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By Frank DiGiacomo

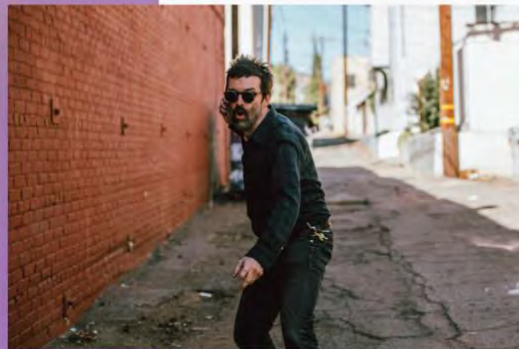
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ROCK

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Gus Black  
EELS

Dark times like these call for a new EELS album -- and that call has been answered. On Oct. 30, Mark Oliver Everett ("E" to friends and fans) will release *Earth to Dora*, his band's 13th album. Like so much of his work, it's a song cycle that finds hope and love amid despair and desperation.

"I'm often labeled as, oh, the guy who writes depressing songs," says E, adding: "You're not really paying attention if that's all you're getting out of it."

Finding hope in hopeless times is a well-trod path in music, but E found his muse the hard way, which has made him a trustworthy guide through dark nights of the soul. His 1998 masterpiece *Electro-Shock Blues* was an unflinching look at the back-to-back deaths of his sister, by suicide, and his mother, from cancer, which left him the only remaining member of his family. (Years earlier, E found the body of his father, who had succumbed to heart failure.)

Heartbreak and loneliness are palpable on *Electro-Shock Blues*, but so is the resolve to put despair in the rear-view mirror. As E sings on the album's final song, "P.S. You Rock My World," "I was thinkin' 'bout how everyone is dying/ And maybe it's time to live." It's also the theme of his poignant and very funny memoir, *Things the Grandchildren Should Know*.

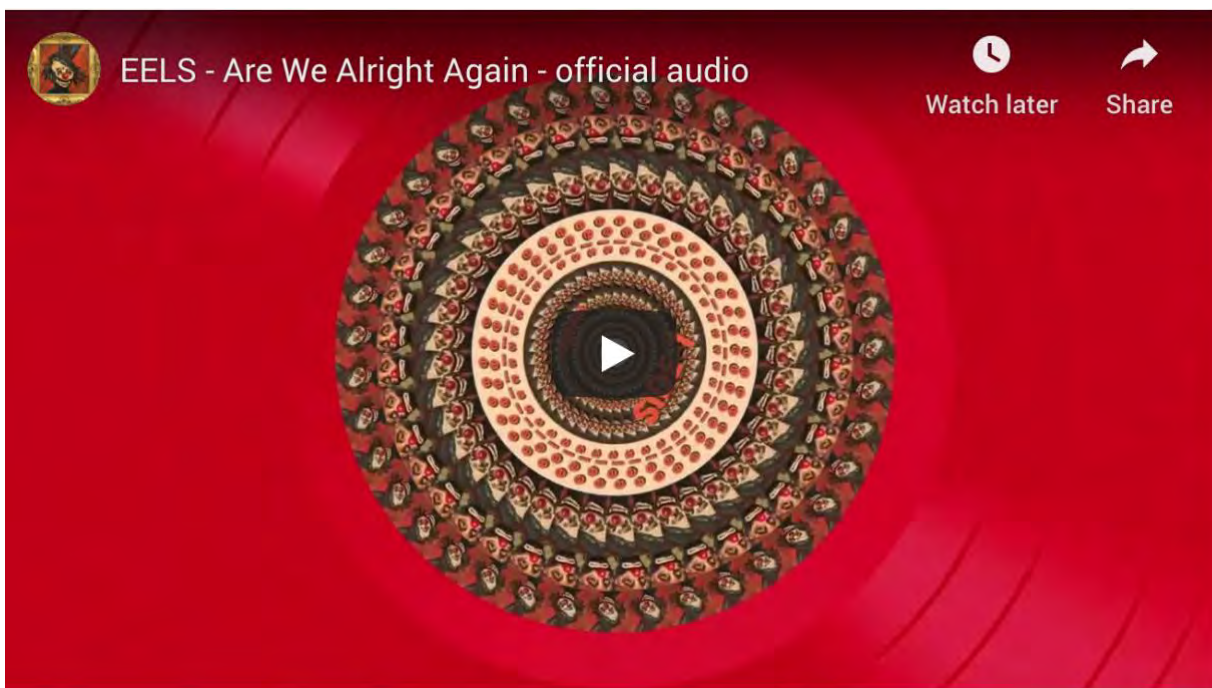
Earth to Dora, most of which was recorded before the pandemic, takes on the dark places that relationships can go -- something E also learned the hard way during a short-lived marriage and painful divorce a few years back. (Silver lining: he is now the father of a three-year-old son, and no longer the sole member of his family.)

