EVERYTHING ABOUT ELVIS Costello –his intelligent and prolific songwriting, impassioned singing, horn-rimmed visual image, ever-changing stylistic jaunts, even his anti-hero guitar playing – is so all-pervasive that his trio of sidemen, the Attractions, seems all but anonymous. (A magazine that just named Costello artist of the year for 1986 only three years earlier misidentified the members of the Attractions in a photo caption.) But if Elvis is to be commended for his stylistic daring, the Attractions deserve equal praise for their ability to follow him down every idiomatic path, with their original fire and indelible individualism intact. Of all of Costello's talents, perhaps his strongest suit is as bandleader – not only for keeping a group together for a decade, but for choosing the musicians he did to make up his backing band.

The Attractions have been together since 1977, in which time they've recorded 11 albums (plus a Best Of collection) since Elvis' debut, My Aim Is True. And night after night they have proved that at least one band (coincidentally virtually the only surviving band) from England's punk era can play and always could. After recording his auspicious debut with uncredited backing from the American band Clover (including guitarist John McFee, currently with Southern Pacific), Declan "Elvis Costello" MacManus settled on pianist Steve Nieve, drummer Pete Thomas, and (no relation) bassist Bruce Thomas, after auditioning, in the bassist's, words "hundreds of guys who couldn't tune up or put the guitar on right." The group's first effort, This Year's Model, not only squelched any fears of a, sophomore jinx; it kicked in with more muscle than Aim and signaled the arrival of a distinct new collective musical personality.

In an era when musical anarchy appropriately mirrored the nihilistic rhetoric of most punk bands, the Attractions looked the part: If Costello resembled a 98-pound weakling, the other three-fourths of the group made him look like a matinee idol. So much for appearances. This may have been 22-year-old Elvis' first professional rock unit, but Steve had formal training at music college; Pete had spent time in the States playing with John Stewart and others, and Bruce was a veteran of the Sutherland Brothers, And Quiver and numerous sessions – he was also no kid. 'The bassist,
who now jokingly lists himself in his "mid 30s," actually shaved a few years off his age for the audition. Of His boyish appearance, he laughs, "I get away with murder, and I wouldn’t mind continuing to get away with it."

Bruce Thomas certainly ranks as one of the most original and most influential bassists to emerge from the new wave scene, and his role with Costello And The Attractions cannot be overestimated. On the group’s early releases, give a listen to his thunderous throbbing on "Pump It Up," his fast fret work on “Lipstick Vogue,” his flights up the "thin ones" on "Goon Squad," or his unpredictability on "Radio Radio." His playing on "(I Don't Want To Go To )'Chelsea" amounts to more than a mere bass line; it constitutes the song's entire instrumental riff. Though Thomas learned rhythmic phrasing from Motown and Stax records before worrying about details such as which notes to play, his bass often represents the only harmonic movement in many passages of Costello's songs. and while he had a ball making the soul–tinged Get Happy! and has few nice memories from the Almost Blue Nashville sessions, Thomas has accompanied Elvis down the composer's stylistic excursions, tackling every curve with "some real bullocks," as he says.

Although Bruce reveals that the band nearly broke up during the recording of 1984's Goodbye Cruel World, 1986 saw a triumphant return to form. After Elvis recorded King Of America with such American musicians as James Burton, Ronnie Tutt, and Jerry Scheff (all alumni from the other Elvis' TCB Blnd), and utilized the Attractions on only one tune, he re–enlisted Thomas, Nieve & Thomas (along with longtime producer Nick Lowe) for Blood & Chocolate, their most stirring work in years. To top it off, the group's fall U.S. tour made rock concert history. Consisting of multi–night stands in selected cities, with a completely different show each night, there were nights with the Attractions, solo acoustic shows by Elvis, and shows with Costelio backed by the Confederates, from King Of America. But the biggest crowd–pleasers by far were the Spinning Songbook shows. Audience members were invited onstage to spin a giant game–show wheel, and the Attractions would plunge into whatever tune the wheel randomly dictated.

