

# Spotlight gravitates towards Miller, but he makes a point of sharing it

**BELIEVER**  
continued from page 7

beside him.

He's running on five hours of sleep, but the Texas native — who now lives in New York with his wife Erica and two-and-a-half-year-old son Max — is more eloquent and empathetic than most people would be after 20.

"This girl in Kentucky put us [the Old 97's] up one night — I shouldn't even tell this story, it's so sad!" Miller says. "The drummer, Phillip [Peeples], and I came downstairs, and she was sitting in the kitchen. There's a bunch of Hershey's bar wrappers on the floor, and there's three or four left in the pack, and she has chocolate all over her mouth, and she says, 'Do you want a Hershey bar? I hate them. I hate them.'"

Miller shakes his head. "I wanted to give her a hug," he says. "It was just so sad — you heard the whole story in that sentiment."

It's those sorts of stories — of loners and misfits and people who need hugs — that Miller excels at telling in song. Perhaps that's because those stories were once his own. Though he's now a happily-married and critically lauded indie-scene heartthrob, Miller was a chubby, unhappy and un-hip kid. ("I was a debater / was not a stoner nor an inline skater / was not a player nor a player-hater / I was just a bookworm on a respirator," he sings memorably in the 97's "Friends Forever.") At age 14, Miller, sick of being tormented by his classmates, tried to take his own life. ("The 12 years after five / are years we're lucky to survive," he sings in that same song; the 97's "Lonely Holiday" includes the line, "I've thought so much about suicide / parts of me have already died.")

The pensive title song of Miller's latest album is a tribute to the late Elliott Smith. But the album as a whole is not maudlin; death gets much less face-time than life in general.

And sex and love, specifically: At that night's show, Miller — living up to the title of his previous solo release, 2002's "The Instigator" — mischievously introduces the album's "Ain't That Strange" by saying, "This is a song that's all about gettin' it on!" The guys in the audience laugh; the girls swoon.

The latter do the same when Miller launches into "Question" during the solo segment in the middle of the show. The song, a lushly orchestrated version of which caps off "The Believer," originally appeared on the 97's "Satellite Rides" (2001).

"To me, that song is kind of the bridge between the Old 97's stuff and the solo stuff," Miller says. "I wrote it in the studio for 'Satellite Rides,' and it wound up as one acoustic guitar and one vocal. I wanted to do a little more with it." A pause. "And I just like that song so much, you know?"

"Question" is a three-minute cynicism-free zone, a simple and tender account of a pivotal night in a couple's courtship (the refrain: "Someday somebody's gonna ask you / a question that you should say yes to / for once in your life / Baby, tonight, I've got a question for you").

And as of a gig in early April, the song is the soundtrack to a successful proposal as well as an account of one.

"[Believers drummer] Angela Webster's best friend

from growing up got engaged in the middle of 'Question,'" says a delighted-sounding Miller, who was in on the plan. "I said, 'Theresa Miller, somebody has a question for you!' or something dorky like that, and pointed to where [she and her boyfriend] were. You saw his head, and then it disappeared as he dropped down on one knee. She was like, 'Oh my God!' And then," he says, smiling at the memory, "he jumped up and hugged her. It was really great."

he doesn't give off the impression that he's looking to distance himself from them.

He mentions them frequently and fondly — and in doing so, deviates nicely from the "frontman achieves solo success, gets too big for his britches, and then either cuts all connections to or takes all the credit for his non-solo stuff" archetype.

Even when it comes to his solo material, Miller doesn't grab all the glory: The spotlight may gravitate toward him, but

plugging away at his laptop, chuckles and shakes his head.)

At that point, the dressing room door opens. It's Believers drummer Angela Webster. "Angela, come in!" Miller says, patting the spot next to him. Onstage, Webster pounds her drum set like it's one of those "Test Your Strength" carnival games, but at the moment at least, she appears reserved: "No, it's OK," she says, and the door shuts behind her.

Miller says that Webster's presence on the Believers'

solo moments, is tough."

"It's weird — everything at once," he continues.

Then he shakes his head. "I keep saying that nowadays, 'everything at once.' It's a good thing," he insists, almost as if he's trying to convince himself.

