

Interview

Bodies are falling from buildings on the front cover of Elliott Smith's disarming eponymous record (*Kill Rock Stars*), while the back cover pictures the singer sniffing a bouquet of daisies. What's inside—twelve devastating acoustic songs—manages a delicate balance between doom and bloom. When playing with the punk band Heatmiser, from Portland, Oregon, Smith cranks a hefty guitar buzz; here, he ignites a slower, gentler burn, with sparse percussion, tender strums, and little-boy-blue-all-grown-up-and-jaded melodies that will leave you sighing. RAY ROGERS

The New York Times

The Pop Life | Neil Strauss

■ At the musical ball, wallflowers that should not be ■ The brains behind David Rosenboom.

At the Ball

New music in 1995 got accepted by pop culture at a faster rate than ever. Dance music trends developed every few months, formerly obscure world-music artists collaborated with pop stars, and alternative rock solidified its position as the new Top 40. Though it may seem hard enough to keep up with the new bands at the top of the pop charts, not every group of note makes it on the radio or into major record chains.

Listed here are 10 of the most notable releases that almost got away last year because they didn't have the distribution or promotion resources of a major label or an American label.

CAT POWER "Dear Sir" (Runt, Viale E. Duse 16A, Florence, Italy 50137): Chan Marshall sings with pent-up power on this record (featuring Steve Shelley of Sonic Youth on drums), an alternative-rock equivalent of the blues with songs wailed from the point of view of the psychotic, the distressed and the just plain confused.

COYLE AND SHARPE "On the Loose" (213CD, P.O. Box 1910, Los Angeles, Calif. 90078): In the early 1960's, before cynicism was commonplace, the comedy duo of James P. Coyle and Mal Sharpe wandered the streets with a briefcase concealing a tape recorder, stopping pedestrians to see if they could persuade them to rob a bank or to ask them if they would have coins surgically implanted in their heads if it meant the money would be doubled. The responses collected here are as hilarious as they are illuminating.

EARTHLING "Radar" (Cooltempo, 131-133 Holland Park Avenue, London, England W11 4UT): This Eng-

lish duo takes a high-minded approach like a soundtrack to a 1970's television police drama. Also notable on the Mo Wax label is "Meiso," by DJ Krush of Japan, a smartly composed montage of beats and scratches with guest raps by Guru, C. L. Smooth and the Roots.

OVAL "94diskont" (Mille Plateaux, 10 Werft, Frankfurt, Germany 60327): This German group has learned how to make music out of technology's shortcomings, taking compact disks and scratching them, pressing them against the CD player's laser and otherwise mutilating them to come up with a surprisingly soothing sound environment.

SALAMAT AND MUSICIANS OF THE NILE "Salam Delta" (Piranha, available from Stern's, 598 Broadway, New York 10012): This is an excellent and accessible collaboration between two Egyptian bands, with female vocals, high-flying brass and whirring strings gathering for a polyrhythmic party. A more serious Egyptian recording also worth hunting down is Mohammed Mounir's new album of contemporary Nubian folk-pop, "Momkin" (CD Saudi Arabia), available from Rashid Sales, 191 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn 11201.

ELLIOTT SMITH "Elliott Smith" (Kill Rock Stars, 120 N.E. State No. 418, Olympia, Wash., 98501): In gently strummed, quietly sung songs, Mr. Smith, of Portland, Ore., sorts through problems of love and friendship. Like an imperfect guardian angel, he hovers tentatively on the edge of other people's lives, telling them, in "Alphabet Town," "She probably won't say you're wrong, but you're already wrong."

T POWER "The Self Evident Truth of an Intuitive Mind" (Sour, 8 Stratton Ground, London, England SW1P 2HP, England): The sounds on this lush, innovative CD are so well-chosen,

in hyper-drive (and with a better sense of humor), the punk band Weston mixes old singles and new songs on its second album.

David Rosenboom

David Rosenboom is to perform at Merkin Concert Hall in Manhattan tonight with an instrument he has been playing since the 1970's: the human brain. On his albums "Brain-wave Music" and "Being Invisible," both two decades old, Mr. Rosenboom began using the brain waves of performers to control electronic instruments in real time. He soon moved on to other research, becoming dean of the School of Music at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia and, most recently, recording an album, "Two Lines" (Lovely Music), with the jazz composer Anthony Braxton.

Technological innovations and a renewal of interest in the field have allowed Mr. Rosenboom to return to his work with brain waves. Tonight he will be performing excerpts from "On Being Invisible II (Hypatia Speaks to Jefferson in a Dream)," a multimedia piece (with a narration by Robert Ashley) that Mr. Rosenboom refers to as a musical system, not a composition.

"The role of brain waves in the piece is to determine how the music becomes structured from an unstructured beginning," he said. "The music will be going along and an important event will happen, and if the brain wave people are paying attention to it and the response is strong, that will cause the material to be captured and stored. It then becomes available for me to call back, to work with and to transform."

"What we take away from a concert is often not what was played, but a musical experience that was organized and synthesized by our memories," he added. "Active listening is a lot like composing."