In this, Thomas' first interview for an American publication, the
bassist reveals a wry, sometimes cynical side, as he reflects on his influences, the punk movement, his love for blues and soul music, and his 10 years as one of rock’s main attractions.

**WHEN ELVIS RECORDED MY AIM Is True, he didn't have his own band yet, did he?**

No. Basically I started reading press about Elvis; there was a rumor going around about this guy who was kind of good. He got up and guested with people like Graham Parker, doing a solo thing on acoustic. There was an ad in the music papers and just by the wording of it and by the timing of it, I had an intuition that it was about Elvis. It said, “Rocking pop combo wants bass player, keyboard player, drummer.” I rang up and spoke to the girl at the office, and she said, "Who have you played with, and what are your influences?" I told her Steely Dan and Graham Parker. They were the only two decent bands around in the mid '70s anyway. There was this kind of conversation going around in the background saying, "'Get rid of " him." "You must give the boy a chance; he sounds like he's all right. " I think they wanted something more along the lines of the Clash. The girl that answered the phone, I actually ended up marrying a year later. In that fateful phone call I got a 10-year career and a marriage.

**What year was that?**

That was in 1977. I went down and did the audition. Actually, I bought all the records first and learned them for four days. The album wasn't out yet; there were two singles. I used to do sessions, so I practiced a bit of psychology: I went to the audition and just pretended to be hearing them for the first time. "Can you show me those chords? I think I've got that." Elvis was very keen on the idea of getting kind of 17-year-old punks who had never played before or anything, but of course he's not that kind of writer. You can tell by the first album. When I auditioned, Steve Nieve was the only keyboard player who made any attempt to improvise. He's the kind of guy who goes off on his flights of fancy. And he actually drank a bottle of sherry and fell asleep on the floor in the middle of the audition. That impressed Elvis no end, so he was hired on the spot. Pete Thomas was recruited by [Costello's manager] Jake Riviera; he used to be in a band Jake managed, Chilly Willy.
How old were you then?

Oh, mid 20s. I think I lied and told them I was about 23 or something.

What's the secret to keeping a band like this together? Virtually no bands from the punk period, which was very tumultuous, have stayed together for 10 years.

Yeah, half the Damned are together, and the Clash are not really together, are they? Or the Sex Pistols. The Boomtown Rats and the Jam are gone. Come to think of it, there aren't any left. Well, we nearly did split up a year or two ago—when Elvis did the King of America stuff. It was definitely coming to the end of an era.

Did he do that album with other musicians because the Attractiions were in a state of almost breaking up, or did you the Attractiions almost break up because he did that album?

Well, it's a bit "six of one and a half–dozen of the other." When we finished the last world tour in 1984, we had done nearly 50 tours and 11 albums. We did a lot of road work. And Elvis was doing three-hour sets. We had been doing those tunes for 10 years, and I think it just came to the point where you couldn't drag any more out of it. For instance, I'm not a great one for country music, so Elvis probably felt like I was holding him back on that–score; and Steve's got a lot of ideas that 'he can't put into the group all the time, you know. So I think all of us just wanted a rest, but none of us really knew if we wanted a permanent rest or a temporary rest. I certainly didn't want to go on the road anymore, and if somebody had said, "World tour, January," I would have said, "Not me, mate. I'm not up for this one."

I get the feeling that there was a period when Elvis thought of us as kind of a liability; we were holding him back in some way. Now that he has worked with other people, and we have had a bit of time away from eveYthing, we're doing the tunes again but in a much IQore spontaneous way that is more entertaining for everybody"":"including us. I think he is beginning to see us as an asset again. Everybody has taken a step back and a step forward again.
What's more amazing than just the sheer longevity is that Elvis has really stretched out—much more than a band like the Rolling Stones. He's gone down all these stylistic tributaries while keeping a fixed band to handle it all.

We can follow him down most of them. We can make a pretty fair stab at any style.

