

SOUNDING BOARD

Deconstructing: Ben Gibbard And Why We Want Him To Be Miserable

Sharon Steel | October 15, 2012 - 4:18 pm



CREDIT: Ben Gibbard

What is it about Ben Gibbard that inspires a celebration of depression? The singer-songwriter's sadness certainly has a twisted currency in the indie rock community. When his divorce with his now ex-wife Zooey Deschanel was announced, I scrolled through a number of comments on [this very site](#) that rejoiced in the split. "Yaaaaay! More sad Death Cab songs. Awesome!" one poster exulted. I felt exactly the same way. Gibbard's pain meant wonderful

things for me, for anyone, really, who has spent the last decade fixated with his band's arc, a bedroom indie rock band from Seattle that became a successful pop outfit, eventually selling out arenas and writing songs for the *Twilight Saga* soundtrack.

People revel in the pain of others for all kinds of reasons, but the idea of applauding Gibbard's heartbreak because it would presumably result in better music seems especially perverse to me. Maybe he wasn't all that torn up — what if the couple's separation was a mutual, amicable decision? Maybe was a long time coming. Maybe, like many breakups, it was a secret relief in the end. Whatever it was, the widely regarded assumption was that he had to be devastated, because that belief fell in line with the mythological narrative we created for Gibbard over the years. We hailed the news as the precursor to a return to form for the band and Gibbard's songwriting.

The reactions I read here and elsewhere, and the conversations I had with others, suggested that fans felt it was Gibbard's responsibility to stop being happy in order to do what he did best. Vintage Gibbard, the lonely poet warrior who wrote about drunken one-night stands, how stupid Los Angeles was, and how hard it was to grow up, was back. No more positive love songs like "Stay Young, Go Dancing," the sweet and uplifting final track off *Codes And Keys*, the band's last record. The end of his marriage with one of the original manic pixie dream girls meant that any emotional horcruxes Gibbard created over the course of his fairy tale romance would suddenly burst open, dripping misery and tortured ennui all over his battered heart and soul. The next Death Cab For Cutie album was going to fucking rule.

Except the grief-propelled renaissance I expected of Gibbard has not arrived. Instead, he decided to put out a solo album, *Former Lives*, out tomorrow, 10/16, via Barsuk Records, Death Cab's first label (the band upgraded to Atlantic in 2005). I love the record. Most of the plaintive songs on it, like "Broken Yolk In Western Sky," featuring the lyric "I faded into your past," seem like they could be about the big Zooey breakup. But all of the tracks were actually written over a

about the big Zooney breakup. But all of the tracks were actually written over a period of eight years. A number of them, including “Broken Yolk,” were penned in Seattle, before Gibbard moved to Los Angeles, years before he married Deschanel. These tracks are the return to sorrowful sound I have been longing for — because they were part of the original genesis of it. So why was a part of me so disappointed?

It’s impossible to pinpoint precisely when I began to view Death Cab’s music as a kind of anthropomorphized version of my teen angst. But it must have happened very quickly after I first discovered the band my freshman year of college at Boston University, when I was introduced to indie rock, in general, for the first time. Now, I can’t remember thinking about the band as anything else but one of the principal touchstones of my coming-of-age canon. *The Photo Album* (2001) had been out for awhile, but my first boyfriend and I were obsessed with the record; it soon became the soundtrack to the start of our relationship. Gibbard’s expressions of anxiety and confusion — both recurring themes on the album and all of Gibbard’s songs — completely charmed me. We bought tickets to see both shows of the band’s two-night stint at the Middle East club in Cambridge. That was the first and last time I would see them play in such an intimate space. I didn’t know it then, but Death Cab and Ben Gibbard in particular would remain a significant musical influence on my life, long after that relationship ended.

Six percent of Stereogum readers voted for Gibbard as the top “male indie rock hottie” in 2005. I’m convinced that a large part of the appeal for those who championed his heartthrob status has to do with how willing Gibbard was, in his earlier work, to admit to being a complete mess a lot of the time. *Something About Airplanes* (1999) and *We Have The Facts And We’re Voting Yes* (2000) are excellent examples of this: The songs on those records have a lo-fi, gritty production quality, the melodies are raw and lovely, and Gibbard’s confessional stories felt deeper and more meaningful to me the more esoteric his lyrics were. Inscrutable turns of phrases he liked to use, like “I can’t drive straight counting your fake frowns” and “You swallowed the last of free MA,” were vague and mysterious in all the right ways, and therefore I found them incredibly profound. I

would scrawl them in notebooks, I would think about them while lying in my bed in the dark, looping the *The Stability EP* (2002) over and over again on my stereo, when another string of romantic disasters rendered me too lonely and freaked out to actually go hang out with people.

The band gained more mainstream recognition in 2003 with the dreamy, hook-laden *Transatlanticism*, thanks, in large part, to being constantly mentioned and played on Fox's show *The O.C.* The teen soap starred Adam Brody as Seth Cohen, another nerd-hot, indie-rocking everyman who got a sexy, seemingly out-of-his-league woman to fall in love with him. Seth continuously mentioned how intrinsic Death Cab were to understanding who he was as a human being, a misanthrope, and a lover of unconventionally cool, under-the-radar things.