ELLIOTT SMITH "Elliott Smith" (Kill Rock Stars, 120 N.E. State No. 418, Olympia, Wash., 98501): In gently strummed, quietly sung songs, Mr. Smith, of Portland, Ore., sorts through problems of love and friendship. Like an imperfect guardian angel, he hovers tentatively on the edge of other people's lives, telling them, in "Alphabet Town," "She probably won't say you're wrong, but you're already wrong."

SALON
"Year in Music"
1996

+ CYNTHIA JOYCE'S TOP TEN (in no particular order) +

10. Elliott Smith, "Elliott Smith"
(Kill Rock Stars)

Don't let anyone tell you Simon and Garfunkel did it first; it may be so, but Elliott Smith is doing it *now*. Anyone who can write a song about "Killing the Southern Belle" and make it sound genuinely tragic without a trace of irony has got my vote.

SALON
"Year in Music"
1996

+ DAVID FENTON'S TOP TEN (approximately) +

1. Elliott Smith, self-titled (Kill Rock Stars)

A guitar, and vocals. Tell everyone you know, then play it for them. They'll understand.

SPIN

TEARS OF RAGE

Three essential albums that expressed punk pain with folk's tools, or vice versa. ALEX PAPANIKOLAOU



Elliott Smith
Either/Or (Kill Rock Stars, 1997)

Moan with the squeal of last night's Unwound show still ringing in his ears. Before the Ozco nod, before looking really effed-up onstage became his main gig. Portland, Oregon, singer/songwriter Smith cut this poetically wrecked after-hours whisper of a record, on which each song sounds like another heartstring snapping.

on a four-track in his bedroom. Springsteen barely became the Reagan era's Chris Columbus. Okay, maybe not. But recovering punks looking for tips on layin' it bare and paintin' it black should feel the flow: redness, prairie. Omaha's Gomez "Bright Eyes" Obessi already has.



Husker Du
Zen Arcade (SST, 1984)

The 10-can production team hasn't aged well, and listeners sulked on *Saves the Day* will

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FRIDAY
APR 4 1997

Elliott Smith ^{14 3/4} *Either/Or* (Kill Rock Stars) ★★★

With his gentle voice and delicate guitar finger-picking, Elliott Smith conjures atmospheric folk-pop tunes that evoke the late, great Nick Drake more so than Smith's emo-core rock band Heatmiser. On his third solo release, the Portland singer-songwriter's tunes are luminously orchestrated within a fragile framework of voices, guitars and percussion. And his formerly dissolute worldview has brightened enough to include the possibility of redemption, however small. On the closing "Say Yes," he is amazed not to be abandoned: "I'm in love with the world through the eyes of a girl/Who's still around the morning after."
G.K.

Interview



Anything but plain folk: Elliott Smith.

Elliott Smith

either/or (Kill Rock Stars)

Listening to Elliott Smith points out just what's wrong with Paul Simon. Both artists write highly structured acoustic songs, with complicated melodies that shift into traditional chord progressions when you least expect it, as if instinctively veering away from the artiness their distanced lyrics and delivery court. But where Simon uses this tactic to craft faux folktales and precious ironies, Smith sketches layered Gen X portraits that are so clear-eyed they cannot cry. Each song on the new *either/or* is surprising, moving, and almost impossible to forget. DUDLEY SAUNDERS

Magnet

ARTISTS
OF THE
YEAR

Given the year's rampant and unironic rock-star posing by even the dimmest of celestial bodies (the guy from Placebo?) and the dispirited comeback of glam not as a musical genre but as a style concept (who can relate to glitter?), it's little wonder that Elliott Smith radiated so brilliantly.

With a blissful album entitled *XO* (DreamWorks), Smith transcended his most famous role as Oscar underdog and became the darling of critics and fans everywhere—performing four dates at the *Les Inrockuptibles* festival in France and four minutes on *Saturday Night Live*. If Smith loathes interviews as much as he claims, 1998 must have been a personal hell.

"For some reason, attention will be paid to some band or person and not to others, and there's no accounting for that," says Smith, still bewildered by success and its trappings. "It's hard to say who's deciding these things."

Most recently, Smith recorded at Abbey Road Studios in London, no doubt fulfilling a fantasy that probably began the first time he heard *Rubber Soul*. He also co-wrote and starred in a short film called *Strange Paradise*, in which our hero becomes equipped with a robot hand (don't ask) and haunts his favorite Brooklyn dives. But Smith's greatest achievement was making fans of his "Northwestern basement" period believe that, just as they cuddled up to his stark indie records to commune with a similarly damaged psyche, they could do the same with the strings, piano and horns that elegantly furnish *XO*. Hugging an orchestra never felt less awkward.

