

Goldenboy: SoCal Sweetness

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Shon Sullivan makes a living as a sideman to the stars, but his own tunes are equally worthy of the spotlight.

If Shon Sullivan's face seems familiar to you, don't worry – you're not hallucinating. Perhaps you haven't had the chance to see him perform with his own Southern California pop group Goldenboy - at this point few outside of the West Coast have with regularity - but more likely than not if you're the kind of person who's drawn to stately and adventurous pop music then you've crossed paths with Sullivan before. A seasoned touring musician whose logged time on the road playing guitar and keyboards with the likes of Elliott Smith, the Eels, the Rentals and Neil Finn, Sullivan's probably been to your town more than once and quietly wowed you with his instrumental prowess. Playing sideman to stellar songwriting talents is all well and good but becoming one in your own right is a different task altogether and a transition Sullivan's successfully completed with the release of Goldenboy's sophomore album this past fall, *Underneath the Radio*. Clearly bearing the influence of all the talents he's bonded with on the road, Sullivan's melancholic lyricism and gentle voice inevitably recall his friend and mentor Smith (the resemblance is actually a little eerie on the finger-picked breathily cooed intro to "Still Down"). Elsewhere, Sullivan's willingness to meld dark words to sunny sounding richly adorned tunes is distinctly reminiscent of head Eel Mark Oliver Everett's songwriting approach. That being said, there's plenty of material on *Radio* that shows Sullivan is his own man; the campfire strum-along duet with Matt Sharp "Goodbye Erica" is a distinctly Californian slice of alt. country while the propulsive horn-led pop of "Second Day of the Year" is more Bacharach than "Bled White." The numerous shimmering electric guitar leads make me think Morrissey ought to look up Sullivan's number the next time he's looking for a new guitarist to take on the road. Sullivan took time out from a tour opening up for (and playing with) the Rentals to talk with Reveille about songwriting on the road and the Southern California music scene amongst other topics. Reveille: So for this big tour you're going out on with the Rentals are you pulling double duty? Shon Sullivan: Yeah, it's pretty crazy, I'm opening up all of the shows doing a Goldenboy set and then coming back out and playing guitar for the Rentals. Reveille: It seems like that would be pretty exhausting having to get up for two sets a night over a bunch of weeks. Sullivan: Yeah, we'll have to see. I've never really done it over a whole long tour before but I've actually done it quite a few times over the years just randomly when the opening act would get sick on some of the other tours where I was playing in the headlining band – just sort of grab the acoustic and get out there. When Matt [Sharp, frontman for the Rentals] toured behind his solo album we did a boatload of touring together where we just played one long set starting off with Matt on bass backing me up and then switching it up for his songs, so I've got a little experience working that way. Reveille: There was a little more than four years in between Goldenboy's first record [2002's *Blue Swan Orchestra*] and *Underneath the Radio*. Were you just swamped doing side musician work that whole time or was there something else behind the long interval? Sullivan: We ended up touring forever off of the first record because it kept getting released in different countries; the album was being "released" for two years in a row. We finished an American tour and then went to England because we got licensed for release over there, then as soon as we got home from that the same thing happened in Australia and we were on the road again. Straight after that tour ended I joined the Eels for a little while and did the better part of six months to a year touring, then I went out with Matt Sharp for the rest of the year. I got back from all that and was like, "God where did the time go?" and just jumped right into making *Underneath the Radio*. The songs were already written because I had my tape recorder on the road with me the whole time and would do most of my writing in the van or backstage or whatever. All the songs from that second album were pretty much written on the last tour with Matt. And the artwork is all pictures taken from the road. Reveille: That's interesting, most of the musicians I've talked to don't seem to find it very easy to get much writing done on the road but it sounds like the touring life has been a pretty inspirational space for you. Sullivan: Definitely, I think the thing that has really worked for me and helped me do these Goldenboy records is just spending time on the road with different people and having them rub off on me, whether it's just noticing some kind of new chord they're using or a new approach to a sound; it slips in subconsciously a little bit. Reveille: You've been able to carve out a nice working space for yourself in the Los Angeles music scene. I always imagine L.A. as a really cutthroat industry run kind of city but it seems like there's another side to it that's starting to emerge lately. There are a lot of cool indie bands coming out of the Southern California area who seem really supportive of each other. What's the vibe like in L.A. right now? Sullivan: I actually live in kind of a smaller town, Diamond Bar, which is about 30 miles outside of L.A., toward the mountains and the beach. Seriously, there are only two musicians that I know of in my town, one is Goldenboy and the other one is Snoop Dogg. I've run into him driving down the street and one time his entourage pulled into Rite Aid when I was there and I told their tour manager I was the second most famous musician in Diamond Bar and he patted me on the back and said "hang in there kid, something's gonna happen for you." It was pretty hysterical. But yeah, there's a great scene right now, I have so many friends in bands in the Silver Lake area, my labelmates and bands like Earlimart and Great Northern. It's exciting because I think it's some of the best stuff that's happening anywhere. I grew up in Diamond Bar and I think the scene in L.A. has definitely changed from the time of the Sunset Strip and pay to play on the street and that sort of thing. Actually, that's still probably going on but I'm too busy going and seeing my friends' bands play at places like the Silver Lake Lounge to notice. We're all friends, I just played some cello on the new Watson Twins record and people are always kind of trading off and help each other out. It's very friendly and supportive. Reveille: So far

