

Reinfandt, Christoph. "Going Fetal with the Eels: The Autobiographic Self in Alternative Rock." Patrick Burger, Martin Butler and Arvi Sepp, eds. *Sound Fabrics: Studies on the Intermedial and Institutional Dimensions of Popular Music*. Trier: WVT, 2009: 155-173.

focal point

Arbeiten zur anglistischen und amerikanistischen Medienwissenschaft
Studies in English and American Media


Herausgegeben von
Edited by
Jörg Helbig, Angela Krewani

Band
Volume
10

Martin Butler, Arvi Sepp, Patrick R. Burger (Eds.)

Sound Fabrics

**Studies on the Intermedial and
Institutional Dimensions of
Popular Music**

 **Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier 2009**

Going Fetal with the Eels: The Autobiographical Self in Alternative Rock

Christoph Reinfandt

In 2005, Mark Oliver Everett, also known as 'E,' the mastermind behind the band identity 'Eels,' managed to put out a sprawling, 33-track double album called *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations* with Vagrant Records, an 'independent'/'alternative' subsidiary of mainstream player Interscope/Universal. Ironically, E had shortly before been sacked from the 'genuine' alternative label DreamWorks, founded in the mid-1990s heyday of alternative rock by record industry legends Larry Waronker and Mo Ostin of 1970s and 1980s Warner Brothers fame – formerly involved with the careers of Neil Young, Jimi Hendrix, Prince, The Kinks, Van Morrison and Randy Newman. As E recalls in his autobiography:

After DreamWorks was sold to Universal and the Interscope A&R guy who seemed so gung-ho about my 'artistry' then told my manager that it wasn't the right place for me after all, I was paid out of my contract and allowed to take the *Blinking Lights* album with me. Money for nothing, as they say. They didn't even ask to hear a single note of the album. Then I signed on with Vagrant Records, which was owned by Interscope and Universal anyway, so it's one of those great stories where the artist sort of gets paid twice by the same company. (Everett 224)

In the autobiography, published in 2008 under the title *Things the Grandchildren Should Know*, this episode prepares the ground for the final, if preliminary apotheosis of the artist's life so far. With *Blinking Lights*, seven years in the making, a decade of intense artistic activity, beginning with the alternative rock hit "Novocaine for the Soul" and the debut album *Beautiful Freak* in 1996 and continuing with *Electro-Shock Blues* (1998), *Daisies of the Galaxy* (2000), *Souljacker* (2001), and *Shootenanny!* (2003), all published with DreamWorks, seemed to round itself off. This sense of achievement was not only celebrated with the publication of the autobiography, but also with a tour involving that epitome of respectability, a string quartet, documented on the CD and DVD *Eels with Strings: Live at Town Hall* (2006), as well as the lavishly produced retrospectives *Useless Trinkets: B-Sides, Rarities and Unreleased 1996-2006* (2 CDs plus 1 DVD, 2007) and *Meet the Eels: Essential Eels Vol. 1 1996-2006* (1 CD plus 1 DVD, 2008). What we are witnessing here, then, is 'alternative rock' canonizing itself, as it were, and the following essay will try to shed light on the precarious cultural position as well as the (re-)medial possibilities of a genre (?) priding itself on its 'authenticity' in the face of the blatant commercialism of post-1980s mainstream pop culture. It will be argued that a strong sense of an aesthetic surplus value with critical overtones is highly characteristic of the 'rock' ingredient in popular culture, and that 'alternative rock' can be profitably described as an attempt at maintaining this stance even after rock has moved away from its revolutionary youth culture origins towards the middle-aged respectability of 'classic rock.'

The Eels are particularly interesting in this context in that they combine the confessional and autobiographical tendencies of 'alternative' performers like, say, Elliott Smith, with the playfulness afforded by an artificial band identity as taken to extremes in, for example, Damon Albarn's *Gorillaz* project (cf. Eckstein), covering the full range of media(l) possibilities in the process. Accordingly, Eels songs oscillate between the intensely personal on the one hand and aspirations to superstardom in ironical perspective on the other, as "Going Fetal" from *Blinking Lights* illustrates most instructively. Introduced in the CD booklet with the comment "I Dreamt I Started an International Dance Craze Based On My Anxieties Wherein Girls Scream When Tom Waits Cries," the track alerts the listener to its special significance by suddenly interrupting the serene studio proceedings of the album so far with a hysterical live atmosphere reminiscent of *The Beatles at the Hollywood Bowl*. The song itself kicks off with an old-time rock 'n' roll drum groove followed by a simple La-Bamba-style guitar riff supplemented by a weird, baby-like cry (as it turns out, by Tom Waits). This is met with an even more hysterical audience response before the full band sets in with a distinctly nostalgic sound: guitars, bass, Hammond organ and drums plus, later, a full horn section emphasizing, somewhat eccentrically, the lower saxophone register, and an equally eccentric all-male chorus providing rhythmical punctuation. Musically, "Going Fetal" is thus a typical example of alternative rock's strong reliance on past musical styles and sounds which are recontextualized in a strange mixture of nostalgia and critique. Its tongue-in-cheek evocation of 1950s to early 1960s good-time music and youth culture is alert to both the stereotypical and the emancipatory potential of the older forms, and it is not quite clear whether nostalgia or irony has the upper hand. The same applies to the lyrics:¹

everyone is going fetal
it's the dance the kids all feel
just get down under your desk
feels like your mama's nest
alright

everyone is going fetal
it's the one that's really real
you're gonna love it if you give it a try
you just lay down like you're gonna die
alright

everyone is going fetal
if you feel like your fate is sealed
then just get down and curl on up
just like a little helpless pup
alright

everyone is going fetal

Along with the generic and very uplifting appeal to emotions, authenticity and collective experience ('all feel,' 'really real,' 'everyone'), there is a subtle evocation of the