E ELLIOTT SMITH

YEAR IN MUSIC / MAGNET • 39

Details

MAY 1997

music

short cuts

BY ROB SHEFFIELD

Artist, Title, Label	What's going on?	Is it any good?	Rating
ELLIOTT SMITH <i>Either/Or</i> (Kill Rock Stars)	Lo-fi acoustic storyteller takes a big step with his third album, weaving sad songs around snappy drums and shivery melodies.	Mood music with lots of heart. It's like having Harry Nilsson hiding in your basement.	6

The Village Voice

Lovefools

April 15, 1997 VILLAGE VOICE 59

In 1978, City Lights published a slim volume of romantic odes by Kenneth Patchen, dedicated to his wife, Miriam. The short, spare verses veerably throb with sensual hypnotic: "From my high love I look at that poor world there," Patchen writes, and he does seem to be up in the belfry with the bats as he rans on about Miriam's white limbs, honeyed thighs, and flower-scented hair. Ick, right? Pure corn. Yet for all their interperate mushiness, Patchen's poems are startlingly intense. They affect like fancies, essences boiled free of all impurities, meant to obliterate any other sense but their own. They are spells. Patchen wrote them to enchant the woman who plumped his pillows and kept him fed during the 30 years he was afflicted with spinal ailments, the last decades of which chained him to his bed.

This ancient and everlasting reason to create a poem, a painting, or a song—to convince someone to love you—is the one singer-songwriters make their métier. For men, this poses a problem: there's so little space in this world for men to sincerely express the softer emotions that it's hard for a guy who devotes his life to writing about them to avoid seeming overwrought, like Patchen, or simply slamy. You can make your peace with schmaltz, feather your hair like Fabio, and hope for the dignified middle age of Julio Iglesias. But what if, like Duncan Sheik and Elliott Smith, you're musically ambitious, or just plain smarter than that?

It's certainly tough to imagine these two twentysomethings chasing the same girl. Sheik's a professionally styled punp whose main source of inspiration is mid-'80s new wave, and Smith's an emphatically unwashed ex-drug buddy who hangs with the punk monks of the Pacific Northwest. Yet Sheik's debut and Smith's third solo release both squeeze new sparks from pop's romantic engine, evoking the precarious state of the masculine ego as it tries to rethink itself. These are postfeminist guys; they can't resort to the usual she's-a-rainbow-under-my-thumb imagery that has historically served to idealize and degrade babes. So both Sheik and Smith begin one step earlier. Their songs explore the workings of persuasion itself, both as an element of pop and a function of desire.

"Everyone's looking, everyone hides, everyone's telling everyone lies," sighs Duncan Sheik four cuts into his Chardonnay-smooth debut, and though he'd like to exempt himself from this duplicitous company, he can't. Sheik, whose album came out last June but is charting now on the strength of the single "Barely Breathing," shows no remorse in dressing his

Duncan Sheik
Duncan Sheik
Atlantic

Elliott Smith
Either/Or
Kill Rock Stars

BY ANN POWERS

romantic musings in luxury fabric. He churns out lush, orchestrated ballads in the tradition Brian Wilson established on *Pet Sounds*, following that line right through the suburban pop of Fleetwood Mac's Lindsey Buckingham into the New Romantic stylings of Talk Talk and David Sylvian. He's a studio rat, the type who just loves to slip that extra lining of strings into an already opulent arrangement. He must have been thrilled to get old sickser Rupert Hine as a producer. Pop this finely wrought can be deathly dull when it's not inventive, but in the hands of an experimenter like Sheik it's as sexy as a well-cut Prada coat. The way the components multiply in a song like "Out of Order," from bare falsetto and piano during the intro to a low, bass-grounded orchestral swell on the first verse to snare drum and guitar reverb on the third—that's *design*. And design like this is always beautiful. But as Sheik realizes, it's also a deception.

Sheik emulates the best—the Wilson of "Caroline No," Marvin Gaye, Nick Drake, Bryan Ferry—in forming a seamless package to contain expressions of confusion and loss. His lyrics can be clumsy, but he nails the most important thing: a slight imbalance be-

bright wild weeds in an English garden.

Sheik is struggling to individualize a genre as familiar as a Hallmark card. Live, he hasn't mastered the trick yet; I've seen him twice, most recently March 19 at the Supper Club, and both times his discomfort onstage made him resort to smug moves, while his pared-down band couldn't live up to the twists he and Hine achieved on disc. But he does master it all over this record, in the slippery guitar riff of "Serena," the Dimitri Tiompanin-esque twitch of the strings on "November," the carelessly concealed bitterness of "In the Absence of Sun." Trying to learn how to win his girl, Sheik ends up mostly

defeating cliché. And that's something that a cure guy gets to do a lot less often than dress up for a good date.

Elliott Smith wouldn't put on a pop cliché any more than he would that Prada jacket. He's an indie purist, his forefathers beautiful wrecks like Alex Chilton and Neil Young and his friends fellow bustlers like Mary Lou Lord. With a high, whispery voice and a knack for noticing the grimy details

of street bohemia, Smith has garnered quite the hip following with his previous releases, as part of the plain-punk Heatmiser and on his own. On *Either/Or*, though, he pushes himself out of those comfortable surroundings by cooking up a home brew of Top 40 pop that finally gives him the means to be as communicative as he is observant.

