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Bright Eyes' bright light illuminates one fanatic

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On Music

Some obsessions are healthy. Take mine, for instance.

Back when people were still making mixed tapes on actual tapes, a friend introduced me to indie rock band Bright Eyes with "Sunrise, Sunset," an adaptation of the song from "Fiddler on The Roof."

And then the "Fever" played. Something in frontman Conor Oberst's voice struck an intimate chord in me. I was an instant junkie, purchasing the band's 2000 release, "Fevers and Mirrors."

Oberst's gritty honesty reached out and grabbed my pounding heart, screamed into my ears and related to me in a way no artist had since The Dead Kennedys provided inspiration for my teenage rebellion.

The songs on "Fevers and Mirrors" collectively represent a desperate loneliness, longing and lingering delusion. Indulgent and full of self-loathing, the album is riddled with sputtered words and warbling vocals, Oberst's breath drawn long into the microphone, his life a book for anyone to read if they'd only open the cover.

Touring in support of their latest album "Cassadaga," Bright Eyes will be in Billings Saturday, performing at the Shrine Auditorium.

Rise to fame

"Fevers and Mirrors" stayed in my CD player for months. I began collecting Bright Eyes' earlier works, starting with the first album, 1998's "A Collection of Songs Written and Recorded 1995-1997."

The album features 20 songs recorded on a four-track in Oberst's parents' basement, introducing me to the less-produced version of the band.

The first full album was followed by "Letting off the Happiness" several months later, setting up the dark and depressive feeling that "Fevers and Mirrors" would elaborate on.

The earlier releases were criticized for the distressed vocal stylings of Oberst, who at times was compared to a babbling child.

"Fevers and Mirrors," released in 2000, remained relatively undiscovered but was able to move Oberst from a basement babler to a substantial musician.

The sound and production quality established a musical trademark that would follow Oberst through his future endeavors, yet "Fevers and Mirrors" would be the last of the old Bright Eyes.

Two years later Bright Eyes released "Lifted or the Story is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground," propelling the band to a national consciousness. From The New York Times to the Los Angeles Times, Bright Eyes was hailed as a significant new artist.

The musical focus shifted from the stripped-down acoustics paired with hesitant and wavering vocals to a folk sound inspired by the likes of Neil Young, Leonard Cohen and Emmylou Harris (who sings with Oberst on 2005's "I'm Wide Awake It's Morning").

The result is a warming of Bright Eyes' sound; a blend of upbeat Southern twang, alt-country and folk revival.

Bright Eyes went on to simultaneously release "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" and "I'm Wide Awake It's Morning" in 2005, a collection of live recordings later that same year, a rarities collection in 2006 and 2007's "Cassadaga," named after a spiritualist Florida town Oberst visited while recording the album.

Live performances

Oberst changes lyrics slightly in live performances, lending each song an original feeling. The instruments flutter on certain notes, making the music much more alive. The crowd shouts excitedly when Oberst begins a familiar song.

I've been lucky enough to catch the band live on each tour, starting with the tour to support "Fevers and Mirrors." Oberst performed with Maria Taylor and Orenda Fink, tour mates and members of opening act Azure Ray. They sipped red wine as Oberst gently strummed his guitar while Taylor and Fink shifted between piano, bass and trumpet.

He beefed up the musical staff during the "Lifted or the Story is in the Soil, Keep Your Ear to the Ground" tour, which included timpani rollers, cello players, violinists, a trumpeter and tambourine men.

During the 2005 tour, Bright Eyes passed through Montana, playing Missoula in November. He performed mostly new music from "I'm Wide Awake It's Morning" and "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn," though he delved a few older songs, such as "The Calendar Hung Itself," off "Fevers and Mirrors."

Oberst has been playing two new songs on tour, "Man Named Truth" and "Roosevelt Room" and a cover of Tom Petty's "Walls."

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