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**At home and away from the limelight, Elliott Smith speaks of *Figure 8*, heartbreak and love.**

BY [DAN MAREK](#)  
STUDENT.COM CORRESPONDENT

Elliott Smith has the ability to create songs so delicate and brittle they could almost crumble apart before you. And his keen attention to detail comes out in sculpted songwriting and lavish recordings spanning five solo albums, which have peaked with his latest work, *Figure 8*.

But for this introspective songwriter, fame is almost a formidable sight. It may even seem like he would rather be at home writing his music instead of bathing in the limelight he has finally received.

"A lot of days I don't really go out at all, because the places that I liked to go are all full of people," Smith says, resting in his Los Angeles condo after a recent European tour. "I think that will pass... I just need to be kind of quiet for awhile. I like that."

Smith's devoted fans would be the first to point out how Smith's emotionally packed songs of heartbreak and loneliness tug at anyone's sensitive side. With songs that paint a sensation of real life and its tribulations, Smith admits his lyrics are fused from his past relationships.

"It's usually a combination of things that actually have to do with me or people I've known," Smith says. "Just imagination and maybe combining several people into one character. They're sort of like daydreams. You're talking to one person and they turn into another person, then a third person. Emotionally they're a good reflection of my life, but not factually."

Smith started honing his skills in early 1991, following the formation and subsequent breakup of his first band, Heatmiser. Two years later, Smith began recording his solo debut, a record called *Roman Candle* that was released on Cavity Search Records. Soon after, he began touring acoustically

while working on material for his untitled follow-up, which would eventually become his self-titled debut for the Washington-based Kill Rock Stars label. Much to his dismay, critics heard Smith's show and dubbed him a "depressing acoustic player" — a title that still haunts him today.

"I'll never get rid of that," Smith says. "Because I made a couple acoustic albums, I must be a sad songwriter. It's just an automatic reaction to knowing that someone plays the acoustic guitar." "It comes up all the time," he continues, "but I don't really care anymore. I know that some of my songs are kinda sad, but if it wasn't like that the happy moments wouldn't count too much. So if other people see them as strictly depressing, what can I do about it? Nothing."

Smith's rise to fame began with his 1997 release, *Either/Or*. The producers of "Good Will Hunting" liked the album so much they asked Smith to contribute four songs and record a new track titled "Miss Misery" for the soundtrack. A year later, "Miss Misery" was nominated for Best Original Song Oscar, giving Smith the opportunity to perform on the Academy Awards. That same year, Smith signed onto Dreamworks Records and began recording his major label debut, *XO*.

"It's not the same, but for the most part the label leaves me alone. They would show up once a week maybe and listen to things that had been done — they seemed happy and went away. They might make a suggestion here and there, but I don't have to do it. They pretty much stay out of my way. There are things that I miss about recording myself, but I'll definitely do that again sometime. Maybe next time, maybe not," he says.

*XO* gained Smith public attention more than any previous album with regular air-play on college campuses, reviews in *Rolling Stone*, *Alternative Press* and got him named *Spin* magazine's #2 Artist of the Year (second only to Lauryn Hill).

But after the original whirlwind of success died down, Smith disappeared to his favorite place once again — the studio. The end result is *Figure 8*, Smith's most mature and beautiful work to date. From the clanky saloon-style piano that outlines the melody of "In the Lost and Found" to the hauntingly simple acoustical scratches on "Everything Reminds Me of Her", it's evident that Smith has found a niche in his self-imposed exile. But don't think Smith has closed himself up.

"I'd like to be in love with somebody," he even says. "Pretty much the same things that everybody else wants — to be totally alive and not be deadened down by the way things are... I don't know if I really have any other real goals."

*Dan Marek interviews rock stars for Student.Com.*

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