¹ Quoted as printed in the booklet in manual typeface without capital letters.

political reality of the 1950s and 60s with its fear of imminent nuclear annihilation ('lay down like you're gonna die,' 'your fate is sealed'), which was in turn countered by fairly ridiculous official measures ('get down under your desk'). If you take these allusions seriously, introverted regression and extroverted escapism are clearly identified in "Going Fetal" as the core ingredients of popular music, but they are supplemented by a critical awareness of the cultural field in which these strategies were (and still are) at work. Thus, the song also demonstrates that there is a strand in popular music fully aware of popular music's limitations, and that within this strand elements of earlier popular styles may well be deemed worthy of recontextualization some 30 years later in a process which identifies and builds an 'alternative' tradition of 'genuine' rock.

I. 'From Which I Came': Pop/Rock/Alternative

Rock music, many critics agree, is that part of popular music which takes itself seriously as an art form, thus claiming the special status of 'good popular music' as opposed to the purely commercial character of other types of popular music:

The idea of rock involves a rejection of those aspects of mass distributed music which are believed to be soft, safe or trivial, those things which may be dismissed as worthless 'pop' – the very opposite of rock. Instead the styles, genres and performers that are thought to merit the name 'rock' must be seen as serious, significant and legitimate in some way. (Keightley 109)

Here, we are obviously entering a highly charged ideological field predicated on the function of cultural capital for social distinction (cf. Bourdieu), while the actual position of rock music as a cultural practice is a precarious one:

One of the great ironies of the second half of the twentieth century is that while rock has involved millions of people buying a mass-marketed, standardised commodity (CD, cassette, LP) that is available virtually everywhere, these purchases have produced intense feelings of freedom, rebellion, marginality, oppositionality, uniqueness and authenticity. It is precisely this predicament that defines rock, since negotiating the relationship between the 'mass' and the 'art' in mass art has been the distinguishing ideological project of rock culture since the 1960s ... Taking popular music seriously, as something more than mere entertainment or distraction, has been the crucial feature of rock culture since its emergence. (Keightley 109-10)

How, then, can this precarious position be transformed into a secure ideological stance which implies an equally secure cultural 'location'? The answer is: by drawing upon already existing discursive formations, preferably with lots of cultural capital attached. Accordingly, rock music as a cultural practice is heavily influenced by notions of authenticity, autonomy and authorship that were established and codified in Romantic and modernist aesthetics and are thus rooted in the tradition of modern art and literature since the 18th century. The distinct but complementary approaches of Romanticism and modernism are fused in what might be called the rock ideology of authenticity (cf. Gracyk 218-26; Shuker 8-9, 99-114; Keightley 131-39), which can be differentiated into Romantic and modernist varieties with regard to its aesthetics of

production, but tends to be biased towards Romantic notions of the performer's 'authentic' self-expression in acts of reception focused on the voice of the performer:²

The aesthetics of 'authenticity' dominates mainstream rock vocalism: 'real experience', expressed with 'sincerity', is regarded as the indispensable basis for good (that is, 'honest') singing ... What happens here is that two distinct semiotic levels – that of the 'text' and that of the 'utterance' – are conflated; thus the subject of the song's lyric ... is identified with that of the performance act. (Middleton 38)

For all practical purposes, Keir Keightley's seminal article "Reconsidering Rock" provides an instructive 'map' for tracing rock music's double-coding of Romantic and modernist elements in the songs themselves (cf. 137):

Authenticity in Rock Music	
Modernist authenticity to be found more in	Romantic authenticity to be found more in
experimentation and progress (avant gardes)	tradition and continuity with the past (roots)
status of artist	sense of community
elitism	populism
openness regarding rock sounds	belief in core or essential rock sound
classical, art music, soul, pop styles	folk, blues, country, rock'n'roll styles
radical or sudden stylistic change	gradual stylistic change
irony, sarcasm, obliqueness	sincerity, directness
'recordedness'	'liveness'
'shocking' sounds	'natural' sounds
celebrating technology	hiding musical technology

With this double-coding rock music avoids the sentimentality and naivety of the merely popular (cf. Anderson/Mullen) and stakes its claim for greater cultural authority, significance and relevance. And it is this claim which is then paradoxically perpetuated in alternative rock's continuation of the rebellious Do-It-Yourself ethos of punk (cf. Savage; Rupp) in opposition to 'inauthentic' and 'alienated' forms of rock music as pop music in the 1980s (cf. Reynolds; Azerrad). However, history keeps repeating itself, as the absorption of alternative rock into the 'Contemporary Rock' of R.E.M. and U2 illustrates (Gregory 214-15), and the actual dividing line between 'rock' and 'alternative rock' is hard to make out these days, particularly after the term 'alternative' was turned into a promotional category of genre in award ceremonies

² On the general influence of Romanticism on rock conventions, cf. Pattison, Meisel, Reinfandt.

(Grammy, MTV) and festival advertisements from the early 1990s onwards.³ Paradoxically, then, the tag 'alternative' in the 2000s carries the ideological markers of music that is "fiercely iconoclastic, anticommercial, and antimainstream," but it is also used from a music industry perspective to denote the complete spectrum of "choices available to consumers via record stores, radio, cable television, and the Internet" (Starr/Waterman 430), thus indicating the general development towards what Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis (1996) have memorably called the 'mainstream of minorities' which can in turn be placed within a larger framework of 'collective individuality' (cf. Reinfandt 278) forming a 'lonely crowd' (Riesman).

