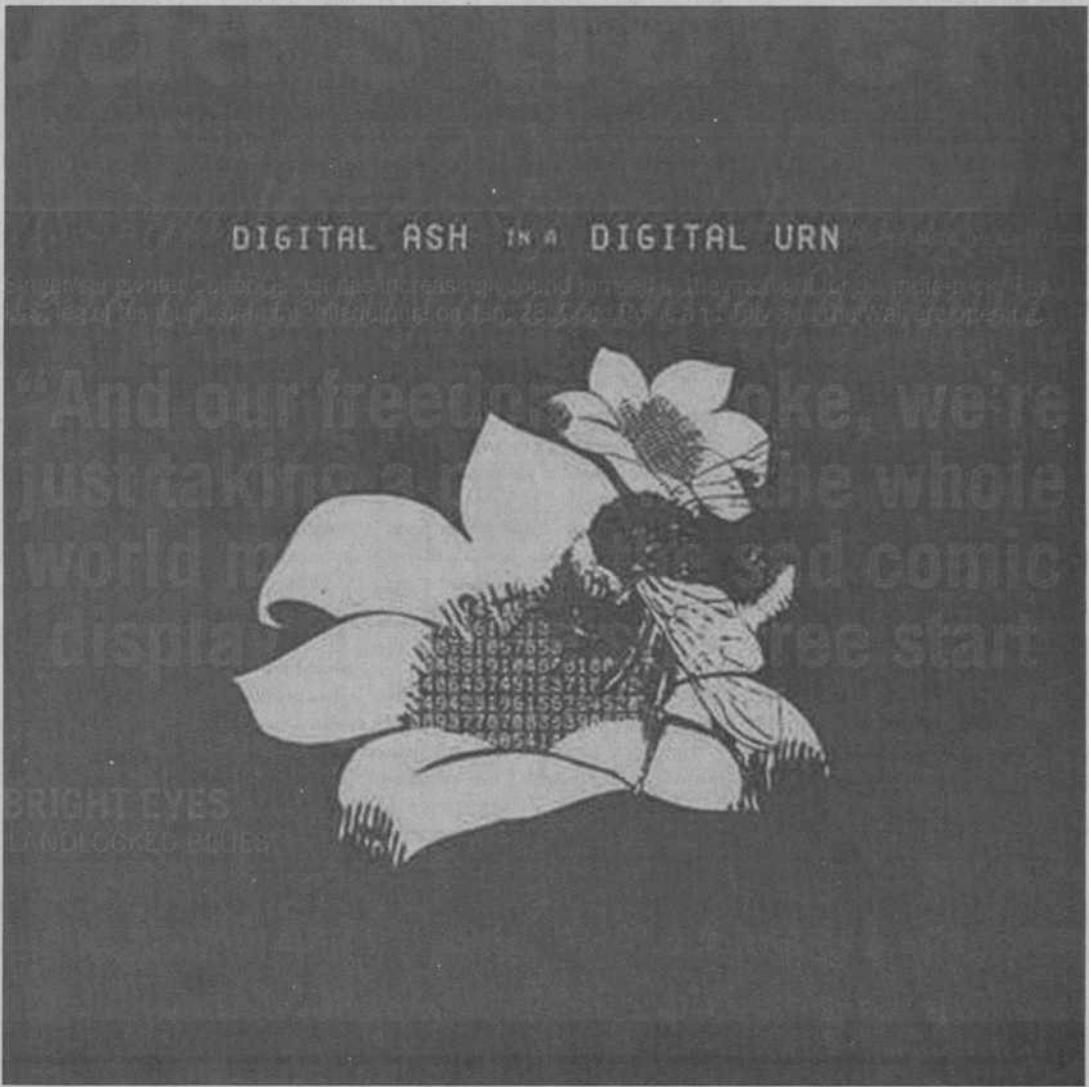
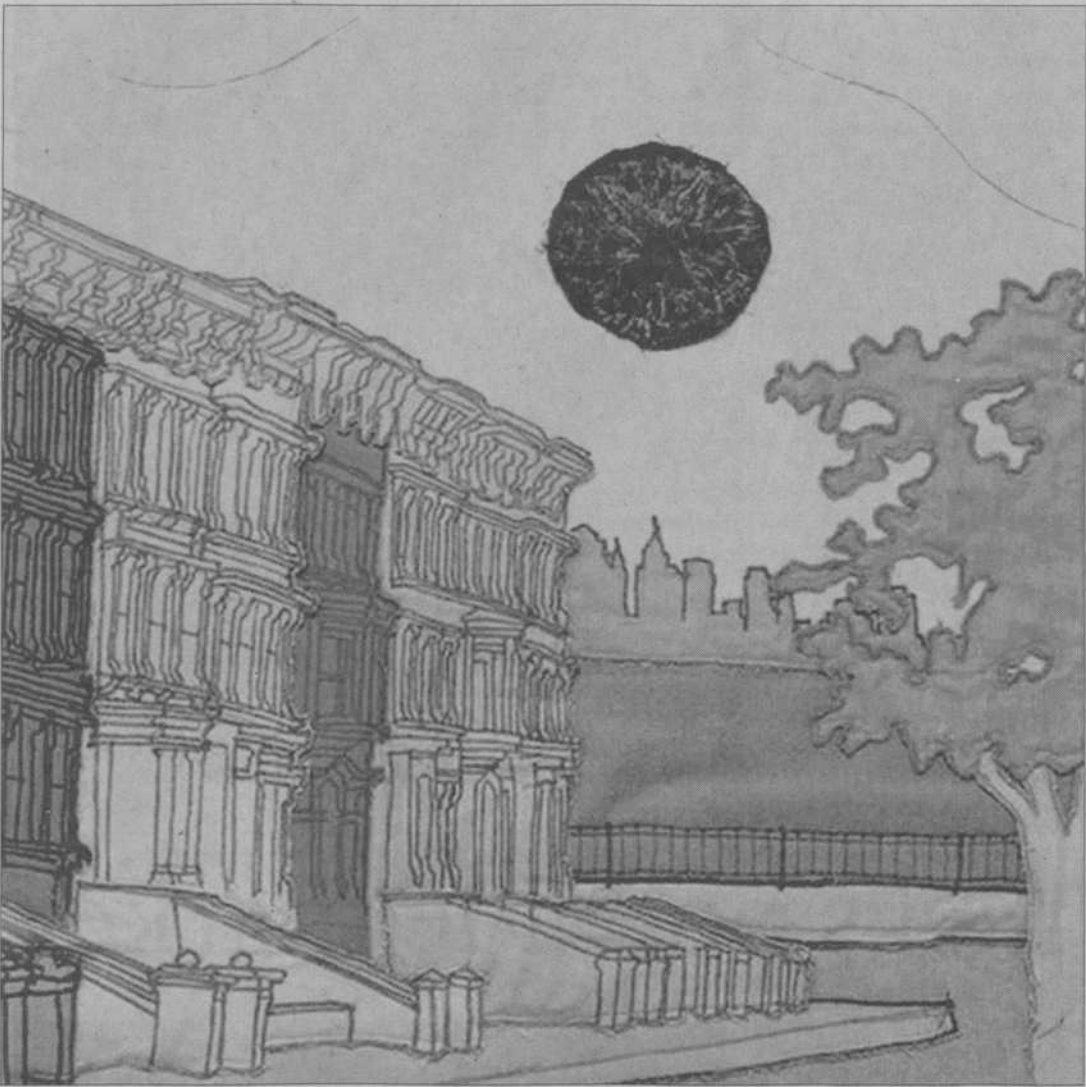




