

A Large Crowd Gathers For the Deceased Jeff Elliot's Encore Performance

It was a pretty big story that Jeff Elliot had come back from the dead. That might sound like an understatement, what with the general lack of real life zombies out there. But he wasn't a zombie. He had just come back from the dead, at least for a little while.

As it turned out, it was a short second run for him, though there were certainly enough witnesses to prove he had been around for a little while. Obviously when the world found out, this strange little case became very big. The greatest scientific minds swept through St. John's to try to prove this all actually happened, religious zealots declared the event a sure sign of the apocalypse, and a new crop of hotlines surfaced claiming you too could contact your loved one for a short time through them (\$5.99 a minute, other long distance charges may apply).

But this story is not about the fallout. This story is about that day he returned, and what he did with that little bit of extra time he had somehow staked out for himself. See, Jeff wasn't a big deal at all prior to his death – he was a Newfoundland based musician who played fairly idiosyncratically and generally mixed with the blur that is the St. John's music scene. Before he died at age 28, he could regularly be seen on “the deck,” near bars like CBTGs and Distortion and The Bull and Barrel, or smoking outside The Ship between sets, or fighting with Ron Hynes down at The Rose and Thistle. He was firmly in the scene, but he didn't own it. He wasn't quite hip enough for the hipsters, and he was too weird for the folkies, and he didn't rock it enough for rock fans. He was known to be “good” by those who know such things, and he supposedly wrote good lyrics, not that

they were ever really heard in the bars he played in, with their half broken P.A. systems and restless drunken crowds.

Of course, that all changed after he died.

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I'm standing outside The Ship, and it's snowing with no wind. This is almost as unbelievable as the show I'm about to attend: Jeff Elliot in Concert: One more Time.

This was the night before the supernatural nature of it all really sunk in and overtook some of what happened. We all still mostly thought it was a joke, not that it stopped people from coming just in case.

It wasn't a postered show. It was also on a Monday night – usually not a concert night. It wasn't advertised in any of the local magazines, though it was all over the internet and messageboards. Most people dismissed it as an internet hoax or publicity stunt by some Jeff Elliot cover band, but I got word from some pretty reliable sources – some of whom were pale at the time, (“as if they'd seen a ghost” har har)– that it was going to happen. I was there to see the deceased Jeff Elliot's encore performance. I stood in a line outside The Ship with 200 plus other people who were here for the same reason, all hoping to get into the 120 capacity club.

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Here's the general backstory as it's understood by those who have tried to piece it together: Jeff was that songwriter who recorded everything he did in a tiny apartment on

Bates Hill using a BOSS digital 4-track he borrowed permanently from a friend. What talents he had for writing he lacked in PR, and his girlfriend Tina sent some of his work out to large labels around the country, where – of course – no one actually listened to the work. Perhaps it was Tina’s covering letter, reprinted here in its entirety: “This is the best music you will ever hear. Listen.”

Jeff had no immediate family – his parents both died when he was young, and the aunt who raised him was a widow who began losing her mind right around the time that Jeff was old enough to start living his own life. So he basically just had Tina.

After he died, Tina tearfully called up the one label that had actually responded to her unsolicited mail – Sunrise Records out of Toronto – and said “don’t worry about that disc. There won’t be any more – he’s gone,” and hung up. This was, of course, the best covering letter to come in for any submission Sunrise had ever received. They immediately gave the discs several more listens, decided it was brilliant, and the ball was rolling. And Tina lied - there was more. A disc of 15 b-sides and unfinished material that Tina bundled together and called *Elliot’s Elegy* The original disc of songs that Jeff produced when he was alive was called *August Burns Away*, and it had sold approximately 40 copies locally before he died. That number jumped to 2000 after Sunrise realized its brilliance for Canada. *Elliot’s Elegy* has sold 3000 discs in Newfoundland alone, with national sales almost doubling that. For whatever reason, his extremely rough and unfinished songs held even more appeal than the already successful *actual* album he made when he was alive. Incidentally, the 4-track he used went on Ebay for \$4000.00 to someone in Mexico last year (actual retail value - \$349.00).