Consequently, Eels records are today just as likely to be filed in the 'independent' as in the 'rock/pop' shelves of record stores, and the tag 'alternative' seems to primarily denote an attitude – on the part of the performer as well as on the part of the audience. However, a brief look at the Eels' emergence lays bare some coordinates. Of the pre-Eels efforts largely disowned by E himself only one record is currently commercially available – an album called *A Man Called (E)* which came out in 1992 on the major label PolyGram. This record, while indicating the direction E's work was going to take – the bracketed identity, the slightly depressive stance, photographs of E in suit playing a toy piano and of a nailed rubber heart sculpture in the CD booklet⁴ – suffers severely from studio overproduction, resulting in a glossy 'pop' sound surface replete with slick orchestral arrangements and timpani.⁵ So perhaps it was a good thing that the follow-up *Broken Toy Shop* (1993) turned out to be collateral damage in the turmoil of restructuring processes at PolyGram and sunk without trace, leaving E without a contract and time on his hands to return to his former methods of DIY recording at home, this time adding the new technology of sampling to his repertoire of skills (vocals, guitars, bass, keyboards, drums and percussion). Between 1993 and 1996 a large collection of tracks was produced in E's basement with occasional forays into the home studios of friends from the L.A. music scene like Mark Goldenberg and Jon Brion, and some of these tapes, and "Novocaine for the Soul" in particular, were eventually played to an enthusiastic response by local radio stations in L.A., which in turn led to the formation of the Eels for playing live, comprising E (guitar, occasional keyboards, vocals), Jonathan 'Butch' Norton (drums) and Tommy Walter (bass). When finally a selection from these tracks was put together to form the album *Beautiful Freak* (1996; produced by E, co-produced and mixed by Michael Simpson) on the DreamWorks label, even casual listening made it clear that the personnel

³ For a well-researched, highly informative and continuously updated introduction to this comparatively recent cultural phenomenon cf. the entry on 'Alternative Rock' in Wikipedia, which is a good example of 'the free encyclopedia' at its best (Wikipedia: 'Alternative Rock').

⁴ Song titles like "Hello Cruel World" (a minor success as a single leading to E opening for Tori Amos), "Fitting In With the Misfits," "Nowheresville," "I've Been Kicked Around" and "You'll Be the Scarecrow" set the pattern for later lyrics, while "Symphony for Toy Piano in G Minor" anticipates many later experiments in appropriating the toy piano, *glockenspiel* and other marginalized instruments for rock purposes.

⁵ Production credits go to E and PolyGram producer Parthenon Huxley.

given in the CD booklet (E: guitar, wurlitzer, vocals, Butch: drums, vocals and Tommy: bass, vocals) could not be responsible for the complex soundscapes on the album, which were in fact largely created by E alone with contributions from Mark Goldenberg (guitars, keyboards), Jon Brion (chamberlin, guitars, trombone) and Jim Jacobsen (keyboards and loops).

Clearly, then, the music of the Eels has existed in two parallel registers from the very beginning: on the one hand there are the carefully crafted sound sculptures of the (home) studio recordings, basically laid down by E himself with a little help from assorted friends and acquaintances. These recordings display a high awareness of their 'recordedness,' they revel in the opportunities technology has created for experimenting with unusual sounds and draw unashamedly on influences from art music and older pop styles. On the other hand, *Beautiful Freak* projects a band identity of three core players who are only introduced by their first names or rather nick-names, thus suggesting a degree of intimacy and familiarity with the audience, while live performances from those early days are clearly imbued with the 'sincerity' and 'directness' of punk and feature the quintessential 'liveness' of the electric guitar, bass and drums rock sound. Any song by the Eels thus combines modernist and Romantic features of authenticity which come together more or less homogeneously in all existing variants of the song. "Novocaine for the Soul," for example, exists by the time of writing (summer 2008) in four officially released disguises and numerous unofficial live incarnations accessible on the internet (and, of course, in concert). Besides the studio version which opens *Beautiful Freak* there is the highly unorthodox live version for harmonium, double bass, string quartet and musical saw from the Town Hall concert, published on *Eels with Strings*, as well as two further studio versions published on *Useless Trinkets*, one, subtitled "Live from Hell" though clearly not 'live,' a sparse affair focused on *glockenspiel*, electric guitar, electric piano and drums with spoken vocals, the other a fully synthesized "Moog Cookbook Remix." There is, however, no doubt whatsoever that the version on *Beautiful Freak* is the reference version against which all other versions are held, and what is more, the official video accompanying the single release subtly combines the modernist and Romantic varieties of authenticity. As it is definitely the most famous Eels song so far, a closer look at the song and the video can provide a suitable point of entry to the Eels universe.⁶

The song itself is structurally unadventurous, consisting of verse, chorus and bridge played in conventional sequence (V-C-V-C-B-V(solo)-V-C). Accordingly, its originality and resonance must reside elsewhere, such as, for example, in the lyrics:⁷

⁶ A grumpy E comments on opening the *Useless Trinkets* collection with "Novocaine for the Soul (Live from Hell)" in the liner notes: "When you have a hit song, you're expected to play it every single day of your life. Good luck not going crazy."

