

REVIEWS

ELVIS COSTELLO & THE ROOTS

Wise Up Ghost

[Blue Note]

If he weren't such a great and versatile singer—irritable punk one album, tender balladeer the next, something entirely different the one after that—Elvis Costello might have made a fantastic rapper. Thankfully, he doesn't prove it on this surprise collaboration with eclectic Philly hip-hop collective the Roots, but he does rely more on words (always his best friends) and grooves than he does on melodies and song structures. There's plenty of soulful singing—on "Tripwire," he's practically whispering in your ear—but the best cuts ("Refuse to Be Saved," "Wake Me Up," "Viceroy's Row") find Elvis spitting vitriolic wit over spare and menacing funk backings.

The album is a surprise only in the sense that it wasn't announced until nearly completed. Costello met the Roots when he appeared in 2009 on *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, where they serve as house band, and it's no wonder they became fast friends. The Roots' TV gig means nightly team-ups with everyone from Carly Rae Jepsen to Bruce Springsteen, and Costello has spent his career working with seemingly anyone who will say yes. *Wise Up Ghost* is a coming-together of chameleons—a chance for Costello to jam out with fellow music geeks and, in some truly inspired moments, sling acidic rhymes like a freestyling MC.



Elvis Costello and Questlove

Dan Hallinan/Invision/AP

Originally, the plan was to rerecord a bunch of Costello's early classics, and while they wisely scrapped that idea, "Stick Out Your Tongue" updates "Pills and Soap," a rap-inspired gem Elvis cut back in '83. It's historical justification for a project that, in theory and practice, already makes perfect sense. —Kenneth Partridge

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