

Preface

Like many of his fans, I first encountered Elliott Smith when he performed “Miss Misery” at the Academy Awards ceremony on March 13, 1998. I was fourteen years old, and watching the Oscars with my parents had become a family ritual-by-default—not because of any particular interest in film, but rather because it was a rare chance for us all to share opinions on a subject where our spheres of cultural knowledge had some degree of overlap. I had never heard Elliott Smith’s music before, but the sound of his name rang a vague, elusive note of recollection; I had *heard* of this guy before, but I couldn’t place the name. As the camera focused in on a man standing uncomfortably in a white Prada suit, the significance of Smith’s name suddenly returned to me. I turned to my parents and said, “Oh, this is Elliott Smith—now he’s on the

Oscars and he's gonna be really famous, but he used to be this homeless junky who did HEROIN!" My father, whose cynicism was nectar to my junior-high mindset, let out a forced laugh and deadpanned, "you can tell."

I've listened to "Miss Misery" hundreds of times since then, and it's come to be one of my favorite Elliott Smith songs. As pop music goes, it is fairly undeniable; a strong melody, a great structural arc, unobtrusively clever and emotionally evocative lyrics. But the song I now know and love has no resemblance to the song I remember hearing during the Academy Awards. While it took a visit to YouTube for me to remember the visual component of Smith's performance, I have a distinct recollection of the song itself—or, rather, of a musical corollary to Smith's sad sack reputation. I couldn't even say where I had heard about Smith in the first place; likely a newspaper or a brief story on MTV or VH1. But my understanding of "Elliott Smith" not only colored my experience of his song—it effectively *created* a new song; a harsh, self-indulgent, and near-unlistenable ditty that lived in my memory and was almost impossible for me to shake.

It would be easy to write off my initial contact with Smith as a product of its particular time and context, or of my own immaturity. But even as I matured and

Smith's musical vocabulary expanded, I could not seem to get past my own illusory reading of "Miss Misery." As a musically ravenous high school student aware of Smith's reputation as a songwriter, I purchased *XO* in 1999, but never got into the record beyond a passing interest in its first single, "Waltz #2." I saw Smith at the Beacon Theater in 2001, and was taken aback by the professionalism and energy of his performance, but not enough so to spark any further interest in his recorded output. Later that year, I purchased Domino Records' box set of Smith's early work, primarily in an effort to win the affections of a girl whose AIM screen name was a combination of her given name and the letters "ESG" ("Elliott Smith Girl"). For a time, I listened obsessively to a CD by Smith's friends and collaborators Quasi—but I still felt an insurmountable distance between myself and any music that bore the name "Elliott Smith."

It was only when writing my band's second record in late 2005 that I truly began to bridge that distance. As a fledgling songwriter terrified of taking my lyrics too seriously, I had been writing exclusively from some semblance of "personal experience." But I was interested in the idea of using songs to literalize emotional observations; as a chance to say things via fictionalized characters that could never be said in person. In a conversation with a friend and bandmate, who grew

up in Portland and was very familiar with Smith's music, *XO* came up as a record that does just that—an album that is unflinchingly harsh and emotionally direct, to the point of being difficult to listen to at times. For fear of looking stupid, I said “yeah”—we had discussed Smith's music in the past, and I wasn't ready to admit just how limited my interest actually was. But the conversation intrigued me—how could Elliott Smith, the poster boy for wallowing, mopey self-loathing, make a record that is unsparing, incisive, and . . . mean?

With that conversation in mind, I began reevaluating Smith's music, particularly *XO*. The ensuing process was gradual, but revelatory. Lines that had passed by suddenly stood out; characters that once seemed little more than one-dimensional projections of Smith himself were populated by fraught and contradictory emotions. The music itself grew richer and more complex, suddenly bursting with nuance, intelligence, and humor. Of *course* Smith's music fell short and failed to connect as weepy sad bastard music—it isn't.