⁷ Quoted with modifications (separation of V2 and C2, substituting 'who's' for 'whose' in the bridge) from <<http://www.eelstheband.com>>. The "Live from Hell" version (but only that one) on *Useless Trinkets* opens some-

- V1: life is hard
and so am i
you'd better give me something
so i don't die
- C1: novocaine for the soul
before i sputter out
- V2: life is white
and i am black
jesus and his lawyer
are coming back
- C2: oh my darling
will you be here
before i sputter out
- B: guess [who's] living here
with the great undead
this paint-by-numbers life
is fucking with my head
once again
- V (instrumental/guitar solo)
- V3: life is good
and i feel great
'cause mother says i was
a great mistake
- C3: novocaine for the soul
you'd better give me something
to fill the hole
before i sputter out

Clearly, the song strives to strike a chord in the key of alienation, and it does so by positing a generalized 'I' in opposition to the proverbially hard paint-by-numbers life at the end of the twentieth century when religion has been turned into a judicial problem (V2) and existence is suffering from a spiritual hole at its centre (C3). The only remedies are the possibility of love (C2) and the novocaine of the title, a synthetic local anaesthetic that the singer asks for repeatedly. The contrast, however, is undercut by the singer's stance, which positions the speaker ambiguously: life is hard, but so is he (V1); he is certainly not black and in the color-sensitive music business this will surely be noted (V2); and when he finally feels great, he turns insult into strength (V3). In fact, the hook of the song is not the title phrase but rather the line "before i sputter out" accompanied by harmonic and rhythmic release in guitar powerchords throughout, and here the choice of words clearly undermines the pathos: before he sputters out, the singer will definitely go on playing like that, so that he himself provides his novocaine. But is the release provided by the playing or the song?

what enigmatically with "little bird / with your beak pressed against the window / there are no seeds for you today // life is hard ..."

This ambiguity is nicely illustrated in the video which follows the audio track closely.⁸ Filmed in black and white and set in a run-down neighborhood of backyards in downtown L.A., the video actually explains the audio track's strange opening visually by showing E putting down the needle of a portable record player placed in front of an abandoned shop on to a vinyl record which is marked by its centre label as an incarnation of *Beautiful Freak*. In a self-reflexive moment of nostalgic referencing and programmatic media awareness, the recording opens with the scratching sounds of a needle on vinyl and introduces a 1960s bass plus drums pattern which is then supplemented by the more 'immediate' sounds of a *glockenspiel* and synthesized strings. When the strings set in, E, who has put on his headphones and is tapping the beat, begins to float, held back only by the headphones' cord, and up in the air he sings the first verse looking up into the camera. Only with the switch from first verse to first chorus does the 'present' sound of "Novocaine for the Soul," dominated by guitar powerchords, electric bass and drums, establish itself, accompanied by a cut to the band floating above their bandstand in a similar backstreet, playing their instruments up in the air, again held back by their electric instruments' cords. While the track lasts, the video moves from player to player, either with or without instruments, floating about in a realm without gravity, experimenting with positions on lampposts and walls, elaborate figures and flight formations. Only when the music comes to an abrupt stop after the second chorus (a gap roughly doubled in length on the video), we see E crashing down next to the record player and stumbling about until the bridge begins, in which he unwittingly (?) crashes with his head into a surveillance camera in time for making the f-word in "is fucking with my head" unrecognizable (even though it is clearly sung on the audio track), explicitly identifying the camera with the "paint-by-numbers life" evoked in the lyrics. At the end of the track the three band members (without instruments) land smoothly in the back street from which their bandstand has vanished and slowly turn round the corner into the main street to join the flow of pedestrians passing by.

Strikingly, then, not only the singer but all three musicians in the video manage to literally carve out their own space in a world of surveillance as long as the music lasts. And this insistence on the emancipatory potential of popular music is, as the opening sequence shows, clearly meant to include the passive consumers who are just listening to records. Like the later "Going Fetal," "Novocaine for the Soul" acknowledges the regressive and escapist dimensions of popular music, but it is so centrally positioned in its contemporary world that these dimensions are fused with a critical awareness of the continuum of mediated realities that runs from surveillance cameras to music videos. With this awareness, the floating space of individual activity and appreciation can retain its significance in the face of pervasive mediation: even in such an environment, where experience is largely induced and framed by the

⁸ The video is available on the Eels Video Collection DVD included in *Meet the Eels*. It was directed by Mark Romanek.

media, the video seems to suggest that there will always be an irreducible core of experience which belongs to the individuals alone, and playing and listening to music is one of these experiences. This, of course, is a highly Romantic notion expressed in a modernist combination of sound dimensions – 1960s pop meets 1990s rock by means of an intermediate layer of primitive (*glockenspiel*) and technologically advanced (synthesizer) sounds – and visual dimensions. Interestingly, the sound dimension of "Novocaine for the Soul" was largely home-made and then offered for commercial distribution, while the visual dimension was added only later within the parameters of a post-MTV pop economy which seemed to suggest that videos are an absolute necessity on which much money should be spent.⁹ In the liner notes to *Meet the Eels*, E comments on this discrepancy between sound and image which is impressively pasted over by the convincing if highly artificial band performance in the video: "This [the audio track] was recorded a few years before it came out in 1996. I was rocking my paisley Telecaster pretty good, considering the rinky dink set up I had in my teeny tiny studio in Echo Park. Little did I know I'd be flying around MTV a few years later." It is indeed striking that even in this highly commercialized sphere of flying individuals, the rock ideology of authenticity seems to resist commodification to a certain extent, possibly because it is based on highly individualized processes of reception drawing on extremely complex semiotic designs which fuse words, sounds and images in larger contexts of individualized and conventionalized understanding. And into this space of representation E moved with his next productions.

