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## On the Road Again

### Live Reviews:

#### Elliott Smith

April 1, 1999

The Opera House, Toronto, ON

An all-ages crowd packed Toronto's Opera House this past April Fool's Day to see Portland, Oregon's Elliott Smith. After a pretty good set by openers Jr. High, Smith and his band ambled onstage and launched into "Ballad of Big Nothing" from 1997's *Either/Or*. Sporting a vintage black Rolling Stones U.S. tour lips-and-tongue t-shirt and his perennial puppy-in-the-rain hair, Smith spent the evening entirely on electric guitar, supported by a bass player and drummer. Working with such a bare-bones combo meant some of the subtleties and frills of his studio material had to be abandoned.

The arrangements are a big part of what I love about his work, especially the wonderful songs on his most recent album, the critically-acclaimed *X/O*. And although I found I missed the record's clunky piano counterpoint and the rich backing vocals (the bass player did chime in with some effective harmonies), Smith and band successfully compensated by cranking up both the energy and intensity level. And, most importantly, the songs were there.

On his recordings, it sometimes seems like Smith steps out of an alleyway, tugs gently at your sleeve and then softly whispers his finely spun intimacies in your ear. And you can do nothing but stop and listen. In live performance, it's a bit of a different proposition. The voice is more insistent; the tug more like a grab. You WILL listen.

Not to imply that Smith's songs are all gentle lamentations. He has enough spiteful emotional broadsides to keep things interesting, and these songs — such as "Cupid's Trick", "Bottle Up and Explode" and "Independence Day" — provided a lot of the set's energy. Smith's guitar skills also proved to be the glue that held some of the sparser arrangements together, driving the music forward.

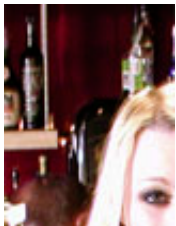
"Waltz #2" and "Baby Britain" were real highlights, as was the very cool solo rendition of Neil Young's "Harvest Moon" that popped up in one of the well-deserved encores. It was fully appreciated by the attentive crowd (it was the night after the full moon, after all).

But while the music itself was fabulous, it was a big disappointment when it ended only an hour after it had begun. Was that supposed to be some kind of April Fool's joke? C'mon, Elliott, give us a little more than that! That gripe aside, the night before Good Friday proved to be not so damn bad itself.

— review by Jim Kelly



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