Oberst finds spotlight after long road's travel

Indie-rock darling releases albums simultaneously, each having separate concepts while holding true to critically acclaimed formula

**"Digital Ash in a Digital Urn"
"I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning"
Bright Eyes
★★★★ out of ☆☆☆☆**

By SHANA TILL
THE GAMECOCK

At only 24, Conor Oberst, a.k.a. Bright Eyes, has been hailed as the neo-Bob Dylan and Gram Parsons of our time. However, the hype surrounding Oberst's new celebrity might come a bit premature. Dylan, perhaps the most acclaimed songwriter in music history, fathered folk-rock with an emphasis on being an eye of the people. Gram Parsons is responsible for the genre of alt-country as we know it today. Without him, there would have been no Uncle Tupelo or Whiskeytown. While Oberst contains the qualities of becoming legendary in his own right, these are gigantic shoes to fill. Aside from the sheer magnitude of such comparisons, Oberst is well-known for being a docile contributor to the music world. He sings of what it's like live in a society of disenchanting youth.

Music history can recollect other meek rock musicians who entered the world of fame too early. Icons like Kurt Cobain and Jeff Buckley were extremely averse to the celebrity world and its pressures.

With an astounding rate of sales from the simultaneous Feb. 25 releases of "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning" and "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" many listeners and critics alike will be able to judge for themselves whether this indie-rocker from Nebraska lives up to the presumably premature hype.