II. 'Going to Your Funeral': Towards Autobiography

While certainly an accomplished record full of catchy titles and refrains in a varied soundscape which integrates digital sampling ("Susan's House") with straight rock grooves ("Rags to Rags," "Not Ready Yet," "My Beloved Moster," "Mental") and pop influences ("Your Lucky Day in Hell") as well as highly eccentric sonic experiments in an introspective mood ("Flower," "Spunky," "Manchild"), the overall ambience of *Beautiful Freak* indicates inventiveness and playfulness rather than artistic urgency. This changed completely with the Eels' next album, *Electro-Shock Blues* (1998), which E 'wrote' and produced in reaction to his sister Liz's suicide and his mother's impending death by cancer. In his autobiography, E clearly identifies his decision to actually draw upon his personal crisis in a fairly direct way as an artistic breakthrough:

I never considered writing songs about what was going on with my family ... it seemed too personal and too tragic ... Then one night ... I had an epiphany ... I realized that I

⁹ In the highly ironical voice-over comment on the *Meet the Eels* Video Collection DVD E still marvels at how expensive the video actually was in 1996. Some ten years later, such expensive video productions seem unfeasible, and MTV has assumed a completely different character no longer centered around music videos. In fact, this development can be traced on the DVD: Towards 2006 Eels videos become rarer and embrace an increasingly home-made, low-budget aura which clearly makes fun of the commercial and institutional pressures surrounding music videos. The DVD ends with an excerpt from the Town Hall concert, thus indicating that the music video days may be over.

had to write about what was going on, and that ... it wouldn't work to try desperately to ignore the ten-ton elephant in the room ... I could make something from all this ... I didn't give a shit any more about the MTV world that I had become a part of. I thought it would be cool but, if you saw how it really works, it's sickening. What if a painter had to show a sketch to a 'focus group' before he made a painting? (139/144, original emphasis)

Along these lines, the record is (again) fully home-produced and was only presented to the record company in its entirety and final state, even though E's manager was sure that "Nobody wants to hear an album about *death*" (Everett 145, original emphasis). However, Lenny Waronker and Mo Ostin liked what they heard, and *Electro-Shock Blues*, though not as successful as *Beautiful Freak*, went on to become one of the best-loved Eels albums, a cornerstone in an emerging oeuvre.¹⁰

Like its predecessor, *Electro-Shock Blues* is musically largely the work of E alone with the help of assorted friends, and the band identity has by now shrunk to "E: singing, guitar, bass, keyboards, etc." and "Butch: drums, singing."¹¹ However, the musical production has a less polished, slightly provisional feel to it, and the cover art moves from the combination of artificial freakishness and glimpses of live playing in photographs that marked the booklet of *Beautiful Freak* towards greater artistic ambition, signaled in the combination of a cover painting by Fiona Hinckley, Jr. with a table of contents suggesting that this is a concept album in two parts with careful sequencing, a Prelude taken from a volume of poetry by E's mother (published under her maiden name, Katherine Kennedy, in 1937), an illustration taken from a chemistry textbook owned by E's father (c. 1944), elaborately printed lyrics, interspersed comic strips by various artists, and three tombstones scattered through the booklet inscribed by E with "THESE ARE THE FLEETING THINGS," "SING ALONG AT HOME," and finally (on the back cover of the booklet) "EVERYTHING IS CHANGING."

The sequencing of songs alternates between lyrics written from Liz's perspective (A) on the one hand, lyrics written from E's perspective (B) on the other, and finally a couple of songs written with greater distance (C):

Part I:	Part II:
Elizabeth on the Bathroom Floor (A)	Going to Your Funeral Part II (B; instrumental)
Going to Your Funeral Part I (B)	Last Stop: This Town (A/B)
Cancer for the Cure (C)	Baby Genius (C)
My Descent into Madness (A)	Climbing to the Moon (A)
3 Speed (A)	Ant Farm (B)
Hospital Food (C)	Dead of Winter (B)
Electro-Shock Blues (A)	The Medication Is Wearing Off (B)
Efils' God (C)	P.S. You Rock My World (B)

¹⁰ Besides the artistic breakthrough, E emphasizes the therapeutic function of the album, both for himself and for his audience: "What saved me was being able to write these songs ... I started to get, and still do get, a lot of mail and comments from people telling me how much *Electro-Shock Blues* helped them ... According to these letters, I was helping people by making music" (Everett 140/153-54, original emphasis).

¹¹ CD booklet. After Tommy Walter's departure, Adam Siegel played bass in concerts, but never became an (en-)listed member.

The 'Liz songs' (A) take their cue from bits of writing E's sister left behind. Alluding to the therapeutic function music has for himself, E comments: "Liz never had that ... I wanted to give her the gift of making her an artist by putting some of her words inside a musical frame" (140). This works hauntingly in the title track of the album, "Electro-Shock Blues"¹² –

FEELING scared today
Write down "I am ok"
A hundred times the doctors say
I am ok
I am ok
I'm not ok
... –

and is fictionally expanded in the other songs from this perspective such as the opening track "Elizabeth on the Bathroom Floor":

LAYING on the bathroom floor
Kitty licks my cheek once more
And I could try
But waking up is harder
when you wanna die
...
My name's Elizabeth
My life is shit and piss

While the strong sense of isolation and desolation in these two songs is underlined by a sparse musical setting, others, like "My Descent into Madness" (track 4), move closer to a 'normal' rock idiom updated with hip-hop elements and include references to the 'outside' world of normality:

SPRINGFIELD'S looking pretty dusty today
I see their dreams coming undone
The view from inside ward nine affords this much
A town teeming with the unloved
Close the window and lock it so it's good and tight
...
The jacket makes me straight so I can just sit back and bake
You know I think I'm gonna stay
Talking very loud but no one hears a word I say
La la la la la la la
...
Voices tell me I'm the shit
...
I'm the shit

However, even songs which go back to happier childhood days like "3 Speed" end in disorientation ("And why won't you just tell me what's going on?"), while the last song

¹² This and the following lyrics from *Electro-Shock Blues* are quoted from the elaborately and carefully designed booklet. All italics and irregularities are in the original.

in this category, a beautiful ballad, sums up all these motifs¹³ and longs for a self-determined escape in its chorus, which provides an eerily beautiful description of a suicide:

I won't be denied this time
'Fore I go out of my mind over matters
Got my foot on the ladder
And I'm climbing up to the moon

The most striking song in this group, "Last Stop: This Town," envisions a final return of Liz's ghost to her home town in a combination of Liz's (A) and E's (B) perspectives:

[B:]
YOU'RE dead but the world keeps spinning
Take a spin through the world you left
It's getting dark a little too early
Are you missing the dearly bereft?