Smith mines the same tension fellow sad-boy songwriter Richard Buckner named his new album after: devotion versus doubt, the wish to be swept up (by music, by the moment, by love) fighting the fear that taking the risk will leave you flat.

It's possible to see this as the postgrunge predicament: that virile form gave young men so much bodily pleasure and release that they often chanced a surprising emotional vulnerability; now, having lost their heroic status, they've become introspective. In song after song, Smith perfectly expresses the baffled exhaustion that takes over when the risks you're taking stop feeling fun and start feeling genuinely dangerous: the crusty kid in "Rose Parade," "Alameda" 's fading hipster, the symbiotic lovers of "Punch and



Elliott Smith: digging deep to articulate at all

Judy" all know they've got to get out of the games they're playing, but don't quite have the energy to see how.

Although he uses traditional song forms, Smith's not trying to cop other people's phrases to form his own vocabulary. He's digging deep to manage to articulate at all. Switching off between the first and second person, he never settles on one perspective, forever bouncing off another sharp corner of the landscape like the freak he describes in "Speed Trials." His music builds the same digressive structure by combining big open choruses and tightly wound, word-packed verses. The "Ballad of Big Nothing" describes a milieu of losers who can get away with anything because no one cares what they do, but the chorus—"You can do what you want to whenever you want to"—rides a swell of acoustic guitar and Smith's multitracked vocals until the phrase turns, confused, from bitterness to optimism. "No Name No. 5" moves in the opposite direction, the droop of its mournful melody dragging all the loneliness out of its final words: "everybody's gone at last."

As he navigates these loops, his lean voice gaining courage from the multitrack, Smith heads as close as he can toward resolution. That he doesn't get there affirms the honesty of his project. The artist, a specialist in ruses, knows that that intimacy is rarely an accident. It's a game of advance and retreat, with old rules that constantly demand new variations. But like Sheik, Smith believes in something, if only the power of his own hunger for the genuine. The last song on *Either/Or*, a tentative pledge to another wavering girl, sums it up with a simple request that all artists ask of their loved ones, their audience: "Say yes."

Elliott Smith performs April 13 and 14 at Brownies.



Duncan Sheik: That's design.

tween the music's extravagance and the singer's hesitant tone, which creates an irresistible pathos. The naivete of Sheik's lyrics actually enhances this mood; raw infamated phrases ("In the wildest mythology were the gods and goddesses ever so in love") burst forth from their sophisticated settings like

The New York Times

THE POP LIFE

triply" (Verve). A main-rio that shows how widely the mainstream has be-cessive, texturally rich y a pianist whose every ts better.

McNeely, "The Vanguard hestra Lickety Split: Music cNeely" (New World). Mr. 's music for the Vanguard hestra or the Carnegie Hall id is often brilliant, fueled opositions, strange connec-ghts and finally surmise.

n Marsalis, "Blood on the (Columbia). Three CD's of 'sy; it's the work with Marsalis won his Pulitzer ere are moments of beauty, mbition alone is worth the

Moody and Mark Turner, Jams, Vol. II: The Two (Warner Brothers). It's an pairing up two tenor saxo-but obviously it still can ecially when the tenor saxa-are Mr. Turner, a young own for his harmonic skills be-bop era Mr. Moody, r his harmonic skills.

rsby, "Further Ado" (Blue ore wonderfully different ons and improvisations ito saxophonist who is tak-ainstream and playing with all sorts of harmonies, tex-rythms.

ce Penn, "Penn's Landing" (ss). A pianoless recording id by a drummer who has ith funk bands, classical s and the best jazz groups. , exploratory music that ps swinging.

us Roberts, "Blues for the enium" (Columbia). Min- Ellington meets John Col- he mind of Mr. Roberts, a his is furious music, full of rns, double drum-and-bass ections and rapid textural s shifting.

MAUSS

ad, "OK Computer" (Cap- at the buried melodies, the ties or the music that bor-



Elliott Smith

From Elliott Smith, "Either/Or."

and Miles Davis that make this record so addictive: it's the mood — heavy, oppressive, bewildered, sub- lime and nervously passionate.

2. Missy (Misdemeanor) Elliott, "Supa Dupa Fly" (East-West/Elek- tra). The freshest wind blowing across rhythm-and-blues, Ms. Elliott knows the music's formula, she knows the music's future and she knows how to combine them into smooth, innovative and propulsive sugar-and-spice jams.

3. Hanson, "Middle of Nowhere" (Mercury). Hanson's upbeat harmo- nies were the guilty pleasure of the year. Its album, on which every song is a potential hit, may not be original in the scope of popular music, but when compared with the middle-of- the-road fare that dominated 1997, it was as novel as it was irresistible.

4. Belle and Sebastian, "If You're Feeling Sinister" (The Enclave/ Jeepster). This introverted Scottish collective released one of the most beautiful albums of the year, full of sensitive, soft-spoken, seductive folk-

of klezmer music with the shovel of expressionist jazz, Mr. Statman un-earths the soul of Jewish music on this surprisingly sedate, melodic and evocative disk.

