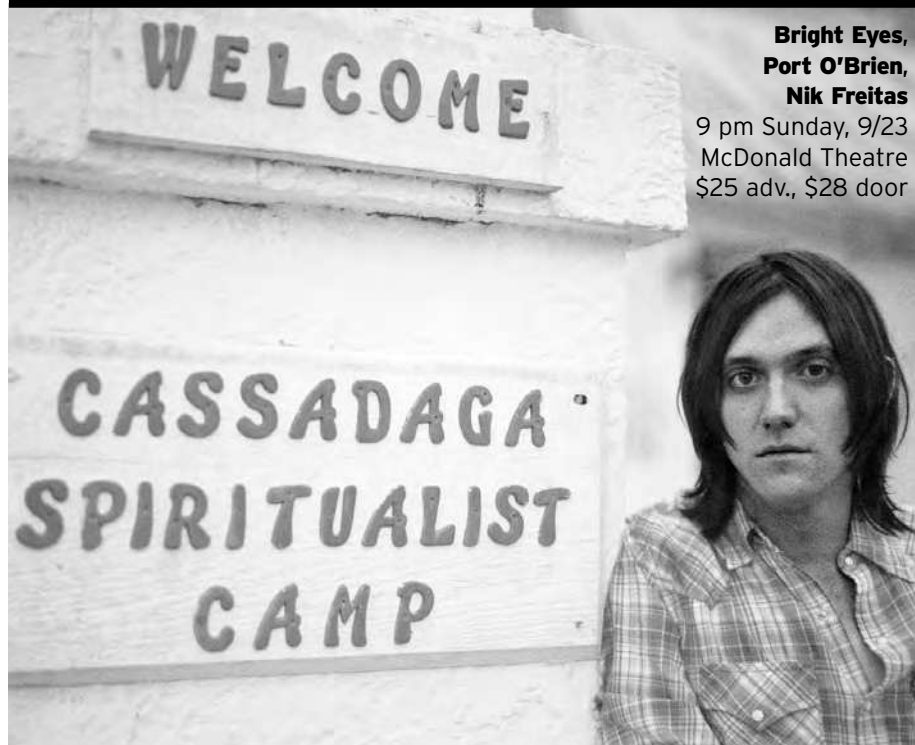




**Bright Eyes,
Port O'Brien,
Nik Freitas**

9 pm Sunday, 9/23
McDonald Theatre
\$25 adv., \$28 door

Personal Jesus

Oberst and co. save music – again

It's rare to read an article about Conor Oberst without encountering the words "prolific" and "genius" somewhere in the text. Beginning in his tender teenage years, the Omaha native was waxing his way into the steely hearts of critics formerly convinced that the death of truly independent music was nigh. With the support of a revolving troupe of musicians and two core members (Nate Walcott and Mike Mogis) who constitute Bright Eyes, Oberst has released music unrelentingly, albeit in a rather unorthodox combination of EPs, singles, compilation and tribute album contributions, not to mention ten full-length releases on Omaha's Saddle Creek label. He sells albums and sells out shows. He wins awards and has taken to the stage in the politically charged company of fellow lefties Bruce Springsteen and Neil Young. But while Oberst is the definition of a successful indie musician, his success embodies the same quiet depth as his lyrics. This vulnerability is guarded by fans of Bright Eyes with an urgency unique to devotees determined to keep "their band" from being ruined by overexposure. "i feel like i want everyone to love him," a fan named "Lauren" posted on a Web site featuring Oberst, "but i don't want anyone to know him. i want him to be special to me."

Evoking ultra-personal relationships with listeners is certainly not a new phenomenon in the world of songwriting. Oberst not only has the observant mind and poetic heart necessary to the art form, but he has also made all the right moves when

it comes to finding musical vehicles for his words. His own voice, with all its cracks and tremors, is often laid uncomfortably bare on acoustic tracks like those featured on 2005's *I'm Wide Awake, It's Morning*. Yet the bleeps and pings of its electronic sister release of the same year, *Digital Ash in a Digital Urn*, drove listeners mad with glee or despair depending on their loyalty to the image of Oberst as minimalist crooner. Either way, the double album release garnered the thoughtful, critical attention of audiences groomed to spot innovation on the horizon. And although the horizon keeps moving, Bright Eyes keeps magically appearing as a burning ember on the lonesome, faraway line.

After a year out of the spotlight, Oberst and company produced *Cassadaga*, an emotionally taut and at times stormy album that utilizes female vocals in a way Bright Eyes rarely has. Amid a few very poignant love songs (rumored to be about Winona Ryder) and strong Americana tracks, the song "No One Would Riot for Less" stands out as a definitive highlight. A dream of a song that is at once ethereal and firmly grounded in political philosophy, it soars with backing instrumentals and vocals that sound like they were produced by a band of musicians wearing flowing white robes and hovering serenely above the stage. The crescendo of "No One" introduces a country-tinged guitar riff into what sounds like a new-age/gospel anti-war ballad, a combination that might sound like an abomination but in reality will raise the hair on your neck. **EW**

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