Taking flight and you could be here tomorrow
Taking flight, well, you could get here tonight

[A:]
I'm gonna fly on down, for the last stop to this town
[B:]
What?
[A:]
I'm gonna fly on down then fly away
[B:]
Well, alright
Get down

The most striking musical feature of this song is its complete abandon in extended rap- or hip hop-inspired passages of highly rhythmic scat vocals and 'heavy' rock guitars, which comes rather unexpectedly in the overall meditative mood of the song, but indicates a joyful reconnection.

Similarly, the E songs (B) move between dirge-like, heavily rocking desperation sung partly in a falsetto voice ("Going to Your Funeral Part I") and tentative meditative optimism in a carefully orchestrated instrumental ("Going to Your Funeral Part II"), before the connection is achieved in "Last Stop: This Town." The following songs, then, can turn towards the impending death of E's mother in quiet, introspective arrangements featuring acoustic instruments and a violin in the painfully honest "Ant Farm" ("HATE a lot of things / But I love a few things / And you are one of them ... I've got a sad-hearted needing to belong") and a striking bowed bass as well as eerie voices and sound effects in the more desolate "Dead of Winter":

So I know you're going pretty soon
Radiation sore throat got your tongue

¹³ "So I wrote it all in a letter / But I don't know if it came / The nurse she likes my writing / So she keeps it just like me / So that I won't get away ... Got a sky that looks like heaven / Got an earth that looks like shit / And it's getting hard to tell where / What I am ends / And what they're making me begins."

Magic markers tattoo you
And show it where to aim
And strangers break their promises
You won't feel any
You won't feel any pain

The record ends with the reconciliatory "P.S. You Rock My World" in a quiet electric arrangement with strings and only occasional rock-inflected rhythmical intensification (the beginning and end of which is marked by * in the following final stanza):

...
Laying in bed tonight I was thinking
and listening to all the dogs
and the sirens and the *shots
And how a careful man tries
to dodge the bullets
While a happy man takes a* walk

And maybe it's time to live

This personal intensity is not fully matched in the more detached songs of the third category, but they fit in nicely by providing a larger perspective and occasional comic relief so that, all in all, *Electro-Shock Blues* provides an intense listening experience rarely achieved in rock and pop music. And it is, interestingly, the slightly unpolished, threadbare production which creates an aura of authenticity that can do away with the explicit visual 'liveness' markers in the booklet of *Beautiful Freak*. *Electro-Shock Blues* insists throughout on its visual and acoustic constructedness, but the clearly discernible autobiographic dimension transforms its modernist authenticity into a Romantic one which is not as popular as its earlier incarnation but artistically convincing.

III. 'A Magic World': An Artist's Life

Beautiful Freak and *Electro-Shock Blues* define the range of artistic possibilities for future Eels releases, and, given the intensely personal character of the latter, it does not really come as a surprise that the following three Eels albums revert to the slightly less committed mode of the first. *Daisies of the Galaxy* (2000) is a generally more upbeat affair "Sung and Played by E, Drummed by Butch," as the CD booklet casually puts it, and drawing on the help of high-profile colleagues from the 'alternative'/contemporary' scene like Peter Dinklage (R.E.M.) and Grant Lee Phillips (Grant Lee Buffalo). Production credits go exclusively to "a man called E (once named Mark Oliver Everett)," and the cover art is inspired by children's books' illustrations from an earlier era of (seeming) innocence. However, in spite of this and its more polished sonic design, the record provoked a couple of conflicts which were indicative of the shift towards artistic autonomy that E had taken by then.¹⁴ On the one hand, the Republican presidential campaign of George W. Bush chanced upon a tender song about

¹⁴ The continuation of this aspect is also discernible in the 'side one' / 'side two' sequencing of the tracks reminiscent of the 'Part One' / 'Part Two' structure of *Electro-Shock Blues* and of older vinyl conventions.

breaking up with one's girlfriend called "It's a Motherfucker" (or, as it is spelled on the album cover, "It's a Motherf#&!@r"). The campaigners considered it insidious to hide away something as shocking as this within the innocently childish CD design apparently, at least so it seemed to literal-minded Republicans, targeted at three-year-olds. On the other hand, and perhaps more to the point in this paper, the record company insisted that a very upbeat song seemingly entitled "Beautiful Day" be included in the album, but E thought that it would spoil the (again careful) sequencing. What is more, he insisted that it should retain its (from a commercial point of view) slightly awkward title, "Mr. E's Beautiful Blues," and its (in an American context) offensive hookline ("Goddamn right, it's a beautiful day"). In the end, E prevailed, and the track, though published as a fairly successful single, found its way on to *Daisies* only as a hidden track – a perverse decision if ever there was one from the record company's perspective.¹⁵

The next release, *Souljacker* (2001), evolved from a collaboration with British guitarist John Parish. It was recorded live in the studio in only three weeks mainly by E, Butch, Parish (guitars) and Kool G Murder (bass) and emphasized a very rough rock sound reminiscent of the punk ethos of early Eels live performances. Again, this change away from the polished *Daisies* towards an uncompromisingly loud, electric and aggressive sound was not appreciated by the record company. Nevertheless, the record sold fairly well and E could then concentrate on his next great project, which would, however, only surface after *Shootenanny!* (2003), again recorded live in the studio in only ten days as a respite from the ongoing work, this time less aggressive than *Souljacker* but still recognizably rough-edged.¹⁶