**How varied was your experience on bass before joining Elvis?**

Well, in a way, what we're doing—without sounding too self-deprecating—is just kind of extending bar-band music. I mean, it's like the Band: There was that quote in The Last Waltz film, where Levon Helm was telling about this music that is kind of like blues and country and all these things, and [director] Martin Scorsese says, "What do you call this music?" He says, "Rock and roll." That is basically it. I have played on folk sessions; I've played in jazz-fusion kinds of combos; and R&B and straight blues bands. And, of course, I used to do sessions, so I'd get called in to play with all kinds of diverse people.

**Such as who?**

In those days, I played with Richard Thompson, embryonic Al Stewart on his earlier albums, and I did sessions with the Flamin' Groovies. All kinds of folk stuff. I'd been in a reasonably successful band before that, the Sutherland Brothers And Quiver. That was when Tim Renwick was on guitar—about '74. It was a good band. I used to do the rounds of the British "soft rock" sessions with Tim.

**To handle sessions, how formal was your training and your background?**

Not at all. I can't read music. I learned to play by records. The Beatles had too many chords to follow, so I learned to play R&B stuff. I used to put on Booker T & The MG's albums time after time and follow Duck Dunn until I got all his riffs down, and then go on to Chuck Berry or whatever. But mainly it was Booker T and Stax soul, which is pretty obvious in the way I play. It's very good training, that one, because it's so rhythmically on. You play tight first and worry about the notes later. Happily, my instinct led me in
the right direction, as I learned to play the parts very punchy and rhythmically first, and then I started finding out all these little tricks about harmony notes and passing notes and melody and all that a bit later. It just built up gradually. When I did sessions, well, we didn't do it like they do in Nashville—one didn't know about the 1, 4, 5 trick—but we just used to write the letters down. I developed my own shorthand over the years, which is almost the same, with little arrows and steps for one thing or the other, and wavy lines. They all mean something to me.

**Does Elvis ever write a bass line into a song?**

Now and again, yeah. One that comes to mind is "Shabby Doll" [Imperial Bedroom]; the basic thing was his idea, and all the rest of it I added. Conversely, he's come along with songs that have been completely changed because I have come up with a bass part that is basically the strong part of the song's arrangement—such as "Chelsea" [Taking Liberties]. It was like a Kinks song at first, like "Tired Of Waiting For You." "B Movie" [Get Happy] was another good example—it was like a Blondie pop song—and "Girls Talk" [Taking Liberties], which was originally a country song.

**It's funny that your bass style stems from Duck Dunn and not the Beatles because, like McCartney, your playing is very melodic. Sometimes, in fact, you provide the only movement.**

[Laughs] Yeah, it does seem like I'm carrying quite a lot sometimes. In fact, the lighting man told me the other day that he actually takes all the lighting cues from the bass part because he can't really rely on anybody else to be playing at certain points in the song. The thing about melodic playing is that all R&B riffs are pretty much variations on a five-note scale. But with the melodic playing and pop playing, the melody of the song and the chord structure of it dictates what you're going to play, so you actually have to work out a melodic part for each song. You can learn a dozen basic blues or R&B riffs and play with all kinds of rock bands, but you can't, say, learn three Beatles tunes and then kind of fit them in. I obviously didn't copy McCartney's melodic style note-for-note; I just liked that kind of melody on the bass, and it filtered through as I learned more. The great joy of discovering that you can play a major third over a root note or something—it sounded "almost classical."

When I discovered all those inversions and bass counterpoint, Steve, who studied all that when he was at music college, started to teach me about Bach and figured bass. I kind of followed what Steve was saying, and when it got a bit more complex, I thought, "Well, it's like learning to read music; I might actually screw up what I am doing." Of course, I figured out I was breaking all the rules. You're never supposed to put two thirds after each other—it's a bad bass line if you follow two consecutive major thirds or something which is what I do in quite a lot of songs, such as "Radio Radio." [This Year's Model]. As long as it sounds all right to me, I'll just carry on.