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Standing next to me are three beautiful girls, and I know all of them. There's Jesara (original name: Jane. She changed it at 18 because she liked how "Jesara" sounded), Susanne (named after the Leonard Cohen song, a fact she has told to everyone within the first five minutes of meeting them), and Ally (actually her real name and with no backstory – I assume she's a minimalist). These are three downtown regulars who claim they are the heartbeat of the arts community. They attend every show that 'matters,' and between them have dated every 'important' artist in the city.

Their styles are all unique, and yet perfectly fit the stereotype of each girl. Jesara is the wild and weird one, with outfits ordered online from other countries. Occasionally she'll offer up a bit of CanCon and order something from Montreal, but that's her definition of slumming it. She often wears shirts with modernized versions of famous art on them – Mona Lisa smoking a cigarillo, or Great Wave off Kanagawa with a little surfer dude on the wave. Cute and funny up to the point where she starts calling it post-modern and important in the sense that we have to tear down the past to build a different future.

Starting, apparently, with t-shirts.

Susanne makes her own clothes. No real surprise that one of them would.

Ally is the indie girl, the one who's closest to the mainstream by virtue of relativity. She wore the Modest Mouse shirt FIRST, then the Arcade Fire shirt FIRST, and so on, and God knows what she's done with them all, because all of those shirts, when worn for the purpose of "first," have an expiry long before the cotton starts to wear thin.

All wear heavy makeup. Jesara's seems done in the spirit of cirque de soleil, Susanne's is the more classy look, and Ally is the overdone emo thing, with strong eyeliner. Skinny jeans are all around.

I listen to them, standing there in line waiting for the doors to open on this epic show. They are talking about Jeff, and how cute they think he might be now that he's a big superstar. It's as if they think it was a record label that did an image makeover on him, instead of death. They talk of loving his music, though I only hear them talk about one song specifically – "The Dark Trees," the first (and last) "single" that Elliot ever had, released posthumously by Tina on Elliot's *Elegy*.

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The only printed review of August Burns Away, prior to Jeff Elliot's death.

Printed in The Stream [a hip NL music mag]

If ever there was an heir to post-James Taylor, pre-Elliot Smith post modern anti-scenester acoustic icono-pop, it would be Jeff Elliot and his album "Everything[sic] Burns Away." From the opening softly bated chords you can tell that this Machiavellian guitar-toting scrooge has been reading Bukowski while The Smiths "Louder Than Bombs" plays in the background, the candlelight of his apartment - for he surely can't afford electricity if he's this earnest about poverty – reflecting off a wall poster of Guernica. There are elements of post-punk powerpop tangled up with Kraftwerk-inspired mentality on a few tracks, but mostly this plays as if Dylan drank a bottle of Tylenol Cold and Flu and smoked a jay while writing Desire, then decided he would rather co-write

*with Tom Waits, Ben Gibbard and Scarlet Johansson instead. A listenable masterpiece
flawed only by its hubris. [EV]*

Rating out of 5 Stars: N/A

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When the doors finally open and everyone gets in, there is an overarching sense of being lost emanating from the crowd. I recognize many of the people here from previous shows, and we all know what to do normally – sidle up to the bar, get a drink, make our way seemingly carelessly toward those we want to talk to. But tonight there is a different feeling in the air, for obvious reasons I suppose. Jeff’s anticipated performance even has the Cool acting somewhat uncool. I assumed that type of jarring encore was already better than anything he could actually do in the coming hours.

I chat with my friend Ben who is hanging out next to the soundboard, and he is all nerves and fear: “Can you believe this?” he keeps repeating, under his breath at first to see how I’d react, and then louder and louder. “Jeff can’t be back, can he? I mean, zombie singer-songwriters?!” He glances around and then brings his voice down again as if feeling it is insensitive to talk about zombies when one might be in the building. “I wonder what he’ll do...”