While legions of indie-rock fans clamor for Bright Eyes' latest tales of dismal reality and love astray, they must be forewarned: The double album releases reveal a new side of Oberst. For those who think they know all there is to know simply from Oberst's perpetual soul-bearing in every self-deprecating lyric, this might come as a revelation. Nonetheless, the Saddle Creek Records releases, "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" and "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," provide a glimpse at a more mature Oberst experimenting with synth lines and Casio beats.

In what will be more consistently labeled the alt-country album of the duo, "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," opens with a spoken anecdote about a woman on an airplane as it's crashing. The track "At the Bottom of Everything" then veers into a carpe diem discourse warning, "We must take all of the medicines too expensive now to sell, set fire to the

preacher who is promising us to hell." Countering Oberst's sing-song approach, Jim James, vocalist of Bonnaroo darlings My Morning Jacket, adds a tone of haunting mortality with the esoteric, country ache in his backing vocals.

To further validate Oberst's alt-country chops, he enlists the help of well-established names such as Emmylou Harris and Mike Mogis. Harris harmonizes with Oberst in the backdrop of three songs: "We are Nowhere and It's Now," "Another Travelin' Song," and "Landlocked Blues." Mogis, producer of Presto! Recording Studios in Lincoln, Neb., not only helps in the production process but supplies the pedal steel and mandolin for several tracks.

Fans can rest assured Oberst has not abandoned the forlorn laments he has trademarked with his gutturally aching voice. On "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," Oberst shows he has not wavered from a tried-and-true formula. The country twinge of this album only accentuates the anthems of loneliness. This formula would not be so appealing without Oberst's penchant for songwriting. Writing lyrics that bear his soul-upon his sleeve produces a sincerity few others can touch. His politically charged songs contribute to his moniker as a true voice of society, and his mastering of the couplet adds a certain ease to each lyric.

On the track "Landlocked Blues," Oberst declares, "And our freedom's a joke, we're just taking a piss. And the whole world must watch the sad comic display, if you're still free start running away."

Oberst portrays the escapism of society's youth on "Lua." He sings, "We might die from medication but we sure killed all the pain. But what was normal in the evening by the morning seems insane."

In extreme contrast, "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," also reveals an Oberst who has matured along with the progression of his earlier albums. On one track, Oberst expresses unabashed hope for a romantic relationship. On the acoustically driven song, "First Day of My Life," Oberst romanticizes, "But now I don't care, I could go anywhere with you and I'd probably be happy. But I'd rather be working for a paycheck then waiting to win the lottery. Besides maybe this time it's different, I mean I really think you like me."

This alt-country half of the double release shows obvious progression in Oberst's style. His instrumentation is more disciplined, and his songwriting is better adapted to this more refined

sound. It seems as though Oberst is even eager to prove this point, as he has added re-recorded tracks to "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning." Listeners might perceive the renditions markedly improved, as Oberst's maturity adds an additional dimension.

The other half of the simultaneously released albums is "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn," which can be best understood as a whole 'nother beast. In what is seemingly an attempt to be less vulnerable, Oberst lays lyrics over digital glitches and synth-pop samples. His tremulous voice seems foreign next to the blips and bleeps that belong more on the albums of the newer of new wave resurgences.

Just as on "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning," Oberst provides an impressive ensemble for his supporting roles. Super producer Jimmy Tamborello, critically acclaimed for his work with indie-rock demi-gods The Postal Service, gives the track "Take it Easy (Love Nothing)" catchy rhythms and hooks.

Much like Oberst, Nick Zinner of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs receives a plethora of attention for his indie-rocker good looks. Luckily for Oberst and Zinner, they have another leg to stand on — talent. Zinner contributes rocking guitar riffs on several tracks including, "Down in a Rabbit Hole" and "Easy/Lucky/Free." However, Zinner also supplies the keyboard beats for "Take it Easy (Love Nothing)," among others.

Despite the jittery digital sound of "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn," Oberst doesn't abstain from his expected brand of songwriting. He continues to divulge his inner demons at a prolific rate. On the track "Hit the Switch," Oberst reveals a struggle of his conscious.

He sings, "I'm thinking of quitting drinking again. I know I've said that a couple of times."

While performing songs from "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" live, Oberst is accompanied by electronic wizards the Faint, who are also on Saddle Creek's label.