**Who besides Duck Dunn influenced you?**

Well, along with Stax there's Tamla/ Motown, which is much more syncopated and melodic. So you've got to put down Carol Kaye and James Jamerson as big influences, too. Along with that really tight, syncopated, rhythmic playing, there were those little melodic turns that really appealed to me, as well. You can hear both those aspects in my approach. Another guy who comes to mind is Phil Lesh, who used to just wander off into these kind of melodic sorties, up the "thin ones." Some of which worked, some of which didn't. He's one for winging it. You start creeping up the neck, and you don't know where you are going to end up.

**What about bass players on the opposite end of the spectrum, such as Chris Squire or Greg Lake?**

That's what I would call the "European" tradition of bass playing, and I'm not too keen on that. It's the "pomp art" rock school. I mean, I'm sure Chris Squire is a very clever bass player, and his lines are really good, but I can't really listen to it. A lot of younger bass players seem to think that bass playing started with Jack Bruce and progressed from there to Chris Squire.

It's a bit of an old battle axe, but there is something to roots, to root music. Picasso learned to do pretty good drawings before he started to take them apart. But you get lots of bad modern artists because they just go, "I think I'll paint abstracts; it's much more fun." But they haven't learned draftsmanship in the first place. I think it's the same. I must avoid talking about equating music with
painting [laughs]. "Painting tapestries of sound," and all that.

**Did you go to art school, by any chance?**

Yeah, I did. I was a commercial artist, I confess. I didn't go very long, and then I went into advertising. I left because I didn't like office politics. When I was working as a commercial artist, I was playing in a band in the north of England with Mick Moody, who later went on to be Whitesnake, and Paul Rodgers, who was the singer. We had a Jeff Beck Group kind of three-piece blues trio with a singer, like Free basically. We used to do "I Ain't Superstitious" and "Spoonful" and Tamla stuff. There was the Jeff Beck Group and Free, and we were like precursors of that kind of thing, doing it semi-pro up in the north. It was very handy playing in a three-piece; you actually have to keep the bass part going. The guitarist is playing chords, and there is no keyboard player. Learning to play in that situation helped when I got into this band.

**Was bass your first instrument?**

No, strangely enough. I started to learn harmonica when all those harmonica R&B bands came out. I used to wail away in the bedroom, and then I got up with a local band one night and did "Got My Mojo Working," squawking away, and they said, "We'll give you a couple of dollars a night if you come along and play harmonica"—so I did. I built a bass guitar in school in woodwork class, so I must have been interested in it. One night after a few weeks our bass player couldn't make the gig, so I just kind of busked through it.

**Did you play it on your homemade bass?**

No, I borrowed one. This guy was one of the only guys with an Epiphone bass. His parents had bought him this really good bass. So I hung onto it [laughs]. Occasionally I gave him a couple of pounds and said, "Just knock it off what I owe you." It was a 200-pound guitar then, which was quite expensive. Hideous sound. Great for reggae, but .... Then I bought a Precision for 15 pounds. Nobody wanted them; you couldn't sell them for love or money. It was a salmon pink Precision—about 20 bucks. When I bought it, it was in like 1966, so it must have been a fairly good one. I wish I had it now. I think I did
something really stupid like part-exchanging it for an Epiphone that cost 100 pounds. I went through this hideous period, doing like what Brinsley Schwartz does, which is changing pickups on guitars and all that putting Gibsons on Fenders and vice versa and rewiring the bloody things. After a couple of years and several hundred pounds, I thought, .. A Fender Precision is the best bass guitar you can get. What am I doing?" Nobody's beaten the Strat and nobody's beaten the Precision.

**Do you have much of a collection now?**

I've got three Precisions: a sunburst '59, a pink '64, and a red '66. I'm using the '59 onstage, at the moment; it's my favorite now. The only other guitar that I've used on record, for Punch The Clock, is a Wal, which is a fairly popular English bass. They are very nicely made, and they've got a really good range of tones. They've got active and passive EQ, and they are very intelligently thought out, but they're very, very heavy-too heavy to use—and also the neck is too small. They are great for sitting in the studio and playing and getting nice sounds, but I like a big plank of wood that you can really lay into. Bass is such a physical instrument, anything else seems too finicky.