When I sat down to write this book, I considered entirely omitting my dubious early impressions of Smith. But part of my fascination with Elliott Smith stems from this moment of misrecognition; from how Smith's cultural legacy seems perpetually at odds with the nature of his music. The “story” of Elliott Smith

is that of a man with no agency; a mopey, weepy, druggy singer-songwriter plucked from coffeehouse obscurity to ambivalent semi-stardom by no effort of his own. *XO* is a work of incredible craft, intelligence, wit, and insight. In its lyrical concerns and its musical realization, it suggests that suffering does not create great art; that, instead, it leaves you “deaf and dumb and done.” Far from a tear-stained journal entry, *XO* is a fully realized work of art.

As such, this is not a book that tells the *story* of Elliott Smith, or even a book that tells the *story* of Elliott Smith making *XO*. Countless stories of varying merit and tact have been written that begin “Steven Paul Smith was born in 1969 . . .” and I’m sure countless more will be written. In the particular case of *XO*, any effort to fix the record’s meaning in Smith’s biography seems thoroughly counter to the album’s tone and mission. Telling the “real story” of Elliott Smith often serves only to emphasize his personal troubles, to place them above his craft and—given the sad and unsolved nature of his death—to cast a suspicious and dour pall over an incredible body of work.

Furthermore, telling the “real” story of a record almost invariably involves seeking out the “real” stories behind the songs, the “real” people the songs are about. Such information ostensibly exists regarding *XO*, but, as I will suggest in my analysis of the record,

the songs on *XO* tended to veer *away* from personal details as Smith refined them. Understanding *XO* does not mean understanding Smith's personal pain—it means examining his tireless, impeccable craft.

In the first section of this book, I discuss how *XO* came to be, primarily by tracing the development of its songs. Though Smith was not given to discussing his work, he recorded more or less constantly, and many of the songs on *XO* are culminations of a fascinating sequence of demos and live performances, many of which have been widely circulated among fans. Obviously, any inferences made about the “creative process” are just that, but there are discernible trends in the development of *XO* that speak to the record's unique strengths. Specifically, I am interested in how *XO*'s lyrical content grew bolder, more incisive, and *less* tethered to personal experience as the album's production grew more professional and elaborate.

Smith's lyrical prowess, and his lyrical precision in particular, remain largely obfuscated by his reliance upon simple and unassuming language. And while Smith utilized a conventional and conversational pop song vocabulary, he mobilized common words to unique thematic ends. By drawing attention to his lyrics as meticulous, intentional writing—*not* simple confession—I attempt to shed light on some of the beliefs, ideas, and attitudes that permeate *XO*,

especially those that explicitly contradict Smith's supposed biography.

In the second section of this book, I examine the cultural construct of "Elliott Smith"—how Smith was introduced to us via the media, and how the resultant construct was read against *XO*. Rather than simply dismissing the "Elliott Smith" produced by popular culture, I argue that it is important to analyze how this figure came to be, not only for understanding *XO*'s cultural legacy, but also for understanding how problematic concepts of "authenticity" and biography can color our understanding of music in general. The way we discuss artists matters—it changes and directs the way we hear and understand their work. In examining the myth of "Elliott Smith," I attempt to provoke a wider discussion about agency, narrative, and craft.

Specifically, I seek to explore how Smith's positioning as an "obscure singer-songwriter" and the story of his "sudden ascent" created contradictory demands and expectations that were often articulated and tenuously resolved via Smith's "personal life." Smith often spoke of the difference between personal turmoil and artistic craft, both on *XO* and in countless interviews conducted around the time of the album's release, but this troubling correlation often informed Smith's popular image, even in articles ostensibly refuting it.

I must admit that this book is meant to be something of a corrective; not to “set the record straight” about Elliott Smith’s life, but rather to deemphasize his personal struggles and examine his craft. I can make no claim that any amount of research I could do would give me a window to the “real person” behind Smith’s music. Furthermore, as Smith was well aware, knowing a “real person”—and that person’s trials, tribulations, and failings—doesn’t necessarily help you to understand that person’s art. In fact, as my initial experience with Elliott Smith suggests, the illusion of such an understanding can lead to very limited and unsympathetic readings. In a 1999 interview with *Spin Magazine*, Smith said, “I don’t like when people talk about all the bad things that have happened to them as if that makes them unique. Because I don’t think I’ve had a harder time than other people.” As a songwriter, Smith needs no excuses and no apologies. It is no coincidence that *XO* contains neither.