When Miller talks about his son Max, his smile returns. "I call him a lot of stuff — Freddy, Goober, Dr. No," he says, launching into a mock conversation between himself and his son: "'You say 'no' an awful lot, are you sure you're not Dr. No?' 'No, I'm not Dr. No!' 'Oooooohkay, I'm just saying...'"

Clearly, Miller's heart is with his family. But it's also with his music. When Miller takes to the stage that night, he's energetic and enthusiastic for every minute of his 27-song set, bouncing around the stage and strumming his guitar so hard that he has to pause at one point to wrap one of his fingertips in duct tape.

When he launches into "Barrier Reef" from the 97's "Too Far to Care" (1997), the audience loses its collective mind, shouting the lyrics with the fervor of a crowd at a gospel revival.

Miller and co. feed off the crowd's energy, delivering a blistering version of the song whose first verse includes a tongue-in-cheek reference to Miller's given name: "So I sidled up beside her / settled down and shouted, 'Hi there / my name's Stuart Ransom Miller / I'm a serial lady-killer' / She said, 'I'm already dead' / That's exactly what she said."

Yes, Miller's birth certificate reads "Stuart Ransom Miller." But he — or rather, his mother — made the switch to "Rhett" at birth. "My dad was Stuart Ransom Miller, and he wanted to name me after him," Miller explains. "My mom consented only on the condition that I go by Rhett, because she didn't like Stu or Stuart or Stewie, and Randy is my dad's name. Plus, that," he grins mischievously, "has all kinds of connotations of its own." (Indeed it does.)

"And 'the second,' what would that be — Deuce? Or Junior? Come on!" Miller continues. "So yeah, I've been Rhett since birth. My mom liked 'Gone With the Wind.'" There's that grin again: "It's problematic with regards to bank accounts and frequent-flyer miles and stuff like that," he says, "but I've got that pretty much figured out by now."

At this point in his life and career, Miller has figured a lot of stuff out. "This record is really doing well, and more importantly, my family is expanding and thriving," he says reflectively.

But though Miller's personal and professional situation more than merits complacency, when you ask him to pick his favorite self-penned lyric, he doesn't give a lazy and generic "They're all like my children; I can't pick just one" response.

Instead, he sits quietly for several seconds, pursing his lips as if the fate of the world depends on his answer.

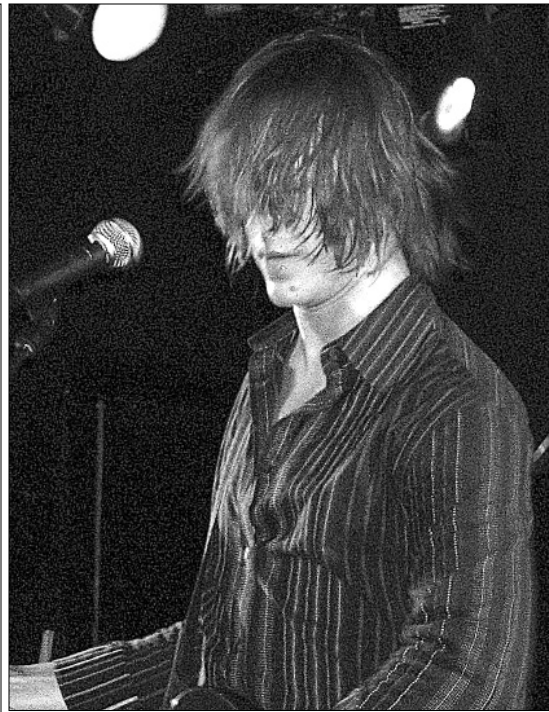
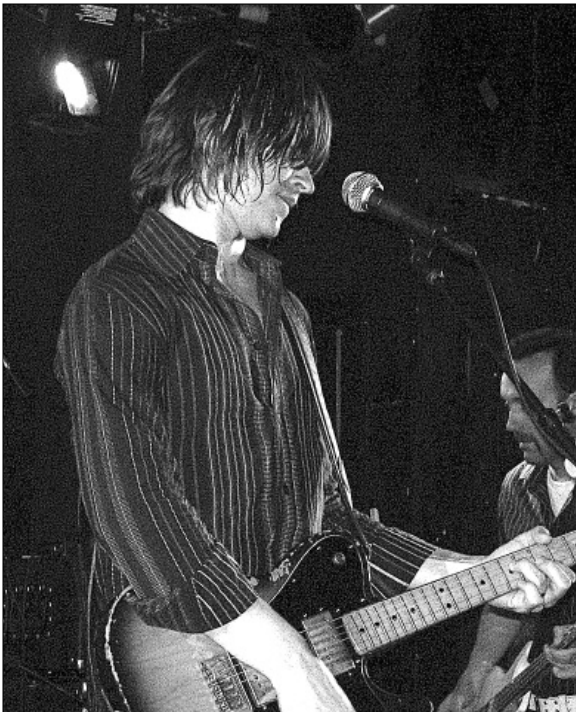
Then he nods. "I got it!" he says, sounding genuinely excited. "From 'Rollerskate Skinny': 'Every other day is a kick in the shins / Every other day it's like the day just wins.'"