**Do you have any problems with the Precision as for as dead spots?**

Oh, there are dead spots all over the neck. Particularly the low string-on B, C, and C#--is dead as a dodo. There is not the uniform response from the pickup, either. You have to hit some strings, you know. But you just have to learn to play the instrument itself. In fact, some notes sustain much longer than others, so you actually end up kind of incorporating that into the parts you play. You come up with parts around the qualities of the instrument.

**McCartney's style obviously changed when he switched from-- a Hofner to a Rickenbacker.**

Punching it out on that Hofner, yeah. I've got that silly Gibson violin bass, the EB-I, which is even more boomy than an Epiphone. It's subsonic. I just use it for posing on TV. I also have two '58 Strats—a sonic blue one and a sunburst. That's what I play at home. Once I finish recording or touring, the bass goes into its case until the next
tour or record, and I just bore everybody that comes within earshot, playing the blues. I'm much more proud of my blues guitar playing than I am of my bass playing. It's pretty good.

**Who are your favorite guitar players?**

Well, I see every B.B. King show that I can possibly see. You are never going to see a guy play a guitar like that again soon. He's got to be the one, but I think I'd have to put my hand on my heart and say for sheer tingles down my spine, it would have to be Peter Green. I've actually played with him two or three times, and one of the most memorable times of my musical life was just playing a shuffle, a one-note bass, behind Pete Green flying—totally inspired, lyrical, emotional.

**Since joining Elvis, have you had a chance to do any outside sessions?**

Well, no, because we work so hard. By the time we did get any time off, I didn't really need to do it financially, so I tended to take advantage of the time off and go traveling. I did odds and ends, but no serious full-album projects. I have actually turned some things down, and it doesn't take too long of turning things down before people don't bother asking you. Actually, though, I just of late let it be known that I am quite keen to do something interesting now. I played with the Pretenders while Chrissie Hynde seemed to be going through the same kind of thing with the Pretenders as Elvis was with us. Everybody was flirting with each other, musically speaking. We did little projects, like a record with Yoko Ono with Allen Toussaint's band in New Orleans. I played with McCartney on his Back To The Egg record, which was quite nice. I told McCartney, "I should be paying you royalties—all the stuff I've stolen from you." He said, "I've nicked a couple of things from you, too," and picked up his bass and started playing "Chelsea."

**Did the Attractions record their "solo," or Elvis–less group album, Mad About The Wrong Boy, to flex their muscles a bit?**

Oh, hell. If it was flexing muscles, they were pretty puny muscles [laughs]. All of those projects— I mean, the Rumour did it, and so did Spiders From Mars—and every time a band has ever done anything like that, they are doomed to failure. They never work.
There were some good ideas on there, but it proved to me one thing: Democracies don't work. Because by the time you please everybody, you dilute it three times over. If anybody heard the rehearsal things we did, it sounded like a much more dangerous version of the Bowie band. That was the kind of sound and approach we were going for. But everything went out the window. I think it would have been much better if we had actually played with a few different people. It would have been more interesting.

Is it ever frustrating for you to be a member of the band, rather than the leader?

No, because until I have a good idea of what I would want to lead anyone into, I don't mind playing the role I play. I sometimes think my job is literally playing second fiddle [laughs], and I don't like playing second fiddle. But I am not a writer and I am not a singer, so I'm not really going to front a band. I get a fair crack at the whip: If I want to stand up and skitter about on the thin notes, I think Elvis is pretty indulgent of my style of playing. I think he realizes it's best to encourage people to express the way they play. I think he accepts the way we all approach our instruments, in the same way that he has carte blanch to do what the hell he likes. If he launches into a solo or takes the arrangement somewhere else, then we have to follow it. And we do. So I don't feel frustrated about not being a bandleader, but I sometimes feel frustrated about being pushed and shoved in certain directions arrangement-- or concept--wise. But I think the ratio of satisfaction to dissatisfaction comes out much more on the plus side.

Do you have any interest in producing?

