

## Elliott Smith Dead at 34

by Will Bryant

Elliott Smith has died at age 34, according to an obituary posted late Tuesday on Sweet Adeline, Smith's official website. Rumors had been circulating on the Internet yesterday afternoon about Smith's apparent suicide; by early evening, the overwhelming traffic from well-wishers and fans was crashing Sweet Adeline's discussion board. A handful of posts indicated that representatives from Smith's label, Dreamworks, were attempting to contact Charlie Ramirez, the webmaster for Sweet Adeline.

Within hours, Ramirez posted the following: "As you probably realize, I'm pretty devastated about having to say goodbye to Elliott. . . it's never easy to put into words what someone means to you. . . Elliott was such a lovely man. . . I will always have his love, kindness, intelligence, humbleness, creativeness, greatness and so much more in me forever because that's what he was and i'll always love him for being who he was. . . I'll miss you so much. We will all miss you. See you in heaven, Elliott."

Kill Rock Stars, who released Smith's 1995 self-titled solo album and 1997's *Either/Or*, changed their website's splash page to a pensive photo of Smith this afternoon in silent tribute to the beloved songwriter.

"We are deeply saddened by Elliott Smith's tragic death and send our condolences to his friends and family," read a statement released by Dreamworks and reported by Reuters' wire service. "He was perhaps his generation's most gifted songwriter. His enormous talent could change your life in a whisper. We will miss him."

Wire reports from the Associated Press and Reuters today confirm that Los Angeles county coroner's officials believe the death is a suicide, indicating that the singer's body had sustained a single stab wound to the chest. Smith's body was found by his live-in girlfriend yesterday afternoon, according to the AP report. He was rushed to a local hospital, where he died about an hour later.

Smith had been working on his sixth studio album, *From A Basement On The Hill*, since late 2001. At various points, the self-recorded album was being shopped to indie labels and later, tentatively scheduled as a double-disc offering on Dreamworks' 2003 schedule.

Last November, Smith was reportedly involved in a scuffle with Los Angeles county sheriffs at a Flaming Lips show. Smith retained the services of an attorney in the matter, and had publicly sought witnesses to the incident on Sweet Adeline. Smith reportedly claimed his hand was injured in the fracas, causing the cancellation of at least one planned show this spring. But this wasn't the first time Smith had cancelled a show because of pain in his arm. A February 2002 London concert was postponed after Smith had flown all the way across the Atlantic—claiming he'd slept on the arm during the flight. In May 2002, Smith flubbed more than half of his planned setlist at a Chicago show, again claiming difficulties with an uncooperative hand.

Smith's continued difficulty with live performances and the multiple delays with *Basement*—including claims that Smith disappeared for days and couldn't be found—led many to speculate that the singer might be using heroin or other hard drugs. Smith had written very candidly about past drug use in his songwriting, most notably in the 1995 track "The White Lady Loves You More." In January, Smith even played a benefit show for a free needle exchange aimed at preventing the spread of AIDS and hepatitis among intravenous drug users. And in a recent, extensive interview with *Under The Radar* magazine, Smith admitted having undergone an intravenous treatment meant to clear his body of toxins resulting from drug and alcohol abuse.

Smith's new songs deal frankly and obsessively with drug use and suicide: a quick perusal of the *Basement* song titles alone yields the now-poignant "Memory Lane," "Strung

Out Again,” “Let’s Get Lost,” “Shooting Star,” “A Distorted Reality Is Now A Necessity To Be Free” and “Fond Farewell.” “Give me one reason not to do it,” Smith taunts in “King’s Crossing,” another unreleased *Basement* cut.

I last saw Elliott Smith at the Henry Fonda Theater in Los Angeles nine months ago, a birthday gift from my girlfriend. Out of all the live shows I’ve ever witnessed—and I’ve witnessed a lot—I’ve never left a show feeling more uneasy and concerned for the well-being of the artist performing. Smith’s live sets have always been hit-or-miss; in particular, his live gigs from the past couple of years have often been marred by forgotten lyrics, butterfingers on his own florid guitar parts, and so on. But on this night, Smith performed beautifully—mostly unaccompanied on acoustic guitar, but also with some spare drumming and backup vocals on a few songs.

It was his between-songs banter, fractured and urgent, that really fostered my concern. Smith couldn’t have asked for any better—a sold-out, shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, focused intently on the frail and inarticulate figure center stage. “My heart’s weak because, like, uh. . .” Smith started at one point, trailing off in mid-sentence before launching into the obscure single “No Confidence Man.” As soon as the song began, Smith became erudite, focused, passionate. Between songs, he stuttered and aborted sentences mid-thought, as if utterly unable to communicate without his music.

Smith was scheduled to play the Los Angeles-area incarnation of this year’s All Tomorrow’s Parties festival in November. As previously reported, Smith released the single “Pretty (Ugly Before)” as a limited-edition seven-inch on Suicide Squeeze in August; the single was expected to serve as a teaser for the forthcoming album. In June, Smith was awarded a “Best Rock/Pop Songwriter/Composer” award from the alternative paper *LA Weekly*.

Like me, Smith grew up in Dallas, TX and was physically and emotionally tormented by insensitive schoolmates before moving west. Smith went to high school in Portland, OR and attended college in Massachusetts. In 1992, Smith formed Heatmiser with bandmates Neil Gust, Tony Lash, and later Sam Coomes. Heatmiser released three albums and an EP, but it was Smith’s self-recorded 1994 effort *Roman Candle* that drew attention to Smith’s spare, confessional songwriting and innovative guitar work. After Heatmiser disbanded in 1996, Smith’s solo career took off—eventually landing the singer several songs on the soundtrack to Gus Van Sant’s 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*, including the Oscar-nominated “Miss Misery.”

Smith signed with Dreamworks in 1998, quickly serving up the baroque *XO* and ambitious *Figure 8*, backing both releases up with extensive full-band tours. Last year, Smith enlisted Flaming Lips manager Scott Booker to manage his career and shop *Basement* to indie labels. In the last ten months, Smith had played acoustic sets extensively across the U.S., including stops in Los Angeles, New York, Austin, Philly, and Hoboken. Smith’s last public performance was at the University of Utah’s Redfest festival last month in Salt Lake City.

In addition to his work with Heatmiser and his brief but productive solo career, Smith also lent his songs and musicianship to friends and fellow artists including Mary Lou Lord, Pete Krebs, Lois, The Spinanes, Quasi, No. 2, Guided By Voices, Jon Spencer Blues Explosion, and Goldenboy.

- .: Sweet Adeline: <http://www.sweetadeline.net>
- .: Elliottsmith.com: <http://www.elliottsmith.com>
- .: Dreamworks: <http://www.dreamworksrecords.com>
- .: Suicide Squeeze: <http://www.suicidesqueeze.net>
- .: Kill Rock Stars: <http://www.killrockstars.com>