

On the passing of musician Justin Townes Earle, 1982-2020

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During the writing of the review of *Ghosts of West Virginia*, the recent album by veteran singer-musician Steve Earle, the news came that his talented 38-year-old musician son Justin Townes Earle passed away on August 20 in his hometown of Nashville. Early police reports indicate he may have died of a drug overdose. Both father and son have long and well-known struggles with drug addiction.

The sad passing of the younger Earle also follows in a grim string of untimely deaths by musicians in the recent period who also struggled with drug addiction and depression. This includes singers Chester Bennington, Chris Cornell, Dolores O’Riordan and Keith Flint, songwriter-poet David Berman, keyboardist Keith Emerson, guitarist Neil Casal, rappers Mac Miller (Malcolm McCormick), Lil Peep (Gustav Ahr), and Juice Wrld (Jared Higgins) and electronic artist Avicii (Tim Bergling), among others.

This also reflects a broader social process as well, particularly among the youth. The last decade has seen suicide and drug overdose rates tragically skyrocket.

Although each overdose death has its own immediate cause and set of facts, a phenomenon reaching such horrendous levels must have a wider *social* significance. It is certainly possible to imagine that a sensitive, vulnerable artist such as Townes Earle might have been further discouraged or demoralized by the COVID-19 crisis—for which there is no end in sight—and the murderous policies of the authorities.

Townes Earle’s music from the mid-2000s on always had intriguing elements to it. Influenced by “roots,” country and blues music, he had a soft but confident voice, with a sensitivity for those struggling through hard times. His guitar playing was inventive and sharp, and his songwriting showed real depth at times.

He had something of a popular breakthrough with his

2010 album *Harlem River Blues*, which included songs like the vibrant gospel-blues title track, as well as the sincere ballad “Workin’ For the MTA.”

Townes Earle often traveled with his father as a touring member of The Dukes in the 2000s and had a definite stage presence. Not surprisingly perhaps, he had a difficult and at times contentious relationship with his famous father, which was reflected in some of his songwriting, particularly in his “family trilogy” of albums—*Single Mothers* (2014), *Absent Fathers* (2015), and *Kids in the Street* (2017). But there was also a moving and visible affection between the two that can be seen, for instance, when they would share the stage in live performances and interviews together.

Townes Earle’s work was moving in interesting directions at the time of his death. What became his final album, 2019’s *The Saint of Lost Causes*, was among his best work. Earle had given a voice to the anger and sorrow of ordinary people, along with some of their more loving and tender sentiments.

“Ain’t nobody born bad,” Earle sang on the album’s title track, “it takes a whole lot of hurting.” Some of the songs provide a sense of the character of these injuries. Earle may not have been able to tell the whole story, but many of the essentials are there.

Written in the midst of its ongoing water crisis, “Flint City Shake It” was a tribute to the working people of Flint, Michigan. Earle sang about the wave of plant shutdowns that devastated the city during the 1980s:

Then trouble come in ’86
With this son of a bitch named Roger Smith
Cut our throat with a stroke of a fountain pen
Been knocked down, but we’re gonna get up again

With an excellent band backing Earle, the *music* of *The Saint of Lost Causes* did as much talking as the lyrics did. The upbeat character of “Flint City Shake It”

in particular suggests that the story isn't over yet—there is still life and it will have its say.

Some of the best aspects of country music lived inside Justin Townes Earle, and they will continue to live in the music he left behind.



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