

# Toys for Elliot the national tapes



Notes on the Recordings  
Five Seventeen, September, 1999.

April 16th 1993

In high school, I borrowed an acoustic guitar off my friend Brian in the hopes that we would write songs together. When that didn't work out, I turned to high school friends Matt and Dan and formed The Osculating Pooh Bears: a punk band with no instruments, no melodies and no songs. During our lunch hours we would often find a corner of the school and craft the lyrics to what was sure to be a landmark song in the history of music. It wasn't.

Somewhere along the way, however, I managed to pick up a bass guitar (right-handed and ill-suited to my left-handedness) and, in 1993, began to take an interest in music again. I even went so far as to help put out a cassette by a band called The Digestable Daisies on the now defunct Rubber Bus Recording Company's label.

On Friday April 16th 1993, I was in the city of Guelph to see the Daisies perform at an unpaid acoustic gig: EPOP (acronym undefined). The gig went over well for them.

After the show I was talking to another performer, Nancy Ogilvie of the Tidbits (who I had met at previous EPOPs), and was introduced to a few of her friends from Camp Coochiching, the summer camp where she worked. One of those girls was Kymberly Drake.

All of us, except Nancy, began to talk about music, wishing we were part of a band, and what instrument if any we owned. In the midst of conversation, I mentioned that I lived in Hamilton and Kym told me that, though she lived in St. Catharines, she was often in Hamilton herself, for appointments at McMaster Hospital (without giving anymore information); she suggested that we try playing together. Before heading home, I wrote my phone number on the back of her neck and told her to give me a call the next time she was in town.

It was five days later, a Wednesday, when the phone rang. Kym said she'd be in the hospital for a few days. I should drop by and visit her, she said, and we could try to play something together. She told me what floor she was on and in what ward: 3B. The plan was to see her the next day, Thursday, after dinner.

I felt strange carrying my bass guitar into the hospital (with no amplifier) and even stranger as I strolled into Ward 3B, a children's ward, the place where she and I would spend many future days. I wondered why she was in a children's ward, but figured they put people where the beds are.

When I walked into her room, she looked a mess. Her face was swollen from what, years later, I would recognize as a side effect of the prednisone she was often given to treat allergic bronchopulmonary aspergillosis, a fungus induced infection of the lungs; a condition occurring only in people who have pre-existing asthma or, in Kym's case, cystic fibrosis. The aspergillosis, more often than not led to recurrent pneumonia which was the reason she was so often in the hospital. I didn't know any of this back then; I just saw a sick and sleeping girl and quietly set down my bass guitar.

I sat and watched her for a couple of minutes and touched her hand to wake her. As she smiled, her sickness seemed to fade away. She was just Kym, slightly swollen and with messy hair. She sat up and we talked for awhile about things: television, friends, and ourselves. I don't think I even asked her why she was in the hospital, but when she said she'd be there tomorrow I said so would I and returned the next day without my bass.

It was in a small hallway, mainly traveled by doctors and nurses, that Kym told me why she was in the hospital and more importantly why she was in the children's ward.

She explained Cystic fibrosis: a genetic disease that effects the glands. Because these glands don't work properly the body produces a thick mucus that can lead to lung problems and digestive disorders. It is most commonly thought of as a lung disease but, as she explained to me, it isn't. The reason that she stayed in the children's ward was that the average life expectancy of a person with CF was under 30 years (though it continually improves) and she had it more severely than most.

We had many more talks in that small hallway, revealing ourselves quietly as our friendship grew. She would spend up to three months of the year in Ward 3B, and as we formed our band, then called This Beautiful Train, the hospital became synonymous with her home and our practice space.

We would sit in one of the visitors lounges with me playing a bass, that was soon replaced by an acoustic guitar, and her at the hospital piano. We sang any and every of the songs we both knew: Red House Painters, This Mortal Coil, The Bee Gees, and slowly creating our own as I slowly learned how to play.

