

Elliott Murphy

Biography

He lives in Paris, near the banks of the Seine with his French wife, Françoise, and his young son Gaspard. His best friend is fellow Parisian, expatriate (and original Modern Lover) Ernie Brooks, his long-time bassist. He tours France, Spain, Italy, Germany and Scandinavia when he's not writing. He's had one novel and two collections of short stories published in Europe in the last couple of years, and is working on another. And he produces passionate, intelligent, deeply-felt rock and roll.

His admirers in the music industry are legion, including such luminaries as Peter Dinklage, Peter Buck of R.E.M., The Violent Femmes, Doors producer Paul Rothchild, Lou Reed, Tom Petty, John Mellencamp and Elvis Costello. Sidemen on his albums have included Femmes, Smothers, Talking Heads, Velvets, neo-folkie Shawn Colvin and even AOR warhorses like Phil Collins and Billy Joel. This past summer, when Bruce Springsteen played Paris, Elliott Murphy was the artist asked to join him onstage, where the two performed an acoustic version of his signature "Rock Ballad." He wrote the classic liner notes to the Velvet Underground's 69 Live album. He's been in Fellini movies, made endless, slogging rock and roll tours, played in stripper joints, at Max's Kansas City, in tough, rural bars and in almost any situation that can be imagined.

He is Elliott James Murphy and his is one of the more remarkable stories in modern rock and roll.

Murphy was a smart, rebellious kid, growing up in Garden City, Long Island in the 1960's. He liked surfing, girls, music and F. Scott Fitzgerald. His was a show-business family; his father, Elliott Sr. ran the Aqua Show, a water ballet at the site of the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows. The Big Bands played there; Duke Ellington, and other top acts of the day. In high school, he won the New York State Battle of the Bands. Weekend nights, Murphy would go into Manhattan, seeking out the Velvet Underground, making the scene. With his brother Matthew he travelled to Europe, busking in subway stations and on street corners to make a living. When he returned to New York in 1973 he put together a band - Elliott Murphy's Aquashow - and started playing out at Max's and the Mercer Arts Center alongside bands like The New York Dolls and The Patti Smith Group. The Aquashow got an adulatory write-up in *Penthouse* and Murphy was soon signed to Polydor Records.

AQUASHOW, Murphy's debut, was released in November of 1973. The critical response was immediate and overwhelming. He had a writing style all his own; poetic imagery, verbal pyrotechnics, smooth and passionate guitar playing. Feature stories appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. Albums followed - LOST GENERATION and NIGHT LIGHTS for RCA in 1975 and 1976, JUST A STORY FROM AMERICA for CBS in 1977. Paul Nelson, at the time, one of the most influential critics in rock and roll wrote, "when the sun rises on Elliott Murphy, it rises on one of the best." *LA Times* critic Robert Hilburn named Murphy's NIGHT LIGHTS the best "alternative" record of the year.

The bubble burst in 1978, however. Caught in a wrangle between his management and CBS, Murphy was dropped by the label. "Disco had risen and singer/songwriters became a luxury we could no longer afford," Murphy recalled later. "It was a hard period. I spent a year living out at the end of Long Island writing songs about the *Titanic*."

In 1980, Murphy formed his own label and released the six-song E.P. AFFAIRS, which, although limited by distribution in the US, sold strongly and received glowing press notices. It also sparked considerable interest in Europe, where Murphy began touring regularly. "It was astonishing," he says in retrospect. "All the effort had been directed at making me a star in the US - I had no idea I had any following abroad until I played a theatre show in Paris. I got six encores and the audience sang along to all the songs." In 1982 he released MURPH THE SURF, an album that saw his talents reach full fruition in exquisitely crafted folk-rock, presaging the late-80's revival in that style by a full five years. '84's PARTY GIRLS/BROKEN POETS, recorded for Warner Brothers in Europe, made several US critics' Ten Best of the Year lists and was nominated for Album of the Year by the New York Music Awards, despite its never being released domestically.

