

Music

MY DAD IS DEAD EMPTY BOTTLE, 8/13

My Dad Is Dead (But I'm OK Now)

Can a songwriter who made his name on bitterness be any good when he's happy?

By J. Niimi

There's nothing like untimely death to turn a minor celebrity into a legend, and "Hope I die before I get old" is the adolescent wish at the heart of rock 'n' roll. But if Kurt Cobain, Nick Drake, and Darby Crash had lived to see 40, they might've come to think of their death wishes as youthful follies—people have all sorts of strange ideas in their 20s.

Mark Edwards, who sings and plays guitar under the name My Dad Is Dead, has had his share of strange ideas. The dire lyrics he wrote in his 20s made him sound like he was good and ready to die—and not because he wanted to stay young forever. After 20 years and 11 albums, though, Edwards is 45, happily married, and financially comfortable. In 2002 he broke a long silence with a home-recorded album, *The Engine of Commerce* (Vital Cog), and last weekend he started playing in public again after a lapse of eight years, hitting the Empty Bottle on the second night of a tour that began in his native Cleveland. He's got a collection of songs called *A Divided House* coming out next month on a start-up label called Unhinged (the disc can be preordered at mydadisdead.com), and if the new material is any indication, he's still kicking not because his old cynicism and despair simply evaporated—instead he's found something even stronger to set up against them.

Edwards's 1986 debut, *My Dad Is Dead... and He's Not Gonna Take It Anymore*, established a

template for his early records, combining the chilly, hypnotic rhythms of Joy Division and the churning riffs of Killing Joke with the chiming arpeggios of the Smiths. His guitar sounded desperate, haunted, even guilty, and his lyrics, sung to simple, plaintive melodies in an almost conversational voice, were punningly gloomy. "Talk to the Weatherman," the opening track, paints a monochromatic picture of Cleveland in the dead of winter: "Can you tell me why / In this city skies are always gray / Can you tell me why / The sun won't shine on my house today."

Even the band's name was a total party killer. "I didn't want some stupid band name," Edwards says. "I was looking for something that had some kind of personal meaning... something that would force me to confront certain things." His mother, 38 when he was born, died during his teens, and his father, a union electrician nine years her senior, began a slow physical and psychological decline. He passed away in the early 80s, at about the time Edwards was teaching himself guitar. "He died of multiple physical problems, including rheumatoid arthritis, the genes for which he passed along to me in the form of lupus," Edwards says. "I already know I will not be able to play guitar forever... I'm just trying to live as full a life as I can for now."

In 1989 I bought a copy of My Dad Is Dead's debut at Wax Trax on Lincoln Avenue. I was in college and as depressed as a per-



Edwards at the Empty Bottle

son can get and still be able to climb out of bed and dress himself (though sometimes that's all

I could do). The Smiths were too funny for me, Bauhaus too arch, but My Dad Is Dead was a

tonic—some odd anodyne thing happens when you click with music that's more miserable



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than you are. I grokked songs like "Bad Judgement Day," on 1988's *Let's Skip the Details*, which is more or less about wanting to lie in dirty sheets staring at soap operas till you die because nothing matters. I definitely wanted to die before I got old—not to get famous, but just to get it over with.

A couple years later (and feeling much better, thanks) I had coffee with Edwards after a MDID show at Lounge Ax. He seemed to be feeling better too: he spoke excitedly of his engagement to a fan he'd been corresponding with for some time and told me that the critical success of his first few releases had convinced him to quit his job and make a go of music full-time. He was planning to leave Cleveland and make a new start in Austin, Texas. He was working on a record called *Chopping Down the Family Tree*, full of bittersweet lyrics about the struggle to break free of the past, and for the album after that he'd even shorten his band's name to MDID, hoping to increase his chances for mainstream acceptance.

But during our talk Edwards seemed vaguely anxious, and it

turned out he had reason to be. After a dispute with longtime label Homestead, he terminated his contract and released *Family Tree* on Scat, a tiny Cleveland-based imprint. Edwards ended up broke in Austin, but though he'd decided he needed to work again, he couldn't find a job. He and his wife returned to Cleveland, where their relationship began to sour, and divorced three years later. To add insult to injury, Gerard Cosloy, who'd also left Homestead and was helping Chris Lombardi get the fledgling Matador label off the ground, took a pass on My Dad Is Dead. (Matador's current prize pig, Interpol, sounds an awful lot like Edwards's band.)

If that had been the last turn Edwards's fortunes had taken, maybe he'd still be writing misanthropic stuff like "Anti-Socialist" ("He said what's the matter? / You don't like new people / Well, they put me on edge / And I could go either way"). Speaking strictly selfishly, that wouldn't be such a bad thing—I still identify with those bleak old songs, the way you can feel connected to pieces of your past even when they no longer define

you. But Edwards has remarried ("It's the real thing," he says) and forsaken bitter northern winters for the temperate climes of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where his wife works. He's happy to treat music as a side project now, not a potential route to the big time—he's fallen back on his training in accounting and flies back to Cleveland about once a month on business for a medical billing firm, and his life's much more happy and stable than it was in the early 90s. "I took out an \$8,000 loan to finance *Family Tree*," he says. "By the time I was in my mid-30s, I had no savings and no assets, except for my musical gear. I realized that there was just no way I could start a family going on like this." His new perspective on his career has affected his feelings about his old material too: "I would never write a song like 'Anti-Socialist' now," he says.

Edwards did dip into his back catalog a couple times at the Bottle last weekend, but alienated-loner songs like "Babe in the Woods" ("Gimme a break, kid / 'Cause you don't know anything / About walkin' in the dark") and cold-blooded vignettes like

"Nothing Special" ("She killed her man and threw his body down the back stairs. . . . She rid herself of the cause of her pain") stood out starkly from the new material. On many of his current tunes he focuses his frustration and disappointment through a political lens: the title track from *A Divided House*, for instance, seethes with indignation at the Bushies ("We didn't hire you to mess up our society / We don't care about your appearances of piety"). It's a profound turn for Edwards. "I was completely indifferent about politics in my 20s and 30s—I never voted. I was too wrapped up in my own situation."

The highlight of the set was another new track, an unabashed love song called "My Safe Place." In the past Edwards's attitudes about love have gravitated toward one of two extremes: either romanticized and rosy, where a relationship is the be-all and end-all of existence, or bitter and pessimistic, where it's a burden or a prison. "My Safe Place" takes the best parts of each for an outlook that's sweet but not sentimental, pragmatic but not hopeless. He's just cynical enough to be healthy:

Give yourself a break and give me one too

We're not among the lucky and chosen few

Who never had to work to maintain a friend

And never hang around long enough for the end

Alarmingly tall, with one leg shorter than the other, a gray-speckled beard, and a paunch behind his Martin acoustic, Edwards looked a bit out of place onstage at the Bottle. But his voice, once a slightly adenoidal buzz, has matured into a pleasantly husky baritone with a shadow of vibrato—enough to give you the comforting sense that he's been through a few things and knows what he's talking about.

At one point someone in the crowd yelled "Prisonshake!"—a shout-out to Edwards's sometime backing band. (Current MDID road drummer Scott Pickering was a member.) Edwards paused reflectively. "With all this talkin' about Cleveland bands tonight, I realized I've been doing this 20 years now," he said. "Hopefully we'll make it to 21." **B**

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