

Elbow Biography

"It's not very fashionable to give a shit about anything," reckons Guy Garvey. Elbow, in contrast, are passion personified. From the dark, breathless romance of their debut single, 'New Born' to Garvey's eyes-shut, stock-still intensity on-stage, Elbow's tales of life, love and politics will stir your soul. Make you care. Inspire devotion. "Both lyrically and musically it has to be sincere," explains Garvey, cigarette crumbling between his fingers. "How many people are privileged enough to be able to scream their views from a stage?"

Mark Potter (guitar), Richard Jupp (drums), Craig Potter (organ), Pete Turner (bass) and Guy Garvey (vocals) met, ten years ago, at sixth-form college in Bury, north Manchester. Outsiders in a run-down, narrow-minded town, they bonded over U2, Jimi Hendrix, Bob Dylan and Red Hot Chili Peppers. And formed a band, Soft. For a while they played, what Pete calls, "chilled funk", and were, it's generally agreed, "shit". Relocating to Manchester itself - most of the band getting work at local underground venue The Roadhouse - they changed their name to Elbow ("the most sensuous word in the world," according to a nurse in Dennis Potter's television-series, 'The Singing Detective') and began to evolve a new sound, wherein driving organ, star-kissed guitars, Guy's fallen-angel vocals and tough grooves were merged into (sometimes eight-minute long!) songs. Songs that owe as much to 60's folk and prog-rockers King Crimson - "We've described ourselves as prog-rock with no solos," offers Guy, unapologetically - as they do the quicksilver melodic rock of The Stone Roses, or funk influences like Sly Stone.

Soon people were talking about Elbow as The Next Big Thing. However, their luck was out. Signed to Island Records in 1998, they disappeared to rural France to record. "It was," chuckles Guy, "strangely like 'Big Brother'. It ended with the biggest row we've ever had. It lasted 16 hours or something stupid." Barely a year later, Island dropped them. A lifeline deal with EMI collapsed weeks later.

Thank god then, for Manchester indie-label UglyMan. Over the last twelve months they've released two Elbow EPs, 'New Born' and 'Any Day Now', to almost universal acclaim, and revitalized Elbow's career culminating in a new deal with V2.

Musically the EPs could be compared to the cerebral, experimental rock of Talk and Radiohead, whilst lyrically they're in a more poetic slipstream to the kitchen-sink romanticism of fellow Mancunian Morrissey. 'Newborn' - about growing old and getting ill with the one you love - is typical: full of romantic yearning yet anchored in the gritty realities of life; corpses and senile dementia. Here is a band who can not only scrape the skies musically, but who were willing to seek out the extraordinary in everyday situations. Forget Oasis' rock 'n' roll sloganeering or Thom Yorke's esoteric abstraction, Elbow turn your life, people in your town, into vivid dramas. "We wanted the EPs to be a pair," says Guy. "One ['Newborn'] is the love and loss, the personal stuff, which obviously stems from me. And we wanted the next EP ['Any Day Now'] to be more of the shared experiences which is small-town frustrations, getting out of Bury for us. It's an introduction to us, where we're from and all that's important."

Understandably, 'Asleep In The Back', Elbow's debut album, is one of the most hotly-anticipated British rock records of 2001. A peerless fusion of the personal and political, it is both a widescreen insight to life in northern England and poignantly introspective. Guy is determined to maintain a lyrical honesty, and many songs are torn, still bloody, from his personal life. "'Newborn' is like the most in love I've ever been," he says, "and 'Bitten By The Tail fly', is about exactly what went wrong, going after the cheap thrills..."

Chasing girls?

"Chasing girls, totally. I'm not a harsh moralist, but I don't think I can be wildly romantic in a song like 'Powder Blue', without offering a balance, the nasty side."

There have been times, in the past, when Guy admits he has reveled in his own drunken, self-destructive behavior, pushed himself into situations to fuel his writing. "I've gone too far in the past. I got to the point,

where I didn't know whether I was fucking up my life deliberately so I had something to write about, or the other way around."

Either way, such introspective angst never becomes self-indulgent, balanced, as it is, by Elbow's keen eye on the wider world. 'Powder Blue' is a typically complex observational lyric, based on a fucked-up, druggie couple Guy once saw in a Manchester bar. Both a wondering tale of one couple's touching co-dependency and a grubby, unsettling look at drug-casualties, Elbow's songs are all set against a very real backdrop - Manchester, with all its poverty, violence and drug-culture.

"You can't help but love the city, but, like any relationship, it's tinged with sadness," says Guy. "Everywhere you've got reminders of a proud industrial city littered with men not working, and shut-down mills. The generation that went before us were very badly disappointed at the hands of Margaret Thatcher." Recent b-side 'Kisses' [which features a ranting, angry socialist Guy met, and recorded secretly, on the bus] and album track 'Little Beast' [a look at how macho cultures flourish] are political broadsides, refracted through touching, human situations.

The upshot? A band who have things to say. A band who draw you into their own dirty, magical world, a world of inky black despair and heart-bursting idealism. But, above all, a world that's alive with honestly rendered emotions and truths. That is, music and life at its richest. "I would like people to pick up on some of the more romantic notions of what we do," says Guy. "But the truth of the matter was that I wasn't happy for a long time."

Elbow, however, cannot simply be tagged miserablists. "There are three songs about babies on the album," smiles Guy. "One that's a real positive, 'don't worry, it's fine', song."

Here are the young men then, a weight on their shoulders, but love in their hearts.