I watched the show religiously. Mostly because I had a stupid crush on Brody, but also because I thought the Seth Cohen character was brilliantly drawn. Even when he was happy, Seth Cohen was never actually happy. He saw the world through a neurotic, overly analytical prism in which the best things that happened to him were merely a precursor to some larger emotional disaster. Before *The O.C.* ever aired, I came to my own set of conclusions that this is what Gibbard was projecting as well, in his music. People labeled it "emo," but to me, it was a gorgeous soundtrack to an inner life that was always more dramatic and engaging than the actual one I led. In my early twenties, I, like Seth (and surely, most definitely, exactly like Gibbard), was a person who felt happiest when I was most miserable. It was just so much more interesting to be sad.

Death Cab had toiled in relative obscurity for years, but Gibbard soon morphed into an early-aughts hipster icon. The band put out its first major-label disc, *Plans* (2005), and it was one of those albums I told myself I had to like, mostly because I wanted to support the band, and I felt it was my duty to enjoy it. While I felt better about *Narrow Stairs* (2008), a dark (but not dark enough for my tastes), weird record that got lost in my move from Boston to New York, I continued to play *The Photo Album* over and over again, waiting for something like it, not different, but building on a foundation of the same motifs, to come along.

Instead we got *Codes And Keys* (2011), which was covered in lip gloss kisses and reeking of sunshine. I liked a few songs, genuinely, but I thought “Stay Young, Go Dancing” was entirely skippable. First because it seemed unnatural and wrong for Gibbard to be writing swingy odes to love — what was next, a quirky collaboration with Deschanel, who would sing backup and strum along on a sticker-covered ukulele? A part of me hoped for it, even as I was appalled by the thought. Gibbard seemed to have forgotten what it felt like to be unhinged. He was supposed to be the quintessential introvert, spend his young adulthood on the fringes, and ideally focus his career on writing songs about what that felt like. He owed it to us, I felt, to release new records that were more bewitchingly cheerless and damaged than the one before it. He wasn’t having that, though. It was clear as soon as I listened to *Codes And Keys* on my headphones last year: Deschanel was Death Cab’s Yoko, and I could never forgive her for it.

Which brings things back to the fallacies that listening to *Former Lives* cracked open for me: There is no evidence that Gibbard wrote music that was more pop, more mainstream, and less palatable to his old-school fans simply because he fell in love and got married to a celebrity. His songwriting style had begun to change long before he got hitched — but it was easy to rewrite history a bit, and take Deschanel to task for what appeared to be a sudden, unwelcome switch to a poppier sheen. I felt a sting of betrayal when, a few years ago, Gibbard moved from Seattle to Los Angeles, a city we all knew he hated — he said as much on “Why You’d Want To Live Here,” one of the best songs on *The Photo Album*. There he was, living in Tinseltown and unabashedly liking it, trading umbrellas and flannel shirts for new sunglasses and being Deschanel’s plus-one at her premieres. I couldn’t relate to that, or music that was about that. I didn’t have it figured out yet, and somewhere along the way, he had. But Gibbard’s songs didn’t teach me how, or why. It just was. His bliss was really bumming me out.

When I started working on this story, I interviewed Gibbard by phone in August, when he was staying in Hawaii in a hotel under a fake name. We had a lovely conversation, my favorite part of which focused on the idea that one’s creativity doesn’t die away simply because you introduce positive changes into your life. In

Gibbard's case, he significantly changed his lifestyle by giving up drinking and becoming a runner. He felt it elevated his songwriting. "I don't buy into that idea of the elegantly wasted artist anymore," Gibbard told me. "I was able to shake the stereotype of what it means to be abusing substances and being a writer. The creativity is within you, and you will harness it no matter where you are in your life."

I don't think Gibbard is miserable anymore. And what if he never really was, regardless of what was going on in his life, or what it seemed like after many microscopic studies of his lyrics? If he was unhappy, and feeling lost, perhaps the root cause of it didn't have as much to do with cruel girlfriends as it did with the fact that his band was putting out great little records and touring the country, but none of them were making any real money off their art. In the years since, Death Cab for Cutie has evolved into a well-known, critically successful rock band. Now that everyone in the group has grown up, including Gibbard, he is likely a great deal more stable and content than he was in his twenties, when he was writing the band's earlier material that I would later develop such a visceral connection to.

The eighth track on *Former Lives*, the song I keep coming back to, is "Oh, Woe," an unrequited love story about sorrow itself. "Oh, woe, please hear this plea / to walk away and leave me be / I've weathered more than I can take / of your ever present lonely ache / It's been a basement of a year / and all I want's for you to disappear," Gibbard sings. But despite the fact that he has, in the last year, publicly weathered a divorce and moved back to Seattle, he clearly has no need to be one of my generation's poster boys for our collective melancholy. Not that he ever asked for it, but he's found an excellent way to rebuff the dubious accolade by chronicling his breakup with his own depression. He isn't going to pay us back for adoring him by being perma-sad, in order to stay true to a stereotype that was created for him over ten years ago. "I think that in the context of this song, the central idea is that I'm done with this," Gibbard told me when I interviewed him in August. "I'm ready for this to go away. I'm ready to feel something else."