

Close Encoun with

This man is mysterious. When I asked Eheads bassist Buddy Zabala if he and the band still keep in touch with their estranged vocalist, he replies: "We can't find him. He just disappeared."

I have since cultivated my first impression of former Eraserheads vocalist Ely Buendia after many years of watching him sporadically on TV and at gigs: a moody, stoic and unresponsive guy best stricken off from the prospective boyfriend/fiance list.

But for one reason or another, I ended up dating a lot of stoic, moody and unresponsive guys much like Ely. Could it be that my brain was shot?

In my desire to understand these moody types, I read up on scientific studies that correlate mood and behavior to the size and shape of the hippocampus. According to one study published in Discover magazine, artists like Van Gogh and Plath have been found to harbor abnormally-sized hippocampuses.

Thus, when I meet Ely Buendia for the first time, the first thing I did was look at his head. There was nothing unusual about its size, although he has a somewhat wide forehead. Below the shiny, fleshy tarmac was a pair of intense small eyes like quasars. The gravitas of his face and confident demeanor somehow reminded me of his former bandmate Raimund Marasigan.

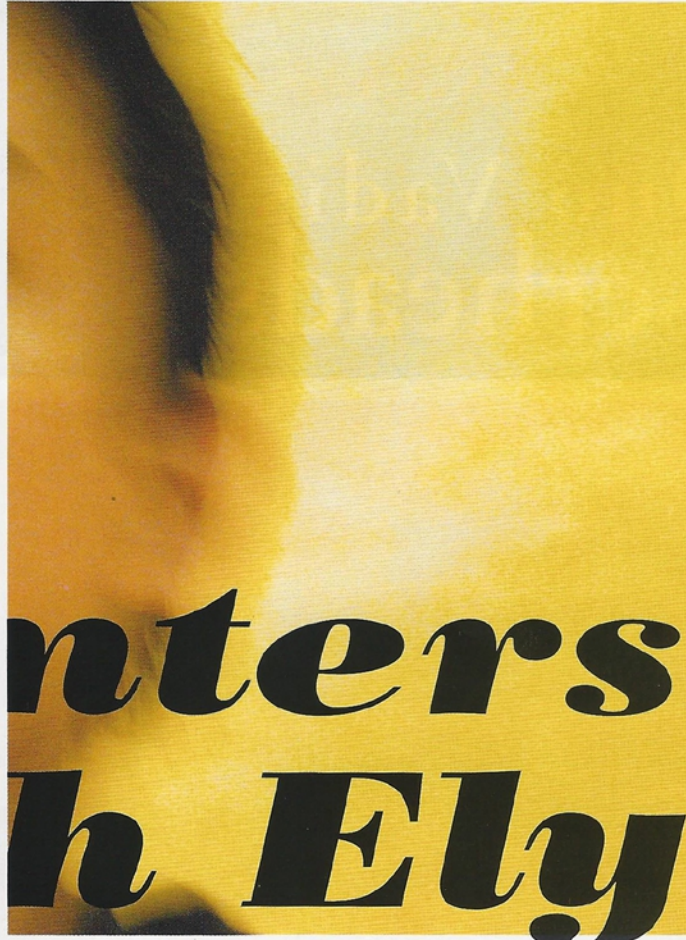
Ely arrived at the Gourmet Café in Galleria with his girlfriend Diane, who is deadringer for actress Maui Taylor, clad in a tube top and tight jeans. Nothing in his smile and cheeky affectations indicate just how guarded he was prior to the interview, which he had granted me on one condition: there will be no questions about the Eraserheads.

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So I had to look for Ely elsewhere. I learned that director Robert Quebral was helping his friend Francis M document a performance of a Death Threat song on a noontime show. Death Threat had asked the babyfaced rapper, as well as Ely, to do guest vocals on "Private Diane." It was Ely's first public reappearance, so I watched. But I couldn't see the quasar. His shades had blackholed any revelatory emotion. Later, Mr. Quebral gave me the number of Francis M, who was gracious enough to help me snag an interview with the elusive vocalist.

Now in the flesh, Ely is inadvertently shedding his mystery, and the presence of Diane has somehow made this intimate striptease possible. They looked like brother and sister. Both have orthodontic braces on. In near-perfect synchrony, they laughingly palm me away as I offer to tell all about a Japanese horror flick they've been meaning to watch. The two are film buffs. In fact, Ely, a UP Film major, has directed some music videos for the Heads ("Maskara") and for the all-girl trio Kaya.

"Ok na experience, kasi never ako nakapag-hands on sa U.P. Dun kasi, puro theory (ang tinuturo)," he explains. He cites anime films like Akira and those by David Lynch as his inspirations. Although he's always been a cineaste, the 32-year old Scorpio is taking his time with film-related pursuits.

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"It's a whole other medium, a whole other scene. Kelangan medyo soaked-up ka rin sa scene na iyun. Hindi ka puwedeng basta papasok na lang," he deadpans. "Yung music, masaya dahil 'yung creative process, ang galing, from writing to recording. Ang maganda sa film kasi, music is only one part of that. Napakalaking challenge. 'Tsaka hindi lang ikaw.'" Then, he repeats "hindi lang ikaw" as if to himself. "Ang daming tao involved, talagang collaborative process. Tapos 'yung journey mo from scriptwriting to (finished movie) is a journey talaga."

So there lies part of the mystery. This man wants to push himself to the limit, fling himself from the cliff of his success. "I'll jump at any opportunity to direct," he adds.

But in the meantime, Ely is still doing music. He is helping his younger sister Lally produce her first album. And yes, he has a new band. "I don't want to make a big deal out of it. Ayokong maunahan na naman ng ano mang klaseng hype. 'Yun nga yung iniwasan ko. 'Yun nga 'yung tinakasan ko eh," he emphasizes. Pressed for more, however, Ely says his new band will be called The Mongols and will play jazz music bordering on operatic.

Then, Ely's quasar shifts toward the quiet figure sitting beside him. Looking at the slim and unruffled Diane, one finds it hard to believe that she is already a mother to their two-year old son Eon. "Lahat ng nagagawa ko ngayon revolves around her, around the world naming tatlo. So in a way, lahat ng kanta ko inspired by them." The controversial musician shifts uneasily in his seat as I press him for more mush. "Ngayon lang nagsi-sink in na may life ka nang binabantayan. Dapat ayusin mo na rin 'yung life mo, parang ganun. In a way, parang liberating, parang selfless na. 'Di mo na pinoproblema 'yung sarili mo."

Sigh. Those moody, stoic and unresponsive Ely types. They still have hope, after all.