The new album's tracklist functions as a loose story arc that could be described in these pandemic times as a v-shaped recovery. "Anything For Boo," which references playing "Tay" Swift's "Lover" on repeat, and "Are We Alright Again" -- which was recorded in the early days of the pandemic and which E has described as "a quarantine daydream I desperately needed to have" -- descend into "Dark and Dramatic," "Are You F--king Your Ex" and the despondent "I Got Hurt."

But the sun rises again on "OK" (a more philosophical response to the previous song), then shines on "Baby Let's Make It Real" and the final track, "Waking Up." That last song concludes with a verse that, intentional or not, sums up love in the time of COVID and Donald Trump: "Nothing new but everything/ Every day is brave/ Anything can happen now/ Nothing's ever safe/ So why don't you just take my hand/And take a chance on love."

Despite the gritty subject matter, Earth to Dora falls on the soothing end of EELS' sonic spectrum. E loves a drum-driven song -- it's the first instrument he learned to play -- and, working with longtime collaborators The Chet, Kool G Murder and P-Boo, he fleshes out that rhythmic skeleton with familiar keyboards, synthesized strings and lush but low-key guitar.

What the album doesn't contain, however, are any songs about the president or political unrest in America. E explains the reasoning behind this in a phone conversation with Billboard, which also touches on how much of Earth to Dora is autobiographical, his take on Taylor Swift and who inspired "Are You F--king Your Ex."



**The last time you and I talked, you had become a father and gone through a divorce. What's life been like since then?**

Totally normal. Like everybody else, I'm just trying to get through the weirdest year in recent history.

**Your last album, *The Deconstruction*, came out in April 2018, a little more than a year into the Trump administration, and you said then that the album was almost entirely apolitical. You can say the same about *Earth to Dora*. Why do you steer clear of politics when so many people are writing protest songs?**

I don't think it's something I would be very good at, and with my audience, I would be preaching to the choir. For someone like Bruce Springsteen it can be a very effective thing. He's a big mainstream act who probably does have Trump supporters in his audience, and it could make a difference to hear the Boss say, "Hey, this guy's a bad guy." It's sort of useless for someone in my position.

**I'm glad you mentioned Springsteen, because while you sound nothing like him, the lyrics you've written for this album could be EELS version of his *Tunnel of Love*. There are a lot of songs that deal with doubts, infidelity and heartbreak.**

*Tunnel of Love* is a great album. I appreciate any comparison. But Bruce Springsteen is the Boss, and I'm not even the assistant night manager.

**I'm thinking of the songs "Waking Up," the one-two punch of "I Got Hurt" and "OK," and the oh-so-subtly named "Are You F--king Your Ex." Lyrically, the first two sound like the internal conversations that people have when they are getting into or out of a relationship. And the last one is self-evident.**

Yeah, there's a bit of an arc to the songs on the album. Things start out nicely. Then it gets a bit dark in the middle and eventually it gets to a nice place again. It gets into the nitty gritty of some relationship stuff. The track "Who You Say You Are" questions what's going on behind someone's charming accent, and is this person really going to be someone that is here for the long haul. Then there's "Dark and Dramatic," where you're trying to get better at recognizing red flags early in a relationship and maybe pay attention to them — something I should be an expert in at this point in my life. It's a song written to myself saying, "Come on man, wake up and smell the coffee. Maybe this isn't a great situation, and maybe I should get out now before it gets really bad.

**And at the same time there are lines, like the one in "The Gentle Souls" - "the petty lies that she was fed" - that reveal the narrator distrusts himself as well.**

I think it's important to tell both sides of the story. It can't always be about, "You did this" and "You did that." What about what I did? This album, like most of our albums, is probably about half autobiographical and half something that was inspired by things that happened to friends of mine as well songs that are pure fiction. But even when it's fiction, you have to be able to relate to it and draw from your own life in certain ways.

**In your notes for the album, you write that "Are You F--king Your Ex" was inspired by a friend of yours. What's the story behind that?**

I asked my friend how she dealt with sexual frustration, and she surprised me by answering, “I f--k my ex.” As a songwriter I always have my lightning rod out for ideas and I thought, well, I don’t think I’ve heard that song before. And I think it’s certainly something a lot of people can relate to.

**When you say maybe half of this is autobiographical, I do feel like this album is the next chapter in a novel that began with EELS last album, The Deconstruction. Thematically, I hear a connection.**

I’m not really sure. Once I’m done with one album, I just completely forget about it and immerse myself in whatever the next one is. I’m not sure how they connect. I don’t have the perspective for it.

**Would you say that some of the songs on Earth to Dora are about the breakup of your marriage?**

They’re not. I laid out the song sequence, so some listeners, if they want, can think of the album as about one relationship. There’s an arc to the story maybe, but really, the songs were all written at different times about different situations. Some of them are about the same situation, but it’s definitely not the story of my marriage. There is stuff in there from that, but, it’s a tricky topic for me to write about because it involves the mother of my son, and I can’t get into anything that would be upsetting to him someday.