9. Meier/Grundheber/Staatskapelle Berlin/Barenboim, "Alban Berg: Wozzeck" (Teldec). If this is not the best live recording of the Berg opera, it's certainly among the most com-plex and tragic, with the Staatska- pelle Berlin, conducted by Daniel Barenboim, capable of sending a chill down one's spine and the libret- to punctuated by the atmospheric sounds of the singer's movements.

10. Built to Spill, "Perfect From Now On" (Warner Brothers). Doug Martsch, the leader of Built to Spill, has said he was annoyed by the praise heaped on this album, so let's not bother him anymore by raving about the beautifully gnarled guitar style he has made his own and the perceptive, quotable aphorisms strewn throughout his lyrics.

Singles

- Daft Punk, "Around the World" (Virgin)
- Magoo and Timbaland, "Up Jumps da Boogie" (Blackground/At- lantic)
- Travis, "All I Want to Do Is Rock" (Epic)
- DJ Shadow/Q-Bert, "Camel Bob- sled Race" (Mo' Wax)
- White Town, "Your Woman" (Vir- gin)

ANN POWERS

1. Elliott Smith, "Either/Or" (Kill Rock Stars). This 28-year-old singer-songwriter's gently insinuating gems chronicle the old bohemian quandaries of self-denial, bashed ideals and irritatingly tenacious hope, in the sardonic, offhandedly popwise vernacular of a generation raised to believe it inherited nothing but leftovers.
2. Radiohead, "OK Computer" (Cap- itol). This beautiful album wrenches opera from the dislocation and sim- mering rage of modern city life. But it's Thom Yorke whose skull-clutch- ing Hamlet establishes a grandly hu- man scale.
3. Erykah Badu, "Baduizm" (Uni- versal). Blending the timing of a jazz chanteuse with the dissonance of a

(Righteous Babe). Officially famous this year, Ms. DiFranco had already released nine successful albums on her own. She has won by remaining true to the essence of her beloved folk — direct communication with the audience she lives for. This live set captures her chutzpah and infec- tious joy.

9. Bob Dylan, "Time Out of Mind" (Columbia). This album gains its crucial luminosity from the master's insistence on being casual when he feels like it. He gives corny rhymes and raunchy grooves equal time with profundities, because in Bob Dylan's America, high and low get an equal shot.

10. Everclear, "So Much for the Af- terglow" (Capitol). With loud, obnox- ious songs that confront the crisis of the family, monogamy's perils and the vise grip of money, from the perspective of a punk trying not to self-destruct for a change, Everclear is perfecting rebel rock for adults.

BEN RATLIFF

1. Abbey Lincoln, "Who Used to Dance" (Verve/Polygram). A weird and lovely elegy, in which Steve Cole- man's alto saxophone, Rodney Ken- drick's piano and Savion Glover's feet are among the supporting roles and Ms. Lincoln's mournful voice the star.

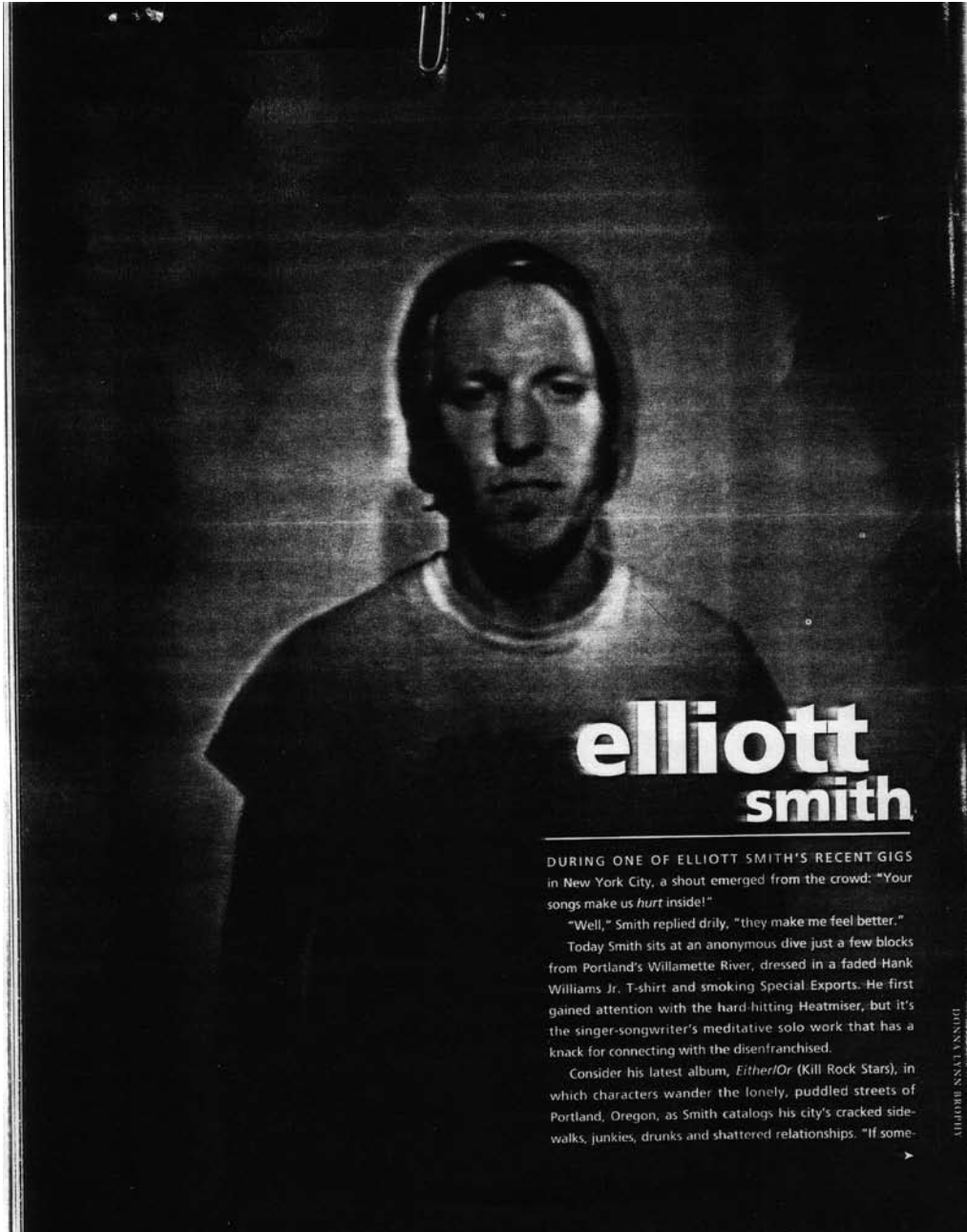
2. Missy (Misdemeanor) Elliott, "Supa Dupa Fly" (East-West/Elek- tra). Not a rapper or a singer per se but a full-fledged being, though it's hard to tell where she ends and the producer Tim (Timbaland) Mosley begins. The tracks leave room for artistic vision: private jokes, tiny subrhythms made by mouth-sounds and gorgeous pockets of open space.

