

Elliott Smith's songs in Good Will Hunting



Good boys: Ben Affleck and Matt Damon in *Good Will Hunting*.

Celebrating a man in tune with a movie...

WRITTEN BY MATT DAMON and Ben Affleck, pre-superstardom, in a bid to create meatier roles for themselves, Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* was a surprise hit in 1997. And when it netted nine Oscar nominations, nobody was more surprised than singer-

kids from broken homes with talents they seem embarrassed by. Will is a maths whizz who scorns academia; Smith, a modest multi-instrumentalist who sings like he doesn't deserve to be heard. It's the perfect match for a movie about unheralded greatness – the genius working as a janitor, and the virtuoso hiding behind a broken voice. "I could always just play," says Will of his gift. So could Smith.

Beneath Will's intellect lies a damaged soul, and the film sees him bloom under therapist Sean Maguire (Robin Williams).

Like Sean and Will's sessions, Smith's songs are a shortcut to wells of feeling. Featherlight but fathoms deep, they're sad without self-pity, beautiful like the colours of a bruise.

No Name #3' is the first we hear, as Will and best friend Chuckie (Affleck) drive through the boozy Boston dawn. It's minor-key but upbeat, like the film, and it washes in apologetically, unsure of its place in the world, like Will. "Everyone is gone, home to oblivion," sighs Smith, a theme for him.

When Will meets student Skylar (Minnie Driver), their first date is soundtrack by the gorgeous 'Say Yes'. Beginning, "I'm in love with the world through the eyes of a girl..." it's not quite the ode to joy it appears. Smith's narrator, like Will, has been transformed, but he's still "damaged bad at best" and at his partner's mercy. Over an intimate bedroom scene, Smith's torch song 'Between The Bars' promises a remedy from "people you've been before that you don't want around anymore", but is that remedy affection, or unconsciousness?

As Skylar leaves for California it's to the eerie rippling of 'Angeles', in which Smith compares the pursuit of love/success to a high-stakes poker game, primed to fail. "Go on and lose the gamble, that's the history of the trade," he sings, resigned, echoing one of the film's main motifs.

According to Will, Sean "lost a big fuckin' hand" when his wife died, and "doesn't have the sack to ante up again". Chuckie, meanwhile, berates Will for not cashing in his "winning lottery ticket".

Spurred on by tough love, Will heads after Skylar as 'Miss Misery' closes the film, a lament for a destructive relationship – something they may well have to overcome in the future. It's an uncertain conclusion, but at least Will, like Smith, has the guts to take a chance on his talent.

Damon and Affleck were rewarded for their efforts with screenwriting Oscars, but there was no happy ending for Smith. After moving to LA and releasing a series of albums, he lost himself to drink, drugs and depression. On 21 October 2003 he stabbed himself twice through the heart, dying soon after. He was just 34. **Matt Glasby**

"Both Will and Elliott Smith are drinkers, brawlers, tough-but-sensitive kids from broken homes"

songwriter Elliott Smith, whose 'Miss Misery' was put forward as Best Song.

Smith and Van Sant knew each other from Portland, their adopted hometown, where Smith enjoyed low-key acclaim. But the film already has a serviceable, if syrupy, Danny Elfman score, so the decision to include five Smith songs – original composition 'Miss Misery', three cuts from album *Either/Or*, plus early obscurity 'No Name #3' – bears further scrutiny.

When we first meet him, Boston boy Will Hunting (Damon) is cleaning floors at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. And there's something scuffed and studenty about Smith's work, most of which sounds (and indeed was) self-recorded. Both men are drinkers, brawlers, tough-but-sensitive

But TOTAL FILM doesn't love...



'My Heart Will Go On'

Predictably, 'Miss Misery' lost out to Celine Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On' at the 1997 Oscars. Rather less predictably, the mismatched pair met and hugged backstage. "She was really sweet," recalled Smith. "It was too human to be dismissed simply because I find her music trite."