“I guess we’ll see shortly,” I say, not to seem curt, but because I really hadn’t the foggiest regarding what was about to happen. Nobody did, though some around me tried to somehow pretend.

There is an opening act for this show. A twenty-three year old named Jacob Doyle who had a friendship with Jeff shortly before he died. They were seen hanging out a few times in some coffee shops, so most assumed they were friends, anyway. Doyle never really talked about Jeff after he died, not to his friends or family, and definitely not in the days that followed this particular performance. He only ever said that Jeff was “a different sort of songwriter,” and since that soundbite could only really go so far without elaboration on the speaker’s part, Jacob was quickly forgotten about, and went back to his usual circuit of three or four bars in downtown St. John’s.

His folk stylings were considerably more upbeat than Jeff’s, though he constantly got labeled as dour and depressing, as if the tortured artist bomb that started at Jeff’s ground zero extended out to those who happened to be associated with him in any way. Tina, for instance, regularly played the wounded widow after Jeff’s death, dating a slew of angry and semi-famous Newfoundland personalities and creating a few drunken public scenes as if on cue for a role she was playing out.

Jacob took the stage as the last of the crowd poured in, and there was a scattered applause, as everyone knew who he was. I noticed those three beauties that had been in the line with me up front and centre, and I watched them when Jacob walked on stage. I chuckled as they briefly consulted each other to make sure this was just the opening act,

and not actually Jeff Elliot. They quickly went back to texting and laughing to themselves as Jacob played his opening song.

I felt bad for him. It's got to be hard to play when only a few are listening in a packed bar, but it's hardly surprising given the headlining act in this case. I suppose the consolation is that when you open for a post-life critically acclaimed songwriter who comes back from the dead for one more show, the eternal bragging rights probably outweigh how the show actually went. That said, watching Jacob's face as he performed, I don't think that really crossed his mind. He looked neither happy to be playing, nor grateful for the opportunity for exposure. He looked like he was singing at a friend's funeral.

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The closest I ever came to talking to Jeff Elliot happened in a small coffee shop on Duckworth Street. It was the middle of a February afternoon, and it was pouring rain outside: a rarity for February in Newfoundland and a blessing that everyone welcomes despite it being rain in the most depressing month of the year. At least it washed away some of the outrageous snow banks that always develop around that time.

The closest I came to conversation was basically eavesdropping on one. I was reading a copy of *The Stream* and contemplating what to do for my day off when Jeff came in and sat down at the table next to me.

I recognized him. I had seen a few of his shows and opening sets around town, but I was basically just aware of his presence at this point.

I kept reading until Jacob Doyle walked over with two coffees and sat down across from Jeff. Their initial conversation was not all that interesting – just some basic gossip about what was happening in the scene. Jacob asked about Tina, and Jeff shrugged it off. My attention kept drifting between the magazine and their conversation – I think I was reading some sort of painful interview with a local celebrity about their favorite vegan recipes.

I glanced up to stare out the window at the rain, and Jeff was almost directly in my line of sight. He looked pretty sad, I remember that, even back then when noticing such a thing did not seem so important in relation to his death, not two weeks after this particular conversation.

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Jacob finished, and they dimmed the stage lights they had set up special for the show. For his last song, he did a cover of Jeff Buckley's "Lover, You Should Have Come Over," which went over the best with the crowd, given everyone's familiarity with the song. There was a general push forward by some in the back, but not by me. I was fine standing at a distance, both due to fear of disappointment (this might still be a joke), and because of something else I couldn't quite pinpoint. Perhaps it's that over my relatively few years on earth I've tried very hard to live in the present, and so didn't want to get too close to the past, or to the people who were supposed to exist in it.