**Given that you’ve become a parent relatively recently, I was wondering if the title track is a reference to Dora the Explorer.**

No, my son hasn’t gotten into Dora the Explorer yet. It actually comes from a real person. I have a friend named Dora who used to work on the Eels tour crew. She did the lights for some of our tours. We were texting one night, and she was going through a hard situation. I was just trying to cheer her up. Most of the lyrics of the song came directly from things I was texting to her. I realized, maybe I can cheer up some more people if I turn them into lyrics for a song.





**I love the way you sign it at the end with your actual first name, “Love, Mark.” It reminds me of the end of Leonard Cohen’s “Famous Blue Raincoat,” when he ends the song, “Sincerely, L. Cohen.”**

The joke there for anyone who cares is that nobody calls me Mark. Everyone calls me E. Dora is my friend’s real name, but she used to go by another. So, the joke we have between us is that my texts start with “Dear Dora,” and hers begin with “Dear Mark.”

**To come back to the Springsteen comparisons again, you’ve been working for a long time with guitarist The Chet, bassist Kool G Murder and drummer P-Boo. Forgive the pun, but it’s like they’ve become your E Street Band.**

That’s a good point. Why does the Boss get to have the E Street Band? My name is E. My band should be the E Street Band.



**You should take it up with Bruce.**

If you look at all the years that we’ve been doing stuff, there have been all sorts of lineups, but these guys have stuck around for a pretty long time. I love to mix it up and collaborate with anyone who has something to offer.

**You’ve been at this since at least the early '90s. The longevity of your career is increasingly rare. Do you think about why you’ve been so successful - and maintained such an avid fan base - for such a substantial period of time?**

All the time. I can’t believe that I’ve been doing it as long as I have and that I still get to do it because I had such low expectations when I was young. I didn’t see any future for myself at all, let alone all this. I

still feel lucky that I got to make one album, let alone all of these albums. I hope it can give people hope that you might be hopeless but you really never know how good things may turn out.

**So much of your music - and your memoir *Things the Grandchildren Should Know* is about that very idea. You've managed to find hope and deliverance during some very dark times in your life. That is evident in your music, and I do think that has quite a bit to do with your longevity.**

That's definitely a big part of my MO. It's much more meaningful if you deal with some real heavy issues on your way to getting a hopeful message across -- rather than something that's more sugarcoated and not really getting into the nitty-gritty. Because of that, I'm often labeled as, oh, the guy who writes depressing songs. You're not really paying attention if that's all you're getting out of it.

**Have you continued working during the pandemic?**

I haven't written or made anything since this record. Between raising a three-year-old and doing all this promotion for the album, there really has not been a lot of time for creativity. Hopefully that will happen in the not-too-distant future. I'd love to get back to making new music.

**Are you planning to tour at some point? Will EELS do any livestreams?**

That's the hardest part about the pandemic for me. In some ways I'm lucky because it's a little bit easier for people like me to work at home, and I tend to live a reclusive lifestyle anyway. The hard part is we had a lot of plans to tour, but obviously that can't happen now. We've had such a good time on our last couple of tours that we were dying to get back out there. We might do some livestream stuff. We're trying to figure out some interesting ways to do it. In the meantime, we got the people at the Pukkelpop Festival in Belgium to allow us to post our entire show from a year ago on the EELS website. We posted it for free so people can see a live show with a screaming audience like it used to be.

**If live shows resume next fall as has been predicted, will you tour behind the album, or do you think you'll have moved on?**

There was some talk of should we not put the album out now if we can't go on tour? I decided people still want music -- maybe need it now more than ever -- and we've got new music so let's just give it to them. We'll go on tour as soon as we can -- even if it's a couple of years from now -- because we're just dying to do it.

**You name-check "Tay" Swift and "Lover" in "Anything For Boo." I'd love to hear your thoughts on her.**

I don't know a lot of her stuff, but I absolutely love the song "Lover." I think it's a perfect song and a perfect recording, too. And, as an established artist, I feel that one of my jobs is to expose little-known acts to people. So I namedrop the Beatles and Taylor Swift on this album. I think they're going to see a big boost in their careers as a result.

**Have you stopped smoking cigars?**

I had gotten to the point where I only smoked on tour, but I had such a stressful year last year -- I had to move out of my house and into my studio, and divorce did a real number on me -- that I started smoking again at home. But don't tell the kids that.

**You are known for rocking some very distinct beard styles over the course of your career. What does your pandemic beard look like?**

The beard is currently short and tight because it's got to be something that's manageable with a mask. If you have a big long beard flowing out under your mask I feel like that's more of a germ danger for people.

**Yeah, it's a germ trellis.**

Exactly.



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