



Elliott Smith
"Say Yes"
Either/Or
02/1997
Kill Rock Stars

Nothing but Everything

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We moved out to Minneapolis from Portland not knowing Dinkytown from Edina and ended up in Uptown only because it was Google's answer to our search "Where to live in Twin Cities." Sandy and I were engaged, she was starting graduate school, and my fate—it felt like a fate at that point—was to pursue writing wherever it would lead me. We didn't know much about the future we were aimed at when we loaded up the U-Haul and trucked across the northern U. S. states, a nervous optimism filling the cab.

Pulling up to the old ivy-covered brick building we'd signed a lease on sight-unseen, we looked through the windshield as rain was coming down steadily in the unseasonably cool June that reminded me of nothing more than the moderate spring we had left behind in Oregon. Here, instead of the bipolar Midwest climate I feared, was another cozy Willamette Valley day. Looking down the green, tree-lined sidewalks through pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly neighborhoods, and thinking of the coffee shops and independent bookstores we'd passed a few blocks back, everything reminded me of home. We thanked the internet gods for getting this one right for us and unloaded the U-Haul, then we walked down the street to Urban Bean Coffee, one of the nearby cafes. We ordered coffees, sat our tired bodies down, breathed out great sighs of satisfaction, and cheered to the unknown. And right about then I heard the familiar finger-strumming opening of Elliott Smith's "Needle in the Hay" come over the speakers. Sandy recognized it too and gave me a knowing little smile. Serendipity.

The omen proved fortuitous. Returning to Urban Bean over the next few months with the frequency allowed by unemployment, I discovered Elliott Smith a regular presence. Whoever made the playlist at Urban Bean played Smith as much as they played anyone and more than local favorites like The Hold Steady and Dessa. Looking around more carefully, the presence of Smith's sound started making a kind of cohesive sense. The place seemed modeled quite intentionally after Portland, where Smith lived for many years and is enthusiastically claimed: the hipster quirks, the emphasis on locally sourced items, the birds painted on the cafe walls. It was familiar, and as I sat down to write, Smith's searching laments felt like just the right soundtrack. It was due to Smith, in part, that I was sitting there trying to come up with the right arrangements of words, trying to make art.

Ten years earlier, in high school, I drove a decade-plus-old, poop-brown, domestic station wagon. The car was, if nothing else, half mine and up to the task of hauling packs of teenagers from one aimless Portland destination to another. Memories from this period play to the sounds of Nas' *It Was Written*, Outkast's *ATLiens*, E-40's *Hall of Game*, and loads of 2Pac. Rap was the music of the time and I was of my era. I turned the bass up louder than I liked it and drove recklessly because that's what it meant to be in high school those days. I liked the way rap music made me feel and I liked the way I imagined it made me come across to my peers. I had been more or less successful by all the teenage standards that mattered at the time: I was athletic, fairly popular, and smart without being bookish—things just kind of went my way without much trouble. One friend even teasingly referred to me as Golden Boy, a name that stuck far too long for my liking. I had plenty of shortcomings, to be sure, and wasn't cool enough to fully ignore the changing winds of high school norms or powerful enough to redirect them myself; I made conscious efforts to retain what status I had, and those efforts were rewarded enough

that I could adopt their ends as my values. What I mean is there was no great need for me to be overly reflective. And yet.

There had been a brief middle school hiatus into the grunge movement that swept down I-5 from Seattle, but after Kurt Cobain's death my friends and I gradually returned to hip hop, which even when we were least sure how to negotiate racially, we felt deep down was *the* music that mattered. I for one lacked the cultural wherewithal to think in these terms, but there was something vital about rap music that I didn't feel from the Goo Goo Dolls and other popular bands whose songs I enjoyed just fine when they came on the radio. Rap was alive in a way that rock wasn't. It told stories I wanted to hear, presented values I aspired to live by (and seductions I knew to eschew), and it brought me into the world. I listened to The Beatles and Cat Stevens occasionally, but out of nostalgia more than anything else—rap was to my generation what The Beatles and Cat Stevens had been to my parents'.

