

## Ray, Elvis and Shrimp

Written by Dave Howard

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This was good green room shrimp. Green room shrimp was usually pretty sketchy. After many years on the road you could tell by the film on the red sauce how long it had been sitting. Red sauce should have no lumps. If there are lumps in your red sauce that meant people had been dipping into it for while.

Elvis Costello sat studying the red sauce. It was a smooth sea that Moses would have coveted. He dipped and bit with a minimal amount of splatter on his trademark glasses and watched the monitor. He's a spiller and tonight was no exception, a little blip of red on his French cuffs. Diana was an hour away from playing. His wife was out and about pressing palms and he didn't feel comfortable making the rounds tonight.

Elvis laughed at himself as he critiqued the shrimp. Thirty years ago he would have eaten anything after the show. And he had paid for it later in the evening. Back then, he would have been grateful for it. There was no booze here. Just a couple of Fiji water bottles beginning to bobble in some in plastic crystalique bowl. Elvis had given up regular boozery a couple (or was it really five) years ago. It wreaked dehydrated havoc on his vocal chords.

He was the plus one to his wife at "A Tribute to Ray Charles." Even after nearly 25 years after "the incident" he still felt like a pariah invited to a firing range/weenie roast. Tonight after all of this time, decades had passed for chrissake, he once again had to face "the incident." But really face it. Not face it to reporters lusty for juicy tabloid smear but face the man he had insulted in an oft quoted piece. That's not what he had meant.

Was it erasable?

Some things you can't really cover up with lipstick and powder.

In 1975 Elvis Costello was an accountant surrounded by an endless stream of ticker tape and typewriter ribbon. In 1979, he was touring as a rock star...muther fucking rock star and he survived off of that "I don't have to count no more.. no more" buzz for a few years before he realized that keeping up with the rock star thing meant a lot of pressure. Keep it good, keep it clean, keep interesting. *Punch the Clock* was a pivotal album because it could have been poorly received just as well. That's a big step. Going from cubicle chump to international sensation, is a huge step. He realized he was losing his mind three years after it was too late to figure that out. There was a sweet smelling air of "Holy Fucking Shit" going through his head. Was it really this easy? I can write songs and people will pay me for it?

He found himself in a Holiday Inn bar in Columbus with a washed up back up singer/groupie and Stephen Stills. On what had been a really good night, Elvis was on his way up, Stills with that hippie pretentious shit on his way down. Stephen Stills represented everything that rock and roll had evolved into. Elvis was amazed and undoubtedly cocky about this new movement that he was proud to lumped in with. Joe Strummer, Joey Ramone and to lesser extent Joe Ely, these guys were great.. how did he end up in their league?

For some reason, all of this came to fruition in a crappy Holiday Inn Bar in Columbus, OH. Elvis remembered the incident as a blur. It had started with a comment about Stephen's "Steel Nose" and this blonde girl who kept whining about how he had ripped off people from Motown and other black artists. They were pushing his geek angry, intoxicated buttons. You can't push me around any fucking more.

Stephen Stills was an ass. Elvis wanted to end the conversation. He wanted to find the most repulsive thing he could say. Seemed like an easy way out, right?

Yes, this was pretty good shrimp. He checked the monitor and Diana hadn't performed yet.

He had said "it." In a little Holiday Inn wasted out of his mind on rock-n-roll superstar. Released from the constraints of a punch clocks and keys, adding machine ribbon and tapes, the most repulsive thing he could think of was "Ray Charles was a blind, ignorant nigger." His mouth was made up but his mind was undone. He saw a fist fly and he ducked back just in time to see, in slow motion, Pete cracking the old hippie with a barstool.

Ray eventually publicly forgave him, in the press. He had said “Bar Talk is not meant for the papers”

For thirty years, Elvis had wondered if he had really meant that. There are truly great moments of assholeism that folks have to live with their entire lives. They trip you up when you least expect it. You are taking out the garbage and suddenly it is there. Angst runs down through your fingers tips and your spine shudders a bit. Even if you make peace with the other party and you are forgiven, it’s still out there. Certain moments of assholeism don’t go away from the asshole. They can be forgiven and forgotten by the victim, but for the asshole the, well regret isn’t the right word....

How did he eat that much shrimp? There was pile of shrimp tails sitting on the plastic tray that someone had thought was festive. Some guy was on the monitor saying “Ladies and gentleman Diana Krall!” The door to the green room burst open and there she was in front of him. Somehow he had missed her entire performance. She was going to close with “But You Don’t Know Me” How did I miss that?

She smiled and pushed folks out of the room with a smile and a “Gimme a minute” and saw the pile of shrimp tails.

“You okay?”

Elvis just looked down and smiled.

“Yeah.”

He grabbed the arm of his Italian greytooth and they walked out of the green room together and faced a mob of well wishers.

They walked to the main backstage, the staging area, and took a moment to say “Hello” to folks.

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Elvis was noticeably uncomfortable but smiled and signed an autograph.

Then there was Ray, ten feet away with his handler. I guess handler may not be the right word, but the guy who shows him around. Elvis was about to have his come to

Jesus moment.

The handler saw them and whispered something into Ray's ear.

Elvis extended his hand to the legend. Elvis was a fan.

The handler looked him in the eye and said "We are only here to see Diana."

The once cocky young man, now in his early 50's, slinked backwards. Suddenly, he was a just geek in that back office, surrounded by other's financial records, wondering if maintenance would ever fix the slow leak above his desk.

Ray Charles passed away later the year.