Ben tried to talk to me again, but this time I couldn't say anything at all, choked by the anticipation. There were conversations around the club, but they all sounded tentative and

full of short, disposable sentences. Thoughts that could be dropped at any moment so that nothing profound could be missed.

Elliot's Elegy played on the stereo for about two minutes, and it was noticed both when it came on and when – after a staff member rushed from the green room – it was abruptly shut off again.

More time went by. Tentative conversation. My thoughts that this might be a joke. Ben's zombie singer-songwriter comment circling absurdly in my head.

And then, ten minutes after *Elegy* was shut off in favor of silence and quiet bar chatter, the lights went up, and Jeff Elliot walked out onto the stage.

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If you search “Jeff Elliot” on youtube, you will find countless documentaries featuring talking heads and file photos (most very poorly taken) of Jeff. But there is one legitimate clip of him performing at a bar. It's someone's camera or maybe even cellphone taking the video, so it's heavily distorted due to crowd noise. He's playing “August Burns Away,” a song that is arguably about “never attaining what you want from life, even when it seems it's the hottest it's ever been and you're right inside it” (credit: Jian Gomeishi in a retrospective on Jeff's work). I happen to agree with this view of the song.

While many have since claimed his live version beats the recorded one, I can only believe that they have listened to the recorded one so much that they mentally fill in the gaps within the video – truth be told, you can barely hear Jeff throughout the clip with all the talking that happens while he plays.

Much has been written and discussed regarding this clip. How his playing style was changing, or how his dress style was even different in the weeks leading up to his death. But the most discussed and important part of the video is something that happens after the song ends. The host of the night jumps up on stage as Jeff strums the last chord and you hear a few hands clap. The host bellows: “Let’s hear it again for the great Jeff Elliot!” and – if you turn your speakers all the way up, you can hear Jeff respond “It’s cool man. Nobody listens anyway.”

“Nobody Listens Anyway” became the name of his biography, it became the group name on Facebook, and it became a one liner for most NL based musicians when they played a show they didn’t feel good about. It was a catchphrase, immortalizing Elliot in yet another way, and a girl who filmed each act that particular night with her camera for posterity was the one who caught it on film. Incidentally, most of the noise on the clip is presumed to be coming from the camera holder’s friend, who spends the duration of “August Burns Away” recounting how her boyfriend cheated on her the weekend before and what a douchebag he was.

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Nobody listens anyway were the words that kept echoing through my head over and over as Jeff Elliot walked onstage to thunderous applause. He was holding the same guitar Jacob had used, since his had been sold for something like five thousand dollars (an entry level Walden, retail: \$249.99).

Nobody listens anyway Jeff picked up the ¼ inch cable and plugged it in *nobody listens anyway* he straightened his strap as the crowd continued to roar *nobody listens anyway* he

stared down at the floor where his tuner was and adjusted some pegs *nobody listens anyway* the crowd roared on *nobody listens anyway* he stepped to the mic

Then that phrase was obliterated by the first chord, much like anything else I could have been thinking at that moment. The show began.

What can you say about a show that has become such a legend? There have been so many tellings and retellings and versions and revisions that nothing new can be said. So I'll just tell you the facts.

He played the hits. The ones we all knew all the words to. The ones we'd learned after he died. Every word to every song on *August Burns Away*, and even some of the *Elegy* album. When he sang "The Dark Woods," to an awestruck and quiet crowd, I heard a squeal and saw those girls in the front turning to one another with tears in their eyes.

He didn't speak though, which was a little strange. Jeff was hardly the most talkative songwriter between songs, but I do remember seeing him a few times where he'd at least mumble something semi-coherent into the mic every now and then. This time, there was nothing but the songs.

Each time he would finish one the crowd would – as expected – erupt into insane cheers. He remained mostly expressionless through the applause, which was hard to imagine simply because it was genuinely overwhelming. This audience was the strangest audience I have ever seen. They collectively sighed at certain lines, and when Jeff played "Present Tense," with the line "I will become yesterday when you really see today," everyone just seemed to get it. Literally, people nodded in agreement with the lyric.