But in 1997 something happened. I was driving around with my cousin Steve and he said, "I think you'll like this," and put in a CD. The sound it produced was sad and sweet, and the lyric—"I'm in love with the world through the eyes of a girl"—felt like the first one I'd ever really heard. It was Elliott Smith's "Say Yes," I was sixteen, and he was right. I borrowed the CD, which ended up being the soundtrack to *Good Will Hunting*, and played it on repeat as I drove around Portland in the days when gas was cheap and the afternoons long. Of all the songs, by artists as varied as The Dandy Warhols and Al Green, it was Smith's I kept returning to. "Angeles," "Between the Bars," "Say Yes"—there was something about these songs. The singing was pretty and the melodies catchy, but there was something else too, something I didn't quite understand, a mood that seemed to emanate from my stock speakers and live in the air I breathed in the little bubble of my car; it was a kind of sadness that permeated, a sadness that, once I could hear it in songs, I began to recognize in myself—there was a directness to Smith's singing that both provoked and soothed that vulnerable part of me. It was an unusual and slow awakening in me to the power of music, of art. Prior, music had been simply music: something that sounded good in the background to the events of my life. Even the rap music I appreciated, I appreciated from the distance of a foreigner. What Elliott Smith did for me was to make music personal. He wrote and sang from a perspective that was distinctly mine, and in so doing enabled music to move to the forefront of my consciousness, and a song itself to be an actual event in my life. He made me feel stuff I felt like I needed to feel and his music became a private space I could hide in when I wanted to get away.

There's a certain subset of high school memories in which it is perpetually a dark and rainy Portland winter, my love is unrequited, and I'm unsure that I'll ever get anywhere on the project of figuring out who I really am. I wonder if others get confused wondering who they are, decide mostly they don't, then wonder if anyone *really* is who they seem to be. I get into my station wagon (sometimes with the girl I think I love or the one who thinks she loves me—who are never one and the same) and am comforted in some unknown way by Smith, who I'm pretty sure both wonders who he really is and in his wondering is sincerely the person he seems to be. There's an integrity to his music—and, I assume, his self—that I greatly respect, even if I can't precisely locate it in the lyrics. I play these concerns up for the girl in the passenger seat to moderate success, but the problems of authenticity and essentialism are serious to me, and they linger after I drop the girl off at home and drive the streets alone looking for nothing but everything. It's late now and still raining, and I'm thinking maybe only artists know what it's like to be someone else.

The things I didn't know these years could make up an entire other person, and in fact sort of have made up the me I've become. One thing I didn't know was that music wasn't always just another mass media-driven commodity. Another was that musicians are people. Or that they have homes besides the TV or the radio, lives that take place beyond their records. Elliott Smith, I learned from Peter, a friend at school, lived in Portland. Slowly, as the significance of this fact took hold in my consciousness, my conception of an artist began to expand from someone who communicated something of importance for my benefit to someone who emerged from a specific context and produced work for his or her own purposes. If Smith lived in Portland, then he drove the same streets I drove, visited the same parks, probably spent time at Powell's, and could be the guy I passed on the street downtown. (Later, a college roommate would tell me he'd carpooled to elementary school with Smith's half-sister. Even later, my mother mentioned that she'd worked with his father.) Music suddenly penetrated normal life. It wasn't merely commodity, merely background noise or disembodied meaning. It was a medium through which one person could communicate with another—and this meant, too obvious almost to say, that Smith was a person like I was a person, and he was offering something I needed, and he was out there living in and drawing from the world right outside my window. It was a hopeful insight. And on its heels followed a sense of wonder at the further possibilities of life. Reality started to spread out in unknown dimensions, and the Golden Boy successes I had achieved so easily ceased to matter much to me. I wanted more, even if I didn't know yet exactly more of what.

