

## Elliott Smith, 1969–2003

Despite his success, the fragile and brilliant alt-troubadour never seemed comfortable with his career—or his life.

By Sarah Schmelling

About a year ago, I went to my first and only Elliott Smith concert. Though I had loved his music for years, coveting his albums and even attempting a version of his song “Say Yes” with my limited ability on guitar, I had never seen him play. It was a disappointing show. He was obviously under the influence of something far beyond stage fright, and over and over he forgot lyrics, broke strings, laughed and mumbled incoherently instead of singing. At least three songs in a row just fell apart halfway through. The crowd, most of whom were in their early 20s, thought this was hilarious and egged him on, cheering at his numerous screw-ups. The people I was with just couldn’t watch it, and we left early. It was such a shame, we kept saying. Such a waste of talent.

But his death yesterday, an apparent suicide at 34, that is the shame. That is the great waste.

In a quote that’s been circulating in the many articles in today’s news, Smith told the Los Angeles Times in 1998 that he didn’t think his songs were particularly fragile or revealing. But ever since he was launched out of obscurity through his songs that were famously selected by director Gus Van Sant for the film “Good Will Hunting,” the word “fragile” has always seemed the most fitting description, not only for his music but for his persona. Who can forget him on that huge Academy Award stage in 1997, sandwiched in his ill-fitting white suit with his acoustic guitar between Trisha Yearwood and Celine Dion? Like a stray street musician who had wandered in to crash the party, Smith seemed to struggle to whisper out his nominated song, “Miss Misery.” And though Dion’s ubiquitous theme to “Titanic” won the trophy, Smith’s performance had been perhaps the truest, most earnest example of strong songwriting ever to grace the ceremony’s stage.

The concert I saw in Los Angeles last year was no anomaly. Smith’s battles with alcohol and drugs had never been much of a secret. He talked about alcoholism in interviews, but his lyrics kept the cat out of the bag as well. Even his Oscar-nominated song starts, “I’ll fake it through the day/ With some help from Johnnie Walker Red/ Send the poison down the drain/ To put bad thoughts in my head.”

Smith’s sweet voice, layered lyrics and rich guitar melodies somehow made his listeners—including those in the concert hall where I saw him play last fall—take these problems less seriously than perhaps we should have. How could you not embrace the warmth of lyrics like the start of “Say Yes”: “I’m in love with the world/ Through the eyes of a girl/ Who’s still around the morning after.” Yes, in that same song, he also swears, doubts his feelings and his strength (“I’m damaged bad at best”), but is ultimately optimistic. This, along with the Beatle-esque chord progressions and vivid, emotional storytelling, won us and kept us listening. He was an artist proud of his musical influences, and had a strong ability to weave references to other music into his tales. In “Waltz #2,” he manages to cite the songs “Cathy’s Clown” and “You’re No Good” so subtly, you may not even realize how much you’re learning about both the singer and the people he’s singing about.

I have friends who ran across Smith in various clubs around L.A. They were always amazed at how approachable and friendly he was, but it’s not a stretch to say anyone who cared about his music felt like they knew him, just a little bit. Today, after his brutal, seemingly self-inflicted stabbing death, that seems to be a harder concept to believe. Obviously, he was part of a much deeper struggle than his words could have conveyed.

The fact that he was in the midst of recording another album, and that he was due to perform as early as next month, is all the more frustrating, knowing what might have been. And yes, that's always the way of the beautiful artist's life cut short. But it's still a shame. Such a mighty shame.

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