvis would continue to go on and break more rules and still break many more hearts.

*Jesse Malin's latest album, *Gutter in the Gutter*, is out now on Atlantic Records.*



BAND: Elvis Costello & The Attractions
ALBUM DATE/TITLE: 1979, *Armed Forces*

STANDOUTS: "Accidents Will Happen," "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding?"

FUN FACT: Original UK pressing has an elaborate fold-out sleeve, four post-cards and a bonus EP, "Live at Hollywood High."