While the doubling of spontaneous live and studio creativity (*Souljacker* and *Shootenanny!*) on the one hand and painstaking long-term studio work on the other again recalls the doubling of Romantic and modernist strategies so characteristic of the Eels, an ambitious return to the autobiographical grounding established with *Electro-Shock Blues* was finally accomplished with *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations* (2005). The autobiographical component of *Blinking Lights* is fairly obvious in the cover design of the CD which incorporates – without any comment or specification – photographs from the 'Everett family archives' (only identified in the small print at the end of the booklet) as well as old-fashioned, typewriter-produced printings of the lyrics. The musicians are introduced under a hazy photograph of E who, for the first time in Eels history, mentions his full name first: Under the title of the record it says "as performed by / Mark Oliver Everett, / a man often called E / with: / Kool G

¹⁵ As E recalls on *Meet the Eels*: "When I told Lenny Waronker the title he made gesture of shooting a pistol at my face. After that, my request to make it an unlisted 'hidden' track on the album didn't seem so bad. I guess he wanted it to be called 'Beautiful Day,' but I knew U2 would be needing that title in a few years."

¹⁶ The persistence of Romantic ideals under changed (more violent!) conditions is also marked by the title *Shootenanny!* which alludes to the 'hootenanny', an informal performance by folk singers, typically with participation of the audience and frequently in a peace (!) movement context (Pete Seeger, Joan Baez etc.).

Murder, Chet, Puddin' and Butch / featuring: / Bobby, Jr. [E's dog], Tom Waits, John Sebastian [of 1960s Lovin' Spoonful fame] and Peter Buck / as well as" a large number of further contributors without providing any more musical details. Consequently, the sonic result stands detached from its origins in a modernist fashion, while the autobiographical framework introduces the dimension of Romantic authenticity.

The sequencing of *Blinking Lights* supports this reading: After an instrumental introduction of the simple, but hauntingly beautiful "Theme from Blinking Lights" (again with electronic rustles of medial self-awareness at the beginning, but else with the by now well-established sound of E's guitar plus *glockenspiel*/celesta, plus double tracked scat vocals), the first CD opens with a brief electronic pre-natal soundscape with strings ("From Which I Came") which opens up into a song of birth entitled "A Magic World":¹⁷

- V1: ten pounds and a head of hair
came into without a care
what they thought were cries
were little laughs
only looking forward and moving fast
- C1: the little bundle had arrived
and i was happy to be alive
in a magic world
- V2: long days and dreaming nights
wide eyes take in all the sights
a little wonder goes a long, long way
learning where to go and what to say
- C2: say hello to your new son
well he sure is having fun
in a magic world
- [instrumental passage]
- C3: every moment's build to last
when you're living without a past
in a magic world

In a very upbeat arrangement (acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass, the inevitable *glockenspiel*, keyboards, drums) with a touch of nostalgia, the track evokes a world of possibility by shifting from an outside perspective (V1) to an inside perspective (C1) and on to the relation between the newly arrived and other people (C2). This, however, is where the problems begin, as the slightly distorted recording of the voice suggests throughout. Like the final two choruses of "A Magic World" (C2/C3), the rest of *Blinking Lights* moves between problematic relationships (e.g. track 3, "Son of a Bitch," in a striking arrangement for saxophones) and epiphanic visions of transcendence such as the title track (#4) "Blinking Lights (For Me)," sardonically introduced in the booklet by "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Airplanes, Car

¹⁷ Lyrics from *Blinking Lights* are quoted as printed in the CD booklet, but omitting the cancellations and corrections visible in the typescript.

Accidents, and Psychic Pain." Fleshing out the musical arrangement of the opening track, the following lyrics are added:

blinking lights on the airplane wings
up above the trees
blinking down a morse code signal
especially for me

ain't no rainbow in the sky
in the middle of the night
but the signal's coming through
one day I will be alright again

blinking lights on the highway cars
stopping one by one
get a look at the accident
didn't see that one coming

and the doctor in the sky
gonna bring his chopper down
gonna bring me out alive
and set me on the ground
once more again

blinking lights on the airplane wings
up above the trees

This is clearly a naïve childhood perspective which assumes continued significance in adult years and for other people, as the instrumental version "Blinking Lights (For You)" at the end of CD 1 suggests, where listeners can insert their own lyrics. The theme is once more activated in a version closer to the opening of CD 1 three tracks into CD 2 (but without the vocals, and thus less 'immediate,' this time called "Bride of Theme from Blinking Lights") and then lost sight of.

All in all, there is a sense of development spanning the two CDs culminating in the epiphanic optimism of "The Stars Shine In the Sky Tonight" ("it's not where you're coming from / it's where you're going to") and the conciliatory stocktaking of "Things the Grandchildren Should Know":

so in the end i'd like to say
that i'm a very thankful man
i tried to make the most of my situations
and enjoy what i had
i knew true love and i knew passion
and the difference between the two
and i had some regrets
but if i had to do it all again
well, it's something i'd like to do

And this, obviously, is where the autobiography *Things the Grandchildren Should Know* takes over on a less generalized, more personal level, providing a compendium of Romantic strategies. The not particularly original story of a young man from a slightly problematic family background who has to deal with the loss of his father, sister, mother and various friends and manages to cope with the help of his music, is

presented as any person's potential experience, reminiscent of William Wordsworth's ideal of 'man speaking to men' as articulated in his preface for the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). As E puts it: "This isn't the story of a famous guy. It's just the story of a guy (who occasionally finds himself in situations that resemble a famous guy's life)" (7). However, the protagonist is marked by his artistic sensibility and wants to share his experiences:

