

Snapshot of an Evolving Beast: Elvis Perkins in Dearland, May 3 at the Redstone Room

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Elvis Perkins is so full of articulated doubt in our interview that I ask him a blunt question: Does he *like* being a songwriter, musician, and bandleader? Because it seems like a miserable existence for him.

"Is that how it sounds?" he replied.

Yes. After talking about how tentative and timid he has been -- not knowing if he should be writing songs and making records -- I asked him what drives him. He responded as if he were a contestant on *Fear Factor* whose deepest anxiety is public performance: "When I find myself on stage and singing in front of however many people, there's nothing to do but to do it," he said. "I've signed up for this experience"

But in the longer view, what pushes him to continue booking shows and making records and agreeing to interviews? "Contracts and schedules," he said without a hint of mirth.

That underwhelming enthusiasm aside, fans of singular, oddball folk rock in the vein of Neutral Milk Hotel and Andrew Bird should be excited by the prospect of Perkins' Sunday performance at the Redstone Room. The new, self-titled album by Perkins and his band, *Elvis Perkins in Dearland*, is lovely,

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gentle, and weird, and is evidence that critics' comparisons to Dylan and Leonard Cohen are premature but have merit. "I'll Be Arriving" is an organ-drenched moaning dirge, and elsewhere New Orleans-style horns give the vibe of a joyous funeral, and those are balanced by the lightly adorned and gorgeously ambiguous "How's Forever Been Baby." His songs are sure-footed even if he isn't.

You might guess that Perkins' reticence is a function of his background. He's the son of the actor Anthony Perkins and the photographer Berry Berenson. His father died in 1992 of complications from AIDS, and his mother died aboard American Airlines Flight 11 on September 11, 2001. He has said that the title of *Ash Wednesday*, his debut album from 2006, was a reference to waking up that September 12 -- the ninth anniversary of his father's death -- with nothing but ash. Beyond that pain, it's easy to imagine anybody tiring by the 93rd question about *Psycho*.

But Perkins said he doesn't get anxious about the inevitable questions about his parents and the inevitable questions *around* his parents. "I would be living in a state of constant dread," he said.

He also said that he can't think of an interview that hasn't touched on his parents, but he *has* run into people "who don't know from whence I came. When I encounter these people, it's almost too good to be true."



He's an awkward interview no matter whether he's asked about his ancestors or anything else. In conversation with this stranger, anyway, he's like an uncertain robot, using a dry vocabulary and a distant tone to express inner conflict and what sounds like a dearth of joy.

But that, he said, is more likely his ambivalence about the tension between commerce and art - although he would never use such mundane words. Commerce has instead become "a thing that requires infrastructure" (a manager, a publicist, a band, a booking agent), while the art is the "thing that is impossibly light." He sounds like he finds it absurd to build this infrastructure around songs.

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He acknowledges a greater confidence on the second record, but even that is couched in terms that foist a consciousness on the album itself, as if Perkins were analyzing something outside of himself. "It seems to be more of a definite sound than one unsure of itself," he said.

He also said he's uncomfortable with the concept of definitive recordings. "There's something frightening about taking a song and declaring that this is what it sounds like as opposed to letting it drift out into space without ever being anchored down in any way," he said. "These are just sort of snapshots of an evolving beast." He compared it to a tiger, and said that the two-year-old animal is different from its older incarnation, but they're the same creature.

I asked him whether he had difficulty letting go of his records. He noted that deadlines and budgets force his hand, but "I put up as good a fight as I could to keep it maturing before it was sent off"

The satisfaction of being a songwriter, he said, is the moment when a song "goes from an improbability to an irrefutable reality. It happens despite my believing that it won't happen."

Given all these responses, I doubt there are many unequivocal things in Perkins' world.

"I wouldn't trade what I do for anything," he said, before quickly adding a caveat: "at least nothing that I've encountered or seen or heard yet."

Elvis Perkins in Dearland will perform at the Redstone Room (129 Main Street in Davenport) on Sunday, May 3. The show starts at 8 p.m., and Other Lives opens. Tickets are \$10 and can be purchased from RedstoneRoom.com.

For more information on the band, visit ElvisPerkinsInDearland.com or MySpace.com/elvisperkinsindearland