More often than not our songs came out of a joke, or a simple pattern that one of us liked. We would each prod the other, forcing a new set of lyrics, or a simple chord change. Over the course of the band, we even built up the nerve to perform on a weekly open stage and secure two unpaid gigs. Pictured below is the poster from *Species Pieces* a gig organized by a student run animal rights group, that was also the release date for *Toys for Elliot* (mmm01) our first "official" cassette.



gig poster 1995 (artwork 5:17)

## <disk one>

A *National Tape* was the name of Toy for Elliot's first cassette attempt. Compiled of live recordings made on Kym's stereo, there were only three copies made. Toys for Elliot had a very short span of recording and the atmosphere in which it was created, changed very little after securing a 4-track. To name this collection of cassette tracks, live recordings and excerpts from our practises after that first cassette seems fitting. What follows is a bit about some of the songs as I remember them:

"deliciousist" was one of the first songs Toys for Elliot wrote, Kym wrote the music on piano in about the time it took to play it and a bass line was written on the right-handed bass that I had at the time. Before adding lyrics and because of the style, we called it "the 20's song" but when it came time to record the songs to my newly acquired 4-track recorder, the bass line was dropped and lyrics were added after arguing about a meal we were eating. Kym's food was the delicious-est. For this release bass was re-introduced though not re-written.

"a song for elliot" was written in response to a poem written by a 12 year old girl that we knew. We thought she was pretty cool. She still is.

"this is not about you" was a silly song written by Kym about someone who will forever remain secret.

"come away" was the first song I ever wrote. About and for a girl named Rosemary Stellik, who I had a huge crush on. If she ever finds this, I suppose she'll find out. ("Hi Rosemary!") The 4-track cassette of this recording was lost, so this is the original mix from *Toys for Elliot* (mmm01).

"sleepguitar" was by far the song we were proudest of. I brought to Kym a single verse and the chorus and she wrote and arranged the rest of it. The title was given by Nancy Ogilvie, though the song isn't about her at all.

"abandoned instrumental" was an idea for a song done at some point during 1996. It was recorded at the same time as Kym's solo material, while Toys for Elliot had slowed down it's recording and writing. Kym improvised the piano, on the spot, without ever hearing the song.

"mr somewhere" was the song that gave us the confidence to start playing in public. We were attending an open stage at Hamilton's La Luna Restaurant and I convinced Kym to perform it. It was originally performed by The Apartments. We played it almost every time we were together.

"mushrooms and olives" is the result of testing a PZM microphone from Radio Shack while Kym and, her then boyfriend, Tymothi: J were eating. The other voice is his.

"toys for elliot" was as punk as we got, power chords and all. The lyrics of the song were inspired after overhearing two kids fighting. This song first appeared on *Hey, It's My Birthday Cassette* (HHBTM005)

"mic test" is simply that. Both Kym and I had microphones worth less than \$20 each that would frequently cut out, making many of our practice recordings useless. It got worse as we continued to record, though Kym's microphone was slightly worse.

"you made me blue" was written as a challenge to write a song about our ex's. I had a song as well, but it was pretty bad and was quickly forgotten (though I still have the lyrics). The beginning of this recording was taped over, so it was taken from an alternate recording.

"potatoes" I was testing the 4-track while Kym was mentioning potatoes. In the background Tymothi:j offers to make potatoes with no way of being able to hear.

"swell" was a song written for and about Trish Newport who could recite a good deal of pi from memory. Far more than you think.

"sarcastic steven" is a cover of our friends The Tidbits. We loved the song and were always performing this song. Their superior original version is available for download on *The Tidbits Of Geldwen* reissue (mmm26).

"new jersey" was originally performed by Red House Painters who were a constant source of practice material and inspiration. This is just a fragment of a much longer song.

"glass waltz" was a song we wrote in a bandshell in Gage Park in Hamilton. We came up with the lyrics "stand by the sea," along with the rest of the chorus and took it from there. It was written as a joke and we intended to fully record the song, by adding piano, but never got beyond the basic guitar track.

"imperial" is a cover of the band Unrest recorded in Mississauga without Kym. This mix appeared as-is on *Toys for Elliot* (mmm01). Honestly, this is a great song which this version should never be measured against.

"sunday afternoon" was the first song we wrote together and is included here for archival purposes only, hence the annoying one minute of silence. The basic track was lifted from one of our earliest recordings in 1993. In 1996, we re-arranged the song, to make it shorter, however there is no recording of that version. In 1999, overdubs of vocals and guitar were added to make it slightly more listenable. I'm pretty sure it didn't work.

#### <disk two>

This disc is made up completely of recordings and practices done straight to tape, usually at Kym's apartment. Sadly many of our practice recordings exist only on second or third generation copies, and many were lost altogether. This disc is presented as a historical document of Toys for Elliot rather than an album. Many tracks are improvised or are a result of constant error, while others are the only existing recordings of many of our songs. The layout of this disc strives to reflect our practice sessions with most of the tracks dating from recordings produced late in 1994. At the time we had a policy of "no do-overs," so if a song was going poorly, we would continue through to the end regardless of quality.