Today, at least, the day hasn't won. Miller has, handily. And even though he's so good at writing songs about losing, it's impossible not to root for him to beat the day, over and over again.



“My dad was Stuart Ransom Miller, and he wanted to name me after him. My mom consented only on the condition that I go by Rhett, because she didn't like Stu or Stuart or Stewie, and Randy is my dad's name. Plus, that has connotations of its own. And 'the second,' what would that be — Deuce? Or Junior? Come on! So yeah, I've been Rhett since birth. It's problematic with regards to bank accounts and frequent-flyer miles and stuff like that, but I've got that pretty much figured out by now.”

Rhett Miller



Clearly, Miller is a sucker for romance (the track that kicks off "The Believer" is called "My Valentine"). But somehow, in his songs — both solo and with the 97's — he very rarely descends into sappiness or cliché.

He's too clever for that: Why write a standard "I love you" song when you can write one that begins, "This is the story of Victoria's heart / You may think it's stupid, but I still think it's art?"

That line comes from "Victoria," the first song on the Old 97's "Wreck Your Life" (1996). Miller doesn't perform "Victoria" that night. But he does tear into two of the album's other tracks, crowd-pleaser "Big Brown Eyes" and "Dressing Room Walls," a despairing look at life on the road that contains a gem of a line in "the punk rock'll get you / if the government don't get you first."

Though Miller is touring without 97's bandmates Murry Hammond, Phillip Peeples and Ken Bethea this time around,

he makes a point of sharing it.

He can't say enough good things about the people he worked with on "The Believer," from Jon Brion (whose song "I Believe She's Lying" Miller covers on the album as well as onstage that night) to veteran producer George Drakoulias and the Jayhawks' Gary Louris. "Gary came in for two days, and we worked him like crazy," Miller marvels. "He did a 12-hour day and a 14-hour day. By the end of the second day, he was completely crispy."

Smoke coming out of his ears?

"Exactly," Miller says. "And oh man, that [second] night was when George made him play the guitar solo on 'I Believe She's Lying.' It was a really great solo, but it was three in the morning."

And with that, Miller slips into an impression of Drakoulias: "C'mon, it's just one more guitar solo — it's nothing!" (The impression must be spot-on: Miller's tour manager Brendan Hoffman, who's sitting in the far corner of the dressing room

tour bus "helps to temper the 'duuuuuude' testosterone. It's cool! It's still not equal parts male and female" — as their names would suggest, the Believers' lead guitarist Billy Borschied and bassist Greg Beshers are male — "but women are well-represented.")

On this tour, though, the most important woman in Miller's life — his wife Erica — is not present. "I miss my family," Miller says. "On my last solo tour [in 2002], Erica came with me. But now, we'd be dragging around a two-year-old, and she's nine months pregnant [with their second child, a girl]."

For the first time so far in the conversation, Miller's energy level seems to wane. "And if they were here, how could I even help?" he wonders.

"Today, I woke up at 9 a.m. and did some radio, and I've been working ever since," he says. "I won't be done until midnight, and then I have to try to find a place to take a shower, so just finding the time for a phone call, those