I had a bash at producing while I had this time off. I didn't do anyone famous or anything; I just found a couple of hopeful, young, bright, keen lads and went into a studio. I thought, "Do I want to do this for a living? Do I want to sit in a room with no windows and no fresh air that's extremely noisy for weeks on end, as a way of life?" And I decided, "No, I don't."

I bought the Mirage [synthesizer], and I have a whole library of sounds. I spend a lot of time just knocking things up on that, just for my own amusement. That is exciting for me because I'm at the stage with that machine now that I was when I was learning to play
the bass. I'm discovering all kinds of ways to put sounds together, which may not be extremely sophisticated from the Steve Nieve point of view, but they're at least as good as Depeche Mode records [laughs]. I've done a lot of [prose] writing, as well. I think that sort of area is going to be where I am a "leader," if you like, where I direct my creativity. I am not for a moment going to try to challenge or usurp Elvis' position, because it would be ridiculous.

**Did you get back into art during your free period?**

Yeah. The funny thing is, when I was a commercial artist I played music for fun, and it was really awful drawing every day. Then when I started playing, after the years of touring, it was a chore just to tour, and I used to take sketch pads on the road and draw for fun. If you want to spoil your enjoyment for anything, do it for a living. I don't want to spread myself too thin, so I am sticking to bass playing and writing at the moment, and doing the rest for fun. And I would dearly love to play the blues with anybody.

**Even with the amount of experience that the various members in the Attractions had from the start, and your capabilities on your respective instruments, you were, by association, part of the punk/new wave movement. Did you feel out of place with that tag?**

Not really. A lot of the time we played too fast because we were nervous. And a lot of the time for more dubious reasons [laughs] that had to do with that era. We were working so hard, we used to basically drink a lot of vodka and take a lot of cocaine—it was as simple as that. So we played too fast. We were just doing gigs and getting on the bus and doing gigs. We didn't have five days off in the first two years. We were basically fried. But even though we were hideously loud and obnoxious and played far too quickly, there was a sort of music in there. It was a bit stripped down to speed—like a car that's got every bit taken off it that it doesn't need, and it just goes fast. But it can be fairly well-tuned and go fast. To stretch the bloody metaphor to a ridiculous extent, it was running on lighter fuel or parafin—not the best-grade fuel. Then the music started to emerge. But I think Steve was very musical, and Pete had been hanging around with the kind of Russ Kunkel/ Lowell George/ California "muso" crowd. I was never a person who listened to rock music at home; I always listened to Baroque or sort of ethnic music.
Steely Dan was about the nearest I ever got to rock, so Elvis thought I was a bit of a wimp. He was the guy who was champing at the bit and frothing at the mouth. He had never been in a band before, never been on a bus before, never seen a groupie before. Conversely, I was playing in bands and was saying, "Aw, for God's sake, you can't keep playing this lame sort of sub–California Eagles shit." The only exciting bands around at the time were like the Pirates and Dr. Feelgood. Let's get some good old British R&B; let's get the beat back into it! Never mind about this "Take It Easy" and "Trucking Down The Freeway Of Life's Stoned And Moody Mind With My Little Denim Lady In L.A." I quite like red– blooded music. I keep thinking, "I'm too old to be making all this racket." Here I am, umm, 31 [laughs], making this tremendous din and thrashing. But it's actually quite solid, and it's bloody good fun.

So where does Steely Dan come into all this?

Well, what was around at that time? I liked J. Geils Band's first three albums. When everybody was playing James Taylor and Carole King and all that stuff, and then J. Geils came out with those first three albums, it was like manna from heaven. It was like, "Oh, thank God! I'd nearly forgotten all about this." Steely Dan had quite intelligent arrangements. I actually had this conversation with Jeff Baxter regarding this stuff about making a noise and rock, as opposed to making music. I said, "I don't mind, as long as it's 51 % the spirit of rock and roll and 49% music." He said, "I'd rather have it the other way around." I said, "Well, yeah, that's obvious, and that's where we differ."

You use a lot of different right–hand techniques. Do you switch from fingers to pick for facility or for the tone?