Life is so full of unpredictable beauty and strange surprises. Sometimes the beauty is too much for me to handle. Do you know that feeling? When something is just too beautiful? When someone says something or writes something or plays something that moves you to the point of tears, maybe even changes you. It's nice when a non-believer has to question his doubts. That might be what led me to music in the first place. It was like magic. I could transcend the shitty situations around me and even turn them into something positive just by setting them to music. (6)

This, of course, is a Romantic program if ever there was one, but its realization at the end of the 20th century can (must) draw on a much wider range of media possibilities, which imbues the Romantic spirit with modernist modes of production. E's artistic practice accordingly moves beyond the stock-in-trade conventions of what might be called the 'singer/songwriter paradigm' in rock music (cf. Reinfandt 325-63), and even his live performances cast an ironic light on typical markers of authenticity.¹⁸ The audience, however, will probably judge the earnestness of his work in terms of just these markers, and the publication of the autobiography authorizes and legitimizes this attitude. It also supports E's respectability in the annals of alternative rock, even if he himself is under no delusions with regard to alternative rock's precarious position in contemporary culture:

The so-called 'alternative' culture brought with it an ugly new reality: it wasn't really an alternative at all. It was for sale just like anything else in the mall. It was rebelling against nothing. It just looked like a rebel and made the motions and the noises of a rebel, but it wasn't any kind of rebel, or individual, to be sure. (Everett 129-30)

Nevertheless, behind, or beyond this sham, it seems, there is still a realm of genuineness and individuality which bestows artistic respectability and, in the process, (a certain type of) authenticity upon a cultural actor whom one would then no longer hesitate to call an artist. However, nobody has to go into all this: the Eels can also just be taken as the vehicle for a slightly morbid good time.

¹⁸ On the *Eels with Strings* tour, E adopted the pose of the cigar-smoking dandy with a walking stick, while the next tour was called *No Strings Attached* and featured a trashy two guitars plus drums formation, with all players wearing a kind of pilot's overall and strangely military headgear. To round things off, the tour featured a dancing security guard on stage throughout, who took over interaction with the audience completely to the point where he executed orders from E for handshakes with or providing drinks to select audience members, as can be seen on the DVD of the Eels' 2006 Lollapalooza live performance included in *Useless Trinkets*. This playing around with conventions even goes so far as to let the security guard take over E's guitar for an extended instrumental passage in "Not Ready Yet," thus again indicating the 'everyman' status of the (alternative) rock star.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Digby, and Peter Mullen, eds. *Faking It: The Sentimentalization of Modern Society*. London: The Social Affairs Unit, 1998.
- Azerrad, Michael. *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground, 1981-1991*. London: Little, Brown, 2001.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. 1974. London: Routledge, 1984.
- Eckstein, Lars. "Torpedoing the Authorship of Popular Music: A Reading of Gorillaz' 'Feel Good Inc.'" *Popular Music* 28.2 (2009): 1-17.
- Eels: Official Band Website: <http://www.eelstheband.com>.
- Everett, Mark Oliver. *Things the Grandchildren Should Know*. London: Little, Brown, 2008.
- Frith, Simon, Will Straw, and John Street, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Rock and Pop*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Gracyk, Theodore. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham/London: Duke UP, 1986.
- Gregory, Hugh. *A Century of Pop*. Chicago: A Capella, 1998.
- Holert, Tom, and Mark Terkessidis, eds. *Mainstream der Minderheiten: Pop in der Kontrollgesellschaft*. Berlin: Edition ID-Archiv, 1996.
- Keightley, Keir. "Reconsidering Rock." Ed. Frith et al. 2001. 109-42.
- Meisel, Perry. *The Cowboy and the Dandy: Crossing Over from Romanticism to Rock and Roll*. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Middleton, Richard. "Rock Singing." *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*. Ed. John Potter. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. 28-41.
- Pattison, Robert. *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987.
- Reinfandt, Christoph. *Romantische Kommunikation: Zur Kontinuität der Romantik in der Kultur der Moderne*. Heidelberg: Winter, 2003.
- Reynolds, Simon. *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984*. London/New York: Penguin, 2005.
- Riesman, David. *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1950.
- Rupp, Susanne. "Writing Punk: Punk Narratives in the 1990s and John King's Novel *Human Punk*." *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 54.1 (2006): 79-91.
- Savage, Jon. *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*. 1991. London: Faber and Faber, 2001.

- Shuker, Roy. *Understanding Popular Music*. 1994. London/New York: Routledge, 2001.
- Starr, Larry, and Christopher Waterman. *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV*. New York: Oxford UP, 2003 [2nd ed.: *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MP3*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006].
- Wikipedia: 'Alternative Rock': http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alternative_Rock.

Discography

- E. *A Man Called (E)*. PolyGram, 1992.
- Eels. *Beautiful Freak*. DreamWorks, 1996.
- , *Electro-Shock Blues*. DreamWorks, 1998.
- , *Daisies of the Galaxy*. DreamWorks, 2000.
- , *Souljacker*. DreamWorks, 2001.
- , *Shootenanny!* DreamWorks, 2003.
- , *Blinking Lights and Other Revelations*. Vagrant Records, 2005.
- , *Eels with Strings: Live at Town Hall*. Image Entertainment/Sony BMG, 2006.
- , *Useless Trinkets: B-Sides, Soundtracks, Rarities and Unreleased 1996-2006*. Geffen, 2007.
- , *Meet the Eels: Essential Eels Vol. 1 1996-2006*. Geffen, 2008.