



Story available at <http://billingsgazette.net/articles/2008/07/25/entertainment/enjoy/24-bright.txt>

Published on Friday, July 25, 2008.

Last modified on 7/25/2008 at 10:58 am

Bright Eyes singer returns to Billings with new band

By ANNA PAIGE
Of The Gazette Staff

After 15 years of making music, the frontman for the indie-rock band Bright Eyes decided to return to the basics.

Conor Oberst, best known as the creative force behind the Omaha-based band, stepped out of the Bright Eyes spotlight to take a stripped-down journey - seeking the privacy of a foreign country to create laid-back music in an exotic setting.

Oberst is taking the tunes he created on the road - making the first stop on his North American tour right here in Billings - less than a year since Bright Eyes played Billings in support of their newest album, "Cassadaga."

Oberst will be backed by The Mystic Valley Band, made up of five longtime Oberst collaborators and friends.

As the story goes, that group of musicians performed two sold-out shows together in December at the 400 Bar in Minneapolis. The band performed nearly a dozen new songs and a few Bright Eyes favorites, fueling rumors of an upcoming Oberst solo album.

Then they headed to Tepoztlan, Morelos, Mexico, in January to make a recording. A temporary studio was created in the mountain villa Valle Mistico - known by some for its Aztec magic and extraterrestrial sightings.

They didn't see any UFOs, according to Oberst in an interview in the August edition of Paste Magazine, but were able to record an album without interruption.

"It was very, very peaceful," he said.

The band trucked in recording equipment on the back of a rickety pickup, Oberst told Paste. "And you couldn't just run and get something if you needed it, whether that's a person or a piece of equipment," he said.

Speculation abounds about the absence of longtime Bright Eyes member Mike Mogis, but Oberst simply said he felt uncomfortable releasing under the Bright Eyes' designation without him.

The self-titled album "Conor Oberst" will be released Aug. 5 under the Conor Oberst and the Mystic Valley Band moniker on Merge Records. The album was produced by Oberst and Andy LeMaster (Now It's Overhead).

A solo endeavor

A man of great consequence in music, Oberst's lyrics read like a modern epic: poems of love, war and empire. His prolific songwriting has earned him plenty of praise from the music media. Genius tags and comparisons to Bob Dylan have followed Oberst for the latter part of his career, which began at the age of 13. Most recently, Oberst, at 28, was named best songwriter in Rolling Stone's Best of Rock 2008.

"Cassadaga," Bright Eyes' sixth album, was released in April 2007. The album, which took most of 2006 to record in studios from Los Angeles to New York, offered more soul-searching songs and less politically inspired ballads.

"Conor Oberst" follows this soul search, picking up where "Cassadaga" left off with more of a minimalist approach, recorded primarily on a tape machine. The musical combination achieves an informal sound, like friends sitting around a campfire jamming together.

The album opens subtly with "Cape Canaveral," a recapitulation of his journey.

"I felt your poltergeist love like Savannah heat / while the waterfall was pouring crazy symbols of my destiny."

The album is full of such profound, almost mythic import.

As though he shed his ostensible cover for a truer cloak, the songs are a mindful remembering of things that have come to pass in Oberst's life.

He watches friends age backward, promises to atone, reflects on living in New York and closes with the detoxifying song "Milk Thistle."

"Milk thistle, milk thistle / Let me down slow / Just help me go slow / I've been hurrying on / I was poised for greatness / I was down and out / I keep death at my heels / Like a basset hound."

Copyright © The Billings Gazette, a division of [Lee Enterprises](#).