Any emotion that was absent between songs was simply poured into the actual set, with each song somehow more scorching than the previous one. It was truly great to watch him. And the more I heard the more I understood that it was all there in the songs I'd already heard, I just hadn't seen it before. At least not in such an...important way. His words rattled in my ears, and when it was over I thought the entire place might rattle itself apart as the audience roared for a few songs from *Elliot's Elegy* that Jeff had never played live, or even for repeated songs, or for anything for that matter. The audience's roar reached a deafening decibel by the time Elliot's guitar was off, and remained at that level until he finally walked back onstage 3 long minutes later. He didn't bring his guitar this time. He just stepped up to the mic.

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“What do you want?” Jacob asked Jeff across the table that day in the coffee shop.

Though I knew at the time I shouldn't listen in, I was all ears for the answer, even back when I didn't think the answers mattered.

On top of looking sad, Jeff was pale as a ghost on that day. He was pretty pale most of the time, but he seemed almost transparent at this point. He didn't respond, and so Jacob prodded him more.

“Listen, Jeff, I know that things get rough – playing the clubs is the worst thing ever for guys like you – you don't write for drunks, just about them...” they chuckled a little together at this. “But lately man – you seem depressed, like you want something you don't have and don't think you'll ever get. I'm just wondering what exactly that is...”

Jeff didn't speak right away, just thumbed the handle on his cup of coffee, stared at it a minute. Then he looked up and said

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"I want people to hear this when it matters. Right now. Not when it's too late."

The audience simply looked at him in silence. A bomb went off in my head as I was taken back to that coffee shop, to that moment I heard him say that exact sentence. The only difference was the tone – in the coffee shop, it was almost pleading, now it was sarcastic. After a minute, some inflection-impaired idiot yelled out "Yeah, Jeff!" in agreement, though it appeared that most of the crowd – who simply stared back - understood it.

Moments passed in silence. A deeper silence than that place had ever seen, or would ever see again. You could feel that the audience was *expecting*. What we were actually expecting, I don't know. More words? A clarification on what that statement really meant? Perhaps a song to clarify. I've had many a debate with people since who believe that if had launched into "Diamond in the Rough," (the closing track on *Elliot's Elegy*) at that moment, The Ship would simply have closed its doors forever as there would never be a better show there.

But in the end, Jeff did something none of us were expecting. He stared out at us for some time, took in a panoramic of the crowd, and walked offstage, and out of our lives for the second time.

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In the days that followed we learned that he was truly gone, and all the supernatural, crazed media stuff came like a hurricane. It was a bonding experience for some in the sense that we had clearly all witnessed something otherworldly together – either that or we were all collectively insane or in on the greatest hoax of all time (in the weeks that followed there were actually ‘semi-voluntary’ studies conducted by health and government officials to find out if we – all 160 of us who got into the show – were actually insane or in on the greatest hoax of all time).

But that night, we just assumed he somehow escaped unseen, which seemed impossible given the layout of the venue and the sheer number at the show, but you can believe anything when you’ve just seen a dead man perform. The crowd thinned slowly and hesitantly, some not believing the show was actually over, and the other half needing to be convinced that there would be no meetings or signings after this particular show.

I waited outside on the steps of Solomon’s Lane, near the doorway to The Ship, the snow still falling straight down. Ben came out and offered me a cigarette.

“What can you say?” He said.

I just shook my head – the best, and the actual answer to that question.

“Interesting encore though. I don’t think I like his spoken word as much.”

I tried to muster a laugh at the lame joke, but it just came out as a huff. “What now?” I asked.

“It’s still pretty early, even for a Monday. I guess we could check out who’s playing up the road.”

“Sounds good,” I said, and we walked down Water Street in the snow.