pretty much every scrap of press I've read about you has to start off by saying that the name of the band came from a nickname that Elliott Smith gave you on the road and most reviewers tend to react to your music by citing similarities and drawing comparisons to Smith's work. Not that I expect you to obsess over your own press or anything but has that ever been something that's frustrated you? Sullivan: Not at all. Elliott was a big influence on me, we would play guitar together in the back of the bus; I learned a lot of new chords from him and things like that. There's a song on our first record, "Summertime," that he wrote with me and recorded a backing vocal for. To this day I'm flattered by that because it means a lot to have someone you admire so much be willing to do something like that. I never worry about people making comparisons, everyone is a product of their environment, and certainly Elliott's music was a big part of my world. I just don't waste time worrying about that kind of stuff, I'm not really a worrier, on the road pretty much my only worry is showing up on time. Reveille: I read on your MySpace page recently that your longtime drummer Bryan Bos left the band before this recent round of touring and in your post about his decision to leave you acknowledge that "being a touring musician is a rough lifestyle." Trying to earn a living full time from music isn't always easy, how is it that you've been able to persevere over the years? Sullivan: Music's been pretty good to me so far. I don't really have to go out and try to hustle up work or anything like that. I probably should but that's just not my personality, I'm more laidback. That being said, even when I'm at home for a few months I'll be doing recordings with other people, a little session work here and there, or I'm working on my own stuff. It's been a pretty busy and consistent going the last several years. Reveille: Do you find that people make assumptions about what you're like as a person based on listening to your records? A lot of the material on Underneath the Radio is pretty melancholy but from our conversation it seems like you're a pretty happy guy. Sullivan: I know it's really funny, when we play the songs from this record in concert, you'll notice that the vibe is actually very different from the record because we're just really happy playing. I think part of the reason Underneath the Radio has that kind of sad and lonely vibe is that I pretty much did it completely by myself and the songs were written when I was traveling in Europe in winter and I was looking back with a little bit of nostalgia on different times and past relationships. When we play live it's happy though, and I see people smiling and I like that. People have different sides of their personality and the music helps get certain parts out there. It can be like your little therapy session. When I was touring in Elliott's band I seriously thought he was one of the funniest people I've ever met, I never laughed so hard so many times and that's not something you would really expect if you only knew him through his music. Reveille: You've been working nonstop on music for the last few years and it's now your full time job. Do you think your relationship with making music has changed since your teenage years when it may have been something you approached more as a hobby? Sullivan: I think as soon as I started doing Goldenboy records everything changed for me musically, I just appreciated the opportunity so much. My parents were musicians so I started playing at a young age. I was a music major in college and did all that kind of stuff, played in bands around town. But it was always my dream to travel and play music for people. When that started happening I just felt so lucky and fortunate to be able to do something I actually really like. Making music for a living is more fun than ever because the more you do it the less seriously you start taking it, which is kind of good. It's nice because I see bands playing that take themselves way too seriously and I worry a little bit about them. Every day I just feel really lucky. We don't have a huge following but the special thing I always find is that every spot we go to there will be at least a few people there that have one of our records and are excited to see us. To me that's just really special, and that someone would like us enough to come down to the show even in these teeny little towns out in the middle of the mountains - I feel like that's what it's all about. GoldenBoyBand.com myspace.com/goldenboyband

{audio}http://eeniemeenie.com/artists/audio_video/Goldenboy_SecondDayOfTheYear.mp3{/audio}"The Second Day of the Year" by Goldenboy from Underneath the Radio {audio}http://eeniemeenie.com/artists/audio_video/Goldenboy_UnderneathTheRadio.mp3{/audio}"Underneath the Radio (A Million Miles From Yesterday)" by Goldenboy from Underneath the Radio COMING UP: Goldenboy opens up for Copeland and the Rentals, August 11. First Avenue . 6 p.m. 18+. \$14/\$16.