

# ELLIOTT SMITH

(STEVEN PAUL SMITH)

SELF-INFLICTED STAB WOUNDS

Born: August 6, 1969

Died: October 21, 2003



Smith's earliest solo musical offerings— *Roman Candle* (1994) and *Elliott Smith* (1995)—were full of tales of the losers on life's margins, showcasing his gift for an impressionistic lyric and a haunting tune. He was concurrently a member of Portland-based punk troupe Heatmiser, but after their 1996 split, Smith poured his energies into his solo work; his next album, the Kierkegaard-inspired *Either/Or* (1997), may have been his best, a clutch of fragile but captivatingly melodic songs.

So far, so low key. After fellow Portlander Gus Van Sant used some of Smith's songs in his 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*, however, the indie singer-songwriter's profile expanded exponentially. "Elliott's music is literally the most important thing in *Good Will Hunting*," actress Minnie Driver noted later. "Elliott is like a character you can't see." Featured in Van Sant's film was the track "Miss Misery," which was nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Song. In atypical white jacket, Smith performed the track at the Academy Awards in 1998 (but the award went to Celine Dion.)

Smith broadened this sound with a full band for *XO* (1998) and *Figure 8* (2000). The latter, which was recorded at the Abbey Road studios in north London, smacked distinctly of The Beatles' *White Album*. (His interest in the Fab Four ran deep; for the *American Beauty* soundtrack, he recorded a cover of their vocal *pièce de résistance* "Because," multitracking the complex harmonies himself.) The quality of his work was never in question, but commercial success continued to elude the troubled troubadour.

And he was troubled. Before the world had heard of him, Smith had undergone psychiatric treatment, and an uneasy melancholy pervaded much of his work; he'd developed a serious heroin habit (note the lyrics to "Bled White" from *XO*)—to which he added prescription pills and, later, crack. He argued with his record label, Dreamworks; the release date of his next album was postponed; and he was thrown in jail after a fight at a gig in L.A. Still, toward the end of 2003, he had nearly finished that record (the somber *From A Basement On The Hill*, released in 2004) and hopes were high that this one might take him over the top.

Smith had apparently become increasingly depressed in the final few months of his life, squabbling with his girlfriend, singer Jennifer Chiba; moreover, his perfectionism created a fractious relationship between Smith and her band, whom he was producing. Weary of Smith's suicide threats, Chiba had locked herself in the bathroom of their Los Angeles home on October 21, 2003, but flew out again when she heard a skin-crawling scream, to find the singer with a steak knife stuck in his chest.

An hour later, Smith was dead. Two chest wounds were apparently self-inflicted, but an air of uncertainty still pervades the case, not least because so few suicides choose to end it all by stabbing themselves through the heart. (In December 2003, an autopsy report floated the idea of homicide.) A hard core of Smith fans clearly had their suspicions, and directed them at Chiba in the form of accusations and threats.

Oh, and the name of Chiba's band? Happy Ending.

**RIGHT** The Smith performing onstage in 1998.

