

Bright Eyes

Sometimes it feels like you hear a Bright Eyes song with your whole body. From Conor Oberst's early recordings in an Omaha basement in 1995 all the way up to 2020, Bright Eyes' music tries to unravel the impossible tangles of dissent: personal and political, external and internal. It's a study of the beauty in unsteadiness in all its forms – in a voice, beliefs, love, identity, and what fills up the spaces in-between. And in so many ways, it's just about searching for a way through.

The year 2020 is full of significant anniversaries for Bright Eyes. *Fevers and Mirrors* was released 20 years ago this May, while *Digital Ash in a Digital Urn* and *I'm Wide Awake It's Morning* both turned 15 in January. The latter, a singer-songwriter tour-de-force released amidst the Bush presidency and Iraq war, wades through incisive anti-war rhetoric and micro, intimate calamities. On the title track and throughout the record, Oberst sings about body counts in the newspaper, televised wars, the bottomless pit of American greed, struggling to understand the world alongside one's own turmoil. In its own way, *I'm Wide Awake It's Morning* carved out its place in the canon of great anti-war albums by being both present and prophetic, its urgency enduring 15 years later.

In 2011 the release of *The People's Key*, Bright Eyes' ninth and most recent album, ushered in an unofficial hiatus for the beloved project. In the time since, the work of the band's core members – Oberst, multi-instrumentalist Mike Mogis, and multi-instrumentalist Nathaniel Walcott – has remained omnipresent, through both the members' original work and collaboration.

In recent years, Mogis produced records for beloved folk acts First Aid Kit and Joseph, among others, as well as mixed the fine-spun ennui of Phoebe Bridgers' breakthrough 2017 debut, *Stranger in the Alps*. Mogis and bandmate Walcott also teamed up to write the original scores for *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Stuck in Love*, and *Lovely Still*, and Walcott worked as a solo composer scoring number of independent feature-length films. Walcott spent extensive time on collaboration; in addition to his arrangement work for Mavis Staples, First Aid Kit, and M. Ward, he contributed studio work to artists ranging from U2 to jazz guitarist Jeff Parker, and also traveled the world as a touring member of the Red Hot Chili Peppers.

Oberst, who's nearly 30 years into a prolific musical career, spent the last decade in similarly productive fashion. Across three years he released a string of solo albums: *Salutations* (2017), *Ruminations* (2016), and *Upside Down Mountain* (2014), as well as guested on records by First Aid Kit, Phoebe Bridgers, and Alt-J. His punk band, Desaparecidos, emerged from a 13-year hiatus in 2015 with the thunderous sophomore LP, *Payola*, a white-knuckled disarray of hollered political fury. And at the top of 2019, Oberst and Bridgers debuted their new band, Better Oblivion Community Center, digitally dropping the critically-lauded eponymous debut LP alongside a surprise performance on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*.

The heart at Bright Eyes' songwriting still looms culturally, in films and TV shows and through re-imaginings by other artists. Mac Miller covered both "Lua" and "First Day of My Life"; Lorde's version of the penultimate *The People's Key* track, the funereal-waltz "Ladder Song," was a focal point of *The Hunger Games*' soundtrack; The Killers covered "Four Winds" for their *Spaceman* EP; and Lil Peep's "Worlds Away" samples "Something Vague" while Young Thug's "Me Or Us" samples "First Day of My Life."

Bright Eyes' expansive catalog has traversed genre, sound, and countless players; unpolished demos or fuzzy folk, electrified rock or country twang. The sharp songwriting and musicianship is all anchored in Bright Eyes' singular ability to flip deep intimacy into something universal. For so many, for so long, listening to Bright Eyes has been like hearing yourself in someone else's song – a moment of understanding or illumination, knowing you're on the same team looking for a way to move through of all this shit.

And while 2020 is a year of milestones for the band, it's also the year Bright Eyes returns, newly signed to indie label Dead Oceans. Amidst the current overwhelming uncertainty and upheaval of global and personal worlds, Oberst, Mogis, and Walcott reunited under the moniker as both an escape from, and a confrontation of, trying times. Getting the band back together felt right, and necessary, and the friendship at the core of the band has been a longtime pillar of Bright Eyes' output. For Bright Eyes, this long-awaited re-emergence feels like coming home.