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Defying death through song: Bright Eyes frontman's lyrics tackle tough subject matter

By ANNA PAIGE For The Gazette

Since age 13, Omaha resident Conor Oberst has been recording on a label he helped build, Saddle Creek, with his band, Bright Eyes.

His life is an open book of lyrics for every critic, lover and fan to pore over. His early releases were full of painful childhood memories, the drowning of his baby brother, the loss of love and innocence, the drugs, drinking, and addiction.

In the "No Lies, Just Love" from 2001's "Oh Holy Fools," Oberst describes his suicide attempt and his promise, with the birth of his brother's firstborn, that he would stick around, the entire world as a beneficiary.

Now 24 and living in New York, Oberst has released two albums simultaneously, "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" and "I'm Wide Awake It's Morning."

With the remarkable ability being able to make death interesting and inviting, yet still terrifying, Oberst continues to explore this theme in "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn."

"To the deepest part of the human heart the fear of death expands," Oberst sings in "Arc of Time (Time Code)," keeping it upbeat with the promise of an afterlife.

Vividly, in the closing song "Easy/Lucky/Free," he paints images of being buried with his friends, "We'll lay in bags as dead as leaves/ All together for eternity."

Oberst has always been refreshingly honest with people through his music, exposing the dark secrets many would choose to forget. He makes these secrets the apex of his music, rejoicing in the life and death of everything.

As in previous recordings, his hesitant, timid, and wavering voice touches the listener's nerves in an intimate chord of chaos, and his music has evolved to carry such a unique characteristic perfectly. In turn, the lyrics contain less self doubt and loathing than in previous recordings.

"Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" departs from the folk he established in 2002 with "Lifted or the Story is

in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground."

With "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," he returns to his folk singer past, with guest vocals from Emmylou Harris and Jim James of My Morning Jacket.

This album opens with "At the Bottom of Everything" an eerie story of a plane crash, strangers turning to each other in the final plummet as Oberst narrates, "We're going to a party it's your birthday party. Happy birthday darling," as the plane plunges into the ocean.

The album, which reads like a book, tells the story of a lonely Oberst, dealing yet again with the loss of love, twisting words into notes until the blur of narration and music becomes one cohesive mess.

Oberst and Harris sound like they were born to play together, creating a longing for something simple and pure. This album is a warm southern day, country meshing with indy in a misleading way, an old and new soul meeting for the first time.

Oberst is a great poet storyteller, in a generation lost in overproduced, over commercialized and overplayed music. Instead of departing from his roots and his label, he reinvents himself, providing a soundtrack to his life, giving us an intimate picture of exactly what it is to be Conor Oberst.

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