I prefer to use fingers, in a way, but some things sound better rhythmically with a pick. "Tokyo Storm Warning" [Blood & Chocolate], which is a kind of Dylanesque beat – like the Blonde On Blonde kind of rhythm really swings much better with a pick because you are hitting open strings. "New Lace Sleeves" [Trust] sounds better with a pick–to get that really robotic regular rhythm.

What kind of amp do you use?
It's an Ampeg SVT, with two SVT cabinets, with eight 10s each. But it has been slightly converted by Venus Electronics in New Jersey. It was Johnny Winter's guitar amp. He used four of them [laughs]! Can you imagine what four of those boogers turned flat-out sound like? I usually use two cabinets, but using one cabinet works the speakers harder and gives it a much better sound. I used to use two because when you hit bottom E on those soul parts, you want it to go thoom; you want the real woody, dead, absolutely rock-solid bottom note. You don't want any kind of distortion at all.

**Do you have any effects?**

In a Boss suitcase I've got a digital delay, a Dimension C digital chorus, a flanger, and an octave dropper – all Boss pedals. To get an 8-string sound, I just play the part an octave higher and then put the bottom octave back in with the Octaver. I have always used a graphic equalizer, which I think is the only really indispensible pedal for the bass player's armory, because the perennial problem for bass 'players is low-end rumble and boom. My graphic is glued down; I use the same settings every time. They've got much bigger graphics on the P.A. board for compensating for hall acoustics. Basically I just take out all the bottom end–150 and 100 [Hz] right out. And that horrible sound around 400–if you boost that frequency it makes things go honky and squawky, so I take that one out. And I whack up 200, 220–that's the one that's got to come through. And the Ampeg has got EQ, too, so you can boost 200, 800, or 1600. I've got 200 on the amp full-on, and 200 on the graphic full-on–to punch the notes out so you can hear every note clearly. Then you've got to use a lot of left-hand damping–play every note separately, so that each one comes out with a slight gap between them. I play with a lot of attack, as well; I physically hit the string very hard, and then fight and push the beat.

**You mean playing on top of the beat more–slightly infront of the beat?**

Yeah, playing into the beat. Pete's a good drummer because he attacks the beat, as well. A lot of drummers play very square on the beat; Dave Mattacks is a prime example of that, and Jim Keltner plays right on the beat, as well. I was listening to him and trying to imagine playing with him, and I think I would really have to change the way I play. He said to me, "God, you really step on it, don't you?"
Yeah, we're speed merchants in a sense.

That's the opposite of the Duck Dunn influence. He played slightly behind the beat.

He did, I suppose, yeah.

You use roundwound strings, obviously.

Yeah, but I leave them on for a year or so. I don't change them very much. I don't like that twang like Chris Squire, but I like the bite. If you get the roundwound strings when all the kind of metallic stuff has gone out of them, then they are not so bad. I use the heaviest-gauged GHS strings I can get: I think they're .110 on top.

What setup do you use when you record?

I hate using headphones. I'll put one side of the headphones on just to hear the voice, if I really have to. I hate not being able to see people, too, when they are in booths up the other end of the bloody street. For Blood And Chocolate we did the whole setup; it was all live in a room, with a couple of mikes in the room, and just thrashing away. Like the Let It Be movie, except for full stage volume. We played in a huge room with a stage amps, monitors, and everything. I used the SVT along with a D.I. [direct input].

Was there a problem with leakage?

Yeah! Completely. No separation whatsoever. They couldn't mix it at all.

So if you screwed up, you couldn't really punch in—you had to cut the whole thing again.

Or you leave the mistake in. There aren't that many, because it's not that complicated. I like the luxury of the safety net, being, able to punch in, but you can't punch in on a gig, can you? So it's only the idea that's worse than the reality of it. When you actually do it, you don't screw it up at all.

Were previous albums done more high tech—where rhythm
tracks were layered on?