While "Digital Ash in a Digital Urn" illustrates Oberst's versatility, the concurrent release of "I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning" proves that his vocals and songwriting is better suited for the glory of alt-country. Oberst's fans won't shun "Digital Ash" because of his indie charm, but "I'm Wide Awake" will get more play-time in their cars' CD players.

Comments on this story? E-mail
gamecockfeatur@s@gwm.sc.edu

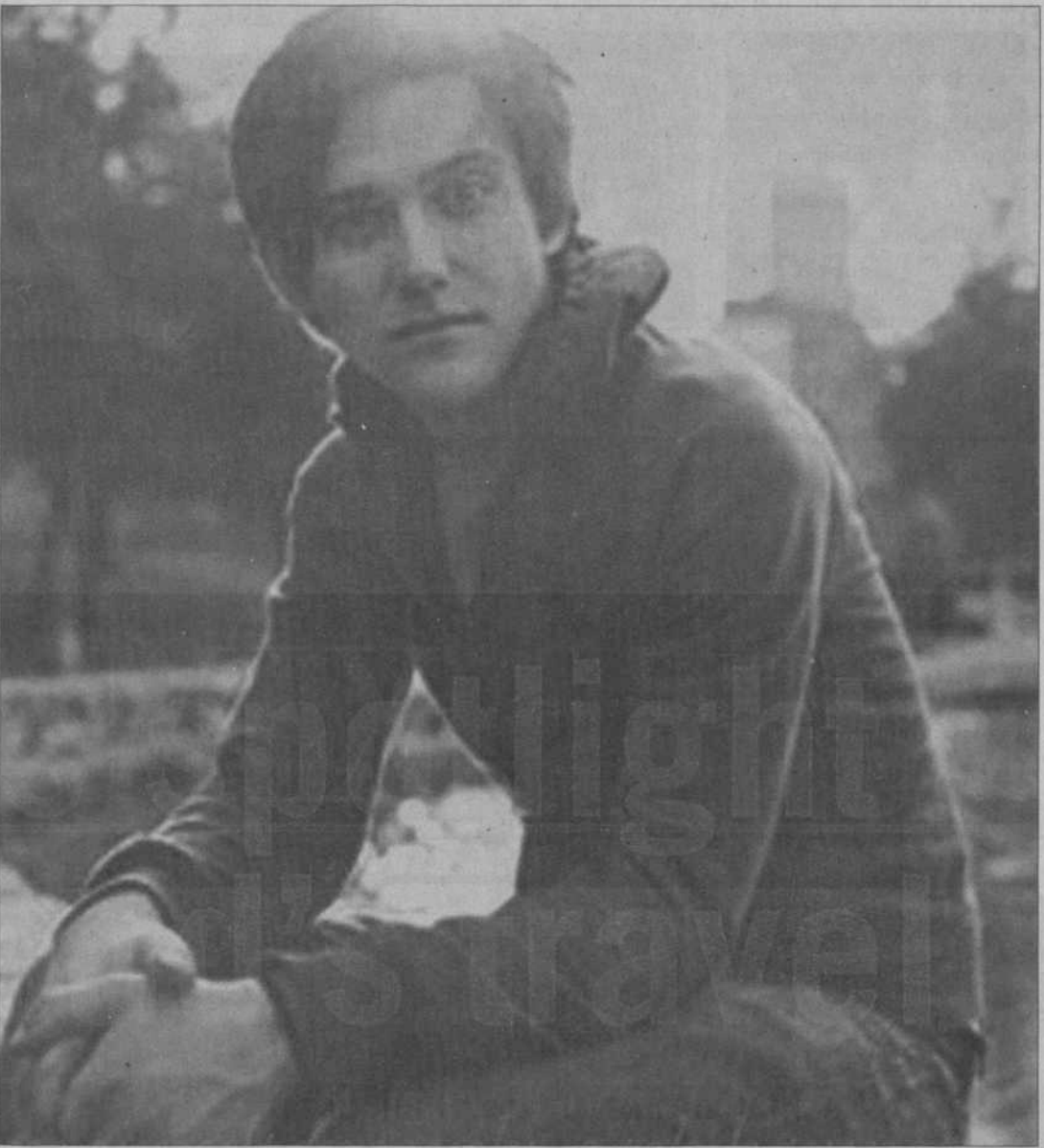


PHOTO SPECIAL TO THE GAMECOCK

Singer/songwriter Conor Oberst has increasingly found himself in the spotlight for his indie-rock. The U.S. leg of his tour began in Philadelphia on Jan. 28. Coco Rosie and Tilly and the Wall are opening.

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BRIGHT EYES
'LANDLOCKED BLUES'