3. Greg Osby, "Further Ado" (Blue Note/Capitol). The alto saxophonist was always a frighteningly good player, and now he's becoming one of the best composers of his generation.

4. Elliott Smith, "Either/Or" (Kill Rock Stars). A set of benumbed, beautiful and obliquely menacing songs, deriving less from the same old punk sources than from George Harrison's recondite contributions to the Beatles's "White Album."

5. Clarence Penn, "Penn's Landing"

OPTION



elliott smith

DURING ONE OF ELLIOTT SMITH'S RECENT GIGS in New York City, a shout emerged from the crowd: "Your songs make us *hurt* inside!"

"Well," Smith replied drily, "they make me feel better."

Today Smith sits at an anonymous dive just a few blocks from Portland's Willamette River, dressed in a faded Hank Williams Jr. T-shirt and smoking Special Exports. He first gained attention with the hard-hitting Heatmiser, but it's the singer-songwriter's meditative solo work that has a knack for connecting with the disenfranchised.

Consider his latest album, *Either/Or* (Kill Rock Stars), in which characters wander the lonely, puddled streets of Portland, Oregon, as Smith catalogs his city's cracked sidewalks, junkies, drunks and shattered relationships. "If some-

elliott smith

one paints their city right, then you can imagine what it's like to be like to be there," says Smith, 27. "I always related to songs about New York, especially when they weren't about all the office buildings in midtown, but about people who seem more like me, who seem more like they're in my world than where they're actually living."

Smith arrived in Portland as a 14-year-old from Dallas to live with his father. He had already begun experimenting with a four-track recorder when he left for Massachusetts to study politics, philosophy and literature at Hampshire College. His return to Portland finally led him to Heatmiser, which released two albums and one EP before breaking apart last year. "The whole experience was draining," Smith says of the band's final days. "It was like having sex with someone you really aren't attracted to."

As a solo performer, Smith remains profoundly moved by his studies of the great Russian writers. Songs on his 1994 debut, *Roman Candle* (Cavity Search), and a self-titled follow-up reveal the kind of parochialism, gloom and intricate detail common to Chekov's short stories. While writing material for the new album, however, Smith expanded his range influences to encompass the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* and *Revolver*, as well as Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, from whom he gleaned the title *Either/Or*.

"This sounds really funny, especially since I have a rep for Serious Downer Guy," Smith says, "but there's one character in that book who argues for a responsible way of deciding what to do and another who argues for deciding what to do based on what you feel like doing — a moral way versus an esthetic way. That just seemed to make perfect sense to me at the time, even though what I was making was an indie record, not a philosophical treatise."

This ideological struggle transformed *Either/Or* into Smith's most accessible and diverse record to date. His emotions expand over a broad spectrum, from the tender, Big Star-inspired ballad "Say Yes" to the full-band pop (with Smith playing all instruments) of "Ballad of Big Nothing." Long-time fans can take

solace in tales of societal disenfranchisement like "Rose Parade," whose down-and-out narrator somberly observes a civic procession and muses, "When they clean the street I'll be the only shit that's left behind."