We never really got near that. We only approached anything like that when we worked with [producer] Clive Langer, on Goodbye Cruel World and Punch The Clock. Even then we only actually laid down sequenced rhythm parts and used click tracks on about three tunes. You can go one of two ways: You can become a really ethnic, cult kind of musicians' band and do everything that way, or you can think about going into the mainstream of production and go for a much more commercial kind of success. We were having that debate at the time we did those albums with Clive, and as it happened, Goodbye Cruel World ended up being the worst album we've ever done—verily pissed everybody off and nearly split the band up. Everybody had such a miserable time making it.

When the band gets into different styles, such as soul music, is it usually because of something Elvis has gotten into, or do the other guys have much input?

He kind of oversees the general direction. Get Happy, for instance—we never set out to make a soul record at all. We actually started to make a pop record; it was sounding like Armed Forces, and we were all starting to get twitchy and saying, "Oh, God, we're repeating ourselves." Back then, it may have been a good time to consolidate the style. I think "B Movie" was the first track we cut for that album, which sounded like Blondie, and then we ended up doing that kind of jazzy version. "High Fidelity" sounded like something off Station To Station—it was a real Bowie-esque kind of tune—and I just whacked into that Tamla bass part. On "Opportunity" we did sort of an Al Green bass part. After a while we became conscious of, "What kind of soul vein can we push this into?"

Was that particularly fun for you, since you like that kind of bass playing?

Oh, yeah. Steve hated that; he said, "I'm not playing this goddamn monkey music anymore." On the other hand, I don't like country and western—that's "horse music." There are three beats in country music, as Pete Thomas said: There is a horse going fast, there is a horse going along slow, and there a horse with a gimpy leg that's going 3/4 [laughs]. Obviously there's much more to it, but I can't get into all the emotions. It all seems so bloody sentimental and
Besides John McFee, were there other studio musicians involved on Almost Blue?

[Steel guitarist] Pete Drake came down and a fiddle player [Tommy Miller]—although I thought McFee was better than them anyway. It was a lot of bullshit. I didn't get along with [Nashville producer] Billy Sherrill; it was like he was the big-shot producer and we were all kind of idiots. We went in there and played like we played—with some real bullocks—but he didn't like it. I think what was undermining the thing was that they were all on such a cozy number—all doing their 1–4–5 chord charts and charging triple rates—that here we were coming along doing the Emperor's New Clothes and upsetting the whole status quo. These guys would come down, and it would be all that kind of crap like, "Hey, Snake, you're playing really great fiddle today." "That's all right, Possum; it's cuz you get such a great sound—you're such a great engineer." They were all keeping themselves in a job. We went in there and actually played better—with a lot more spirit. We played all the dots just as well, and we cut 20 tracks in 10 days—lots and lots of material—and it was sounding fine. Then Sherrill went in and added strings and stuff. So what if he gets a great sound and knows what he's doing? We were too much like the real thing for him. It was a very interesting experience, but I wasn't taken in by it for one minute.

Do you think Elvis would ever do a blues album?

I really hope that he will one day. I don't know why he hasn't, because it's the only thing we haven't covered. I think the reason he is putting that off actually is because he's got more than a sneaky suggestion that I'd be demanding to play guitar on it. I just got the double Little Walter album on Chess at Village Music [9 E. Blithedale, Mill Valley, CA 94941]—I'm rediscovering blues harmonica. Crateloads of stuff come from there over to England. That's got to be the best record shop in the world. You should see Elvis' record collection.

How do you feel about the level you guys have reached so far? You're not a hit singles band, but you can sell out major venues, and you have a catalog that few bands in the world can boast.
I see parallels between us and the Band or something. I almost feel like we are historians or something—entrusted with carrying the sacred vessel of rock and roll knowledge and preserving it through the kind of dark ages of heavy metal [laughs]. I'd like to sell more records. The only band I can think of in America that I actually like on all levels, musically and commercially, is the Talking Heads.

I think Elvis has created a bit of a monster here, with the Spinning Songbook and everything. He's obviously enjoying it, which is great because a happy Elvis is a happy me, as far I'm concerned. But I don't know how the hell we are going to follow this one. We can't just sort of try to be more bizarre and wacky, and we can't just show up and be ordinary, so who knows? Maybe we'll have a hit [laughs]; that's the only thing we haven't done.