



## Ryan Adams

Live at The Catalyst: July 21 | by Irene Jay Liu

The life and career of Ryan Adams has been brilliant, erratic, prolific and random—ever oscillating between manic and depressive. He's been to hell and back and, based on the packed auditorium at The Catalyst this past Saturday, his fans have stuck by him. And they were well rewarded for their loyalty. Ryan Adams is back—sober, matured and polished, but with enough of the old mania to keep things interesting and a broad inventory of songs to draw from.

Adams is out promoting his new album, *Easy Tiger*, which dropped in early June of this year. People call it a return to his earlier glory, but it's more like a vindication. He got sober after years of abusing alcohol, speedballs (the mix of heroine and cocaine) and pills.

"There was intense loneliness, end-of-the-world stuff going on in my mind, bottomless depression," Adams told *The New York Times*. "Without exaggerating, it is a miracle I did not die."

*Easy Tiger* is the result of this sobriety—a collection of focused, tight songs with strong simple lyricism, delivered in a soulful performance. Adams' record company, historically indulgent of his recklessness, is fully backing him on this endeavor. Writer Stephen King wrote the promotional copy for the album's release, saying "I won't say Adams is the best North American singer-songwriter since Neil Young ... but I won't say he isn't, either." He's got a radio-ready track in the form of "Two," with backing vocals from Sheryl Crow.

The album, though it isn't a step back to his earlier days, does fulfill the promise that he showed back then. Adams started off strong at the start of the decade; after he broke off with his major-label band Whiskeytown, his first solo albums *Heartbreaker* and *Gold* were met with critical gushing and moderate sales. *Gold* was released on Sept. 11, 2001 and the album's first single, "New York, New York" became an anthem of sorts, a salve in the wake of the bombings. The music video, filmed only days before the tragic day, prominently featured the Twin Towers in the background and received prominent play on MTV in the days after the attacks.

The intervening years were prolific, but not consistent for Adams. He came out with six albums in four years and produced many more songs that weren't published (but will be released in a box

set due out later this year). His website, a spastic, nearly unintelligible homage to *Star Wars*, contains 18 albums'-worth of music under a variety of fake monikers, including forays into hip-hop, metal, and other genres. Of this period, his strongest works were "Cold Roses" and "Jacksonville City Nights," released under the billing of Ryan Adams and the Cardinals.

The Cardinals provide strong backing and focus for Adams. Many of the songs on *Easy Tiger* are co-written by members of the band.

Adams' performance at The Catalyst is consistent, but his mood evolves as the concert wears on. The first set is brooding, mellow. Adams barely raises his head enough to address the audience. The inaudible murmurings between songs are indecipherable. I think that it is maybe just me, but around me everyone speculates what he is saying. He spends more time running his fingers through his perfectly unruly bedhead, only possible with careful mussing with good pomade. He's dressed in the perfect hipster uniform of paper-thin worn vintage-y T-shirt and fitted, flared plaid wool pants. It prompts one of the few comments from the audience; "Nice pants" is as far as the audience is willing to go at this concert.

In fact, this is one of the striking parts of the concert. Adams isn't the pop idol in the traditional sense. There aren't the screaming, swooning girls. The audience is calm, respectful, almost reverent. Maybe it's because of Adams' cult-like following. Maybe his fans still treat him with kid gloves, unsure about what might happen. Adams had an on-stage meltdown in 2002 when a heckler made a sarcastic comment about playing early '90s pop sensation Bryan Adams' song "Summer of '69."

You think that he's been shot with a heavy dose of Valium, the drug that helped him get sober quasi cold-turkey. The cigarette is in his mouth before he's even walked off the stage after the first set. He returns and it's like he got a shot of adrenaline, or realized where he was. He plays with gusto. The songs are interspersed with random beat boxing, shouted pronouncements.

You never know what you'll get with Adams, but he's off to an auspicious start. You can, however, see where the title of his new album comes from. All that creativity, that manic energy...easy, tiger.