

OBIT

New York in Reverse

Elliott Smith's idea of heaven was modest, like everything else about the songwriter.

By Alex Abramovich

Elliott Smith, who wrote about love, loss, addiction, and the precise point at which the three intersect, died Tuesday, Oct. 21, of a single, self-inflicted stab-wound to the chest. Like so many rock deaths, his was a long time in the making, but no less sad or shocking for all the warnings that preceded it. "Give me one reason not to do it," Smith sang on his final album, which now remains unfinished.

We'll see more than a few comparisons between Smith and Kurt Cobain in the coming days; they are easy, and, perhaps, inevitable. Like Cobain, Smith sprang from the indie-rock scene of the Pacific Northwest, and despite a similar overabundance of talent, he shared that scene's set of reduced expectations. "I'm a color reporter," Smith sang, "but the city's been bled white." Like Cobain, Smith was a junkie who occasionally played his addiction for laughs—the kind that stuck in his listener's throats: Nirvana called its first album *Bleach*; "You ought to be proud," Smith sang on his second, "that I'm getting good marks."

But unlike Cobain, Smith split away from his first group, Heatmiser, and struck out on his own. "I was always disguised in this loud rock band," he explained. Pushing to the opposite extreme, he released a series of remarkably understated solo records. Initially released on the Olympia, Wash., Kill Rock Stars label, these won him a cult following, a major-label deal and, eventually, an Oscar nomination (for his contribution to the *Good Will Hunting* soundtrack). But Smith's four- and eight-track recordings—whispered vocals dubbed over and against themselves, and set over the fast and florid finger-picking of his acoustic guitar—never lost their sense of intimacy. Even in recent years, when he immersed himself in the Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* and tried to replicate its arrangements in Los Angeles studios, Smith's voice had a way of cutting through the lushness of his string sections.

Still, Smith was at his best when he was least adorned. His words were concrete and lyrical, but not uncomplicated: "Drink yourself into slo-mo," he sang, in a typical turn toward self-erasure. "Made an angel in the snow/ Anything to pass the time/ And keep that song out of your mind." (Smith's heroes always seemed to find themselves a half-step behind happiness, his lovers bent on self-sabotage: "You beat it into me/ That part of you/ But I'm going to split us back in two"). The songs, too, were deceptively simple; Smith preferred minor keys, and cycled through as many as 13 or 14 chord changes in the course of a few minutes; onstage he managed to evoke the pained nostalgia of the records like George Harrison's *Isn't It a Pity*, John Lennon's *Jealous Guy*, the Kinks' *Waterloo Sunset*, and Big Star's *Thirteen*, all of which he covered in countless solo performances. "You gotta get out there and show what it's like to be a person," he told Seattle's *Rocket* in 1997. "That's what I'm gonna do. It might be good or it might be bad, but I'm gonna show what it's like to be a person."

Offstage, however, Smith seemed to shrink from view. He moved to New York to escape the Portland drug scene, began drinking heavily, and provoked bar fights he rarely got the best of. Six years ago, a mutual friend invited me to share their table after a show—the friend and I chatted for nearly an hour, while Smith stared into the distance and said perhaps a dozen words. That same year, I took another friend to see him play to a packed house in Hoboken, N.J. Afterward, the audience wouldn't let him leave. A line of pretty women queued up at the exits. But walking home in Manhattan an hour later we turned a corner and ran into Smith, standing alone in the drizzle, with his head down and his Walkman turned up. He looked unspeakably lonely. "I remember

seeing him stumbling glumly around the East Village every now and then,” that friend e-mailed me this morning.

Smith moved to Los Angeles to detox, but it didn’t stick. He began missing shows, claiming injuries and health problems of one sort or another, but continued playing—his sixth record, *From a Basement on the Hill*, was due to be released this year. He’d turned 34 in August.

Asked once by *New Musical Express* what his idea of heaven was, Smith replied, “George Jones would be singing all the time. It would be like New York in reverse. People would be nice to each other for no reason at all. And it would smell good.” Today, it seems like the least we could wish for him.

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