In most cases, to record, we plugged in a pair of microphones corresponding with left and right channels and used one each resulting in almost fully panned recordings. These are the moments presented here.

"throw it all away" was recorded during the short period of time that I tried using the electric guitar. I was never comfortable with the sound and we never really used it. The idea of using The Carpenters' "Close to You" as the bridge was funny at the time, though there was no logical connection. Kym's bird Atticus can be heard in the background of this and many other recordings. The drop outs at the beginning of the song was caused by Kym's microphone.

"shadows" was a self-penned song that Kym really liked. The lyrics were written late in the winter about my then girlfriend, Charlotte Blake who inspired many of my songs at the time — along with the drawings on the cover. The first version demonstrates how many of our practices deteriorated. During the second version Kym is singing through a dollar-store plastic-toy microphone that creates the echo on many of our songs.

"no control" was a song very quickly abandoned, as none of it made any sense.

"come away" because it was one of our earliest songs was recorded the most, but often gave us the most trouble, for no good reason.

"michael" was the closing song of the Toys for Elliot's live set, at one time performed weekly at La Luna Restaurant's open stage in Hamilton. At the end of the song, we would segue into a version of Jane's Addictions "Jane Says" and end it with annoying laughter inspired from the recordings of Ween. It was this moment when we decided not to record the full version. And we never did. At the beginning of one of the versions you can hear Kym giving herself chest physiotherapy.

"stompin' on the floor" is the result of an upstairs neighbour of Kym's who really hated our practice sessions, though he/she never came downstairs to confront us they would bang on the floor constantly. Most of our practices were performed mid-afternoon and never before noon. Atticus was a far greater source of neighbour complaint.

"an april secret" was the basis of what would later become Kym's song "April Fools" that appears on *Sicker Than a Cat* (mmm09). With perhaps the most upbeat music we had written, it's content was by far the most depressing. The song was written in McMaster hospital in Ward 3B, picking at random a poem from one of Kym's many journals. Alternate lyrics were written to entertain Adam, a boy also often confined to the ward with AIDS. "Hey there little bear, why the long face / floating round, in outer space." He was probably our biggest fan, and we played to him everytime he was in the hospital. In 1998 he passed away.

"calgon take me away" was written for Tristan MacKenzie and Nancy Ogilvie. Nancy was meant to be a member of a band with us, and we did record one song under the name Nancy's Transparent Head. We would adapt the lyrics to any and every name we could, but these are the original lyrics. I still find the instrumental section somewhat witty.

"ramona pipkin quimby" was recorded during another day of recording Kym's solo songs. There was a Tim Horton's across the street from La Luna's Restaurant, just around the corner from Kym's apartment where this was recorded. Ramona was the name of Kym's rabbit. Again, the song simply degrades.

"songs we'll never do" is pretty self-explanatory.

#### September 15th 1999

After a week in a coma, induced by the lung transplant Kym had been wishing for since she first learned of her disease, Kym died. Kym tended to record everything, and though the full contents of these discs are of questionable quality, she is the reason that they exist at all. I had tried writing songs before, but wrote the first ones I was proud of because of Kym. Though the songs of merit are few, I believe they are worth holding onto. In retrospect, I'd have given anything to have a better 4-track, a better microphone and to not have a few more tapes of our many early practices, but this will do just fine.

On disc one, songs 01-05, 08 and 18, appeared previously on *Toys for Elliot* (my mean mustard 01). All but "come away" and "imperial" have been remixed for this release, as the master tapes for those songs have been lost and/or ignored. "deliciousist," "swell," "sunday afternoon," and "glass waltz" have a few overdubs of bass and/or vocals. All other tracks were recorded straight to tape in either mono or stereo depending on the source.

On disc two, the right and left channel have been swapped in some cases to provide continuance. Tymothi:j is usually the background voice on tracks where a third voice can be heard.

On disc one the laughter between tracks is that of Tristan MacKenzie (owner of the third copy of the "original" *National Tape*, and on disc two there is someone (most likely someone named Rob) interjecting with curses. The new mixes of the tracks on disc one were created by Five: Seventeen the week following September 15th, 1999. The final sequence was revised during the week of August 20th, 2001. All additional mixing, editing and mastering took place at that time. Original "physio" drawings, by Charlotte Blake. Design, layout, and paintings by Five: Seventeen. Toys for Elliot photo by Kymbliss. All tracks ©1995, 1996, 2001, 2006 Toys for Elliot (Kymberley Drake, Five Seventeen). This is My Mean Magpie No. 18.