By the mid-eighties, Murphy's cult was solidifying in the US and abroad. Fan clubs sprang up in France, Italy, Japan and the US. A series of bootleg albums emerged, including LIVE AT MONTREUX '84, MR. BLUE, TALKIN' ABOUT AMERICA and the elusive FLASH IN SHADOW. Murphy was writing extensively, penning articles and short stories for *Spin* and numerous other publications, including *Rolling Stone* interviews with Tom Waits and Keith Richards.

(more)

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Murphy's regular Wednesday-night gig at the tiny Tramps club in New York became a pilgrimage of sorts for fans from America and abroad. With drummer Tony Machine, Ernie Brooks on bass and the late Patti Smith keyboardist Richard Sohl (later supplanted by Art Labriola), they created some of the best rock and roll of the 1980's, out of the spotlight, far from the momentary locus of fashion.

In 1986, Murphy created the stunning MILWAUKEE album with Jerry Harrison (keyboardist for the Talking Heads and a former Murphy bandmember) as guest producer. This record received three-and-a-half stars in **Rolling Stone** and was the first of Murphy's albums to appear on the New Rose label abroad. The follow-up, CHANGE WILL COME, recorded in New York with Smithereens producer James Ball, was also warmly received. A live album, HOT POINT, with Chris Spedding guesting on lead guitar, followed, and in 1990, following his move to Paris, Murphy released what is probably his major work to date, the intensely personal twenty-four song 12. Now, with a shortened version, titled UNREAL CITY, to be released in the States, US listeners will have the opportunity to hear the work of a master songwriter in full command of his art.

UNREAL CITY will be the second Murphy release for the feisty New York independent label Razor & Tie. Their first foray, 1992's eighteen-song DIAMONDS BY THE YARD compilation of Murphy's 1970's work, garnered extremely favorable press and has served as a trigger to reviving interest in Murphy's work. That the youthful idealism of "Last of the Rock Stars" gave way to the harrowing disillusionment of "Caught Short in the Long Run" is no surprise. What is an astonishment is the power with which Murphy has come back. Songs like "Sicily" and "Something Like Steve McQueen" are masterworks, full of insight, brimming with wit, passion and irony. UNREAL CITY was recorded direct-to-DAT live in the studio and shows the utter confidence of an artist at the peak of his power.

With plans for twice-yearly domestic touring underway it seems that US audiences will at last have the chance to get to know one of the most remarkable songwriters the rock and roll era has produced: Elliott Murphy. He is no household name and he will probably never be one. But as Paul Nelson wrote, now almost twenty years ago, "Elliott Murphy's music will be with us for as long as we have rock and roll. I suggest we play it now."

Discography

1973	AQUASHOW	Polydor	Reissued Polygram, 1989
1975	LOST GENERATION	RCA	Reissued BMG, 1990
1976	NIGHT LIGHTS	RCA	Reissued BMG, 1991
1977	JUST A STORY FROM AMERICA	CBS	Reissued Sony Europe, 1990
1980	AFFAIRS	Courtisane/Ariola	Reissued New Rose, 1990
1982	MURPH THE SURF	Courtisane/Disc A-Z	Reissued New Rose, 1990
1984	PARTY GIRLS/BROKEN POETS	WEA International	Reissued Dejadisc, 1992
1985	APRES LE DELUGE	EMIS	Reissued New Rose, 1988
1987	MILWAUKEE	EMIS/New Rose	
1988	CHANGE WILL COME	New Rose	
1989	LIVE HOT POINT	New Rose	
1990	12	New Rose	
1991	IF POETS WERE KING (e.p.)	New Rose	
1992	DIAMONDS BY THE YARD (anthology)	Razor & Tie	
1992	PARIS/NEW YORK (anthology)	New Rose	
1993	UNREAL CITY	Razor & Tie	