Not long after, Peter took me to my first concert to see Elliott Smith at LaLuna, an all-ages venue that was the epicenter of the thriving Portland music scene. Here was the world I'd suspected was out there waiting for me. The audience comprised teens and twenty- and thirty-somethings who just looked like they knew what was what. They were tattooed and pierced and swaggered with the freedom that came from the knowledge that this was their proper spot in the universe. There was a grittiness, but a happiness as well. The air of excitement was due to creativity as much as to celebrity, and the intoxication to inspiration as much as chemicals. They felt—and quickly I felt too—part of something bigger, something significant that we might look back on one day and be proud of. It was a mysterious kind of scene to me, one that I didn't feel like I could participate in fully, dressed as I was in the preppy clothes of my safely conventional high school wardrobe. My ties to good grades, bright white smiles, and being an achieving sort of kid bought me no credibility at LaLuna, among a crowd that accepted me without actually affirming what my appearance represented. They were split between a hip and cynical knowingness and a sincere and kind ethos that I thought flowed through Smith's work. It was Smith, I confirmed, who was at the center of things. The respect for him and the pride in his music was palpable. Others may have known and appreciated the opening band, which I've long forgotten, but I was waiting on Smith and when he took the stage the attention in the room telescoped. Everyone converged forward, took silent, and listened to Smith's every mumble. We as an audience were all in that room together with Smith, all sharing a sincere artistic moment. It was a new experience for me.

I never fit very neatly into the LaLuna scene, but in the year that followed I returned again and again whenever Smith played. I'd go with Peter sometimes, and sometimes with those girls who things kept going never-quite-right with, and listen to the music and feel it, really feel it. Before long, though, it was time for college and LaLuna closed down and I left Smith behind in Portland (or actually Brooklyn, where he'd moved by then). I spent my college years reading philosophy, my interest in art and writing yet to reach any kind of fruition whereby it might become a possibility for me. Smith, too, had studied philosophy in college, later naming his best album after Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. But for who knows what reasons I stopped listening to Smith's records.

Meanwhile Smith was undergoing a troubled period in his life marked by heavy drinking, drug use, and depression. He was institutionalized after an intervention by some of his friends during the *Either/Or* tour. As the cliché of the troubled artist anticipates, the desperation and depression of Smith's lyrics were enacted in his life. Smith hated this cliché, perhaps moreso because he knew he was prone to it. There's a way of reading his songs as a struggle to find and declaim beauty in an ugly or painful world. The early aughts revealed just how close Smith was to the kind of suffering his lyrics evince and that his music belies. As Charlie, the host of Elliott Smith's official website (sweetadelaine.net), writes, "It is as if the music points the way to a redemption that the words-the rational mind-could never possibly grasp: a universe that is loving, forgiving, and endlessly compassionate." I didn't know this at the time, didn't know that he'd attempted suicide during this period, about which he said to one interviewer: "Yeah, I jumped off a cliff [his fall was broken by a tree], but let's talk about something else."

I didn't know this, and yet when my cousin killed himself in the spring of 2003 it was to Smith's music I turned for solace. I walked around Eugene, Oregon, that spring and summer listening to *Either/Or* and *XO* in my headphones, finding comfort and catharsis in his effort to make beauty out of pain. That fall, when I learned of Smith's suicide, it came as the bitter fulfillment of a promise I'd hoped but never expected would be forgotten. The songs he wrote, like the songs Kurt Cobain wrote, ticked like time bombs. Of course, I thought. Of course. I returned again to his songs, tracked down *Figure 8*, his latest album, went up to Portland and visited the impromptu memorial his fans made on Division St. , where he'd once lived and once mentioned in song.

Somehow that was a long time ago now and somehow the world needs beauty, real human beauty, as much as ever. Here I am, still in Minnesota, still writing, still wondering how to proceed, still returning to Elliott Smith looking for clues. It's obvious now that his music opened a certain kind of future for me, a richer future, to be sure, but one that comes at a price. There's no returning to the naive innocence of my youth before art started to reach in and squeeze my insides, before I understood the proximity of beauty and pain. I can't go back. Nor would I want to.