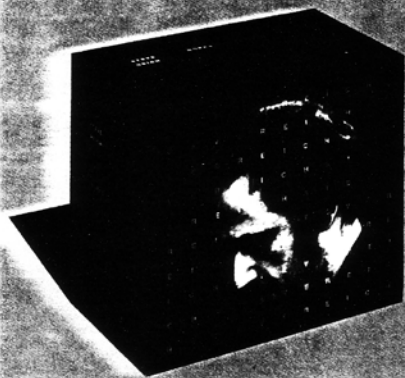
Smith hints that his next record will stray even further from the type of downcast fare that's led some to pigeonhole him as the Nick Drake of the '90s, noting that the buoyant pop of the early Kinks has become his new touchstone.

Until this latest evolution occurs, he offers advice for those who home in on *Either/Or*'s gritty lyrics rather than its tuneful melodies. "To the extent that people say anything at all about my records, they say they're really depressing," he observes. "And yeah, I guess they are in comparison to Bush. But on this last record, a lot of the music sounds happy. If you don't pay attention to the words, you can pretend that it's a happy record." — Richard Martin

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The New York Times

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BECAUSE HE SINGS TENDERLY ABOUT DRUG ADDICTION AND EMOTIONAL BANKRUPTCY, SMITH HAS BEEN CAST AS THE BOY MORE LIKELY TO CRY THAN FIGHT.

ELLIOTT SMITH

"I HAVEN'T WASHED my hair in like four months," confesses a chuckling Elliott Smith, a slight 27-year-old troubadour whose hair is as dark as the midnight sky, and almost as murky. "I just didn't feel like it." Since 1995, with the release of his eponymous second album, he's been the fast-rising anti-star within the iconoclastic cosmos of the Portland, Oregon, label Kill Rock Stars. Smith's third album—an earthy yet ethereal folk-pop gem titled *Either/Or*—has him poised on the brink of something, well, bigger. So, if Smith doesn't want to wash his hair, who cares?

Sitting in a low-riding chair on the patio of an old apartment complex in downtown L.A. and wearing a wrinkled yellow oxford shirt, he looks almost preppy—if it weren't for that hair. He's genial and soft-spoken, if somewhat evasive. "I'm kind of spacey a lot of the time," he says apologetically.

But this quiet singer has been a bright spot in indie rock partly because he's otherworldly. *Elliott Smith* lulled with its austere style and Smith's considerable talents as a poet. Because he sings softly and tenderly about drug addiction and emotional bankruptcy, Smith has been cast as the boy more likely to cry than fight.

"The last record was more angry than sad, but I guess because it was quiet it seemed sadder," he says. "But if it was a loud band playing, then it would seem like an angry record and not a bleak one."

He admits that he was attracted to Elvis Costello when he was a kid, not simply for

his way with a melody and words, but for his pissed-off streak: "He was really mad. I was really mad. It was a perfect match."

Either/Or is a poppy move that veers away from Elliott Smith's stripped-down sound. And when you're "indie," a switch from soft folk to pop, from low-fi sparseness to more layered, elaborate production, from poetic obscurity to practically radio-ready songs might cause a problem with your old fans. "Oh, I'm sure I'll catch hell for that," Smith says. "People can't wait to call you a sellout."

Smith's solo career sprang from his work with his band Heatmiser and his prolific songwriting. With extra time on his hands, he recorded his first album, *Roman Candle*, on a four-track in a friend's basement. He was shocked when it was released to critical kudos by Cavity Search Records in 1994. Then came the darker *Elliott Smith*, with tracks like "Needle in the Hay," a song about a rock-bottom scramble to get high. "I wasn't having a very good time. Lots of people love to talk about their checkered past—I'm not one of them," Smith says.

Now he admits to *maybe* feeling a little more positive. He's moving to Paris to live for a couple of months, and his solo career is flourishing. What would he like to do more of? "Read," he says smiling. "I'm supposed to be a rebel rock 'n' roller who thinks about nothing but rock 'n' roll and wants to die, but I like to read—Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, that Kierkegaard guy. Other people always say how heavy and depressing they are, then you usually find out that they're just good. I mean, Raymond Carver—that's not any more heavy and depressing than a Nirvana record." —SARA SCRIBNER

NEW *from the* NORTHWEST

SEATTLE TIMES
SEATTLE, WA
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THURSDAY
MAR 13 1997

Elliott Smith

"Either/Or" (Kill Rock Stars)

For a while, another album from the Portland quartet Heatmiser looked doubtful, because singer-guitarist Elliott Smith was so busy with his solo career. But in November, after Smith finally hooked back up with his band, the excellent "Mic City Sons" (Caroline) was released.

On "Either/Or," Smith returns to bare, introspective folk-pop. Over gentle and understated but stunningly accomplished acoustic guitar. Smith's breathy voice is reminiscent of Art Garfunkel — ethereal and sweet, yet powerfully resonant. His is a voice that shines, sighs and stutters, all at the same time.

With incisive lyrics centered on life's bleaker side, and despite the cool, pop hooks of songs like "Speed Trials" and "Ballad of Big Nothing," he is absolutely compelling.



MUSIC

SMITH'S NUMBERS ADD UP FOR DIRECTOR GUS VAN SANT

A-'HUNTING' HE WILL GO

IS THAT THE PLACE with the bathroom attendants?" asks Elliott Smith when reminded of a New York City venue he played last fall. "A person was hanging out there giving towels to people for a dollar tip," he adds, clearly sympathetic to the janitorial staff of that swank nightclub. How fitting, then, that Smith's voice and fervent confessional folk songs should dominate the soundtrack to *Good Will Hunting*, the hit film featuring Matt Damon on mop patrol as the unassuming, calculus-loving janitor at elite university MIT.

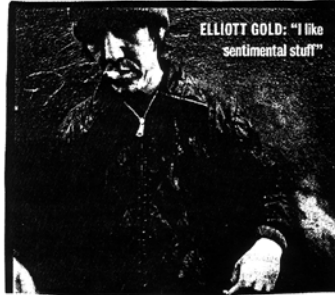
Just as Damon's character is liberated from logging hours mastering the no-wax shine when a professor discovers that he is also a master of logarithms, so was Smith,

28, rescued from obscurity by the movie's director, Gus Van Sant. An Oregon native, Smith toiled on the Portland scene for

years, both as a solo act (with three indie albums under his belt) and as frontman of noise-rock band Heatmiser. Neighbor Van Sant "would come to see some of my shows," says Smith, now a Brooklyn resident. "We were hanging out one time, and he told me what he wanted his next movie

to be. Eventually, someone told me Gus put some of my songs [in] it."

Tacturn in a way typical of those who are Jarringly eloquent in song, Smith downplays his own success. "This was a really good movie," he mutters, "but I don't have much interest in branching out into soundtracks in general." Yet he was impressed with one experience—working with soundtrack savant Danny Elfman, who backed Smith with an 80-piece orchestra. "It was easier than I thought," he enthuses. "I was surrounded by perfectly tuned notes instead of my normally untuned guitar." —Michele Romero



ELLIOTT GOLD: "I like sentimental stuff"

Los Angeles Times
January 26, 1998

Smith's Whispers Resonate With an Intense Energy

POP MUSIC REVIEW

7686
By SARA SCRIBNER
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Sometimes rock works best when it is whispered, and perhaps no one knows this better than Elliott Smith. The Portland, Ore.-based singer-songwriter at the Largo on Saturday was hushed and quiet, but his set still delivered the heft and energy of the best rock.

Still mainly an underground figure, Smith has been gaining momentum with his strong presence on the soundtrack for the film "Good Will Hunting" and his excellent 1997 album "Either/Or."

His resonant buzz was obvious by the appearance in the audience of Billy Corgan, Marilyn Manson and John Doe, as well as the size of the turnout itself. After half the crowd couldn't get in, Smith played an unplanned second set.

Smith, a slight man with dyed black hair and a tattoo, spent most of his show hunched over his acoustic guitar, concentrating on songs that carried the dark folk undertones of Nick Drake and the poetic bite of Kurt Cobain.

Like soft imprints of moods and feelings, songs such as "Alameda," a tune that pierces through the fog of self-pity, and "Angeles," a number on the "Good Will Hunting" soundtrack with a slippery meaning and acerbic edge, carried a wispy mystery and an angry punch.

Local musician Jon Brion lightened the mood on a surprisingly adept, impromptu version of the Left Banke's 1966 hit "Walk Away Renee." Mostly, though, this bare-bones set was simply Smith, a man with no quirky gimmick, no fierce indie pose, just an intense, thoughtful singer armed with truly great songs.

SPIN

73 ELLIOTT SMITH

EITHER/DR (KILL ROCK STARS, 1997)

The moment at last year's Academy Awards when Elliott Smith took his bow with Trisha Yearwood and Celine Dion was an unforgettable bit of underground-meets-mainstream weirdness. A skinny, frail-voiced singer/guitarist with a grunge-casualty vibe, Smith had three very indie albums and the Oscar-nominated "Miss Misery" (from the *Good Will Hunting* soundtrack) to his name, and was up on that stage for exactly one reason: He's a songwriter of astonishing power. His lyrics are heartbreaking and un sentimental, universal and brutally specific, and they're backed



up by a remarkable tune-sense that draws more on the Beatles than Smith's punk roots.

Smith is also his own harshest critic. By the time he recorded *Either/Or* (note that the title's from Kierkegaard), he was tormented by fear of fame and self-doubt. "I recorded 30 songs for the album, and I couldn't pick out any that I liked," he told the Seattle alternative weekly *The Stranger*. "I thought they all sucked." But plenty of people disagreed. Sleater-Kinney drummer Janet Weiss says that when she backed Smith on tour last year, "not a night went by when 'Ballad of Big Nothing' wouldn't move me nearly to tears." She's not the only one. **DOUGLAS WOLK**

See also: Richard Buckner's country-colored heart-popping on *Devotion+Doubt*