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<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/shinedown-brent-smith-symptom-of-being-human-1234950585/>

**HUMAN LEAGUE**

Shinedown Are Outgrowing Hard Rock With an Unexpected Pop Hit

Twenty years into their career, the band is cultivating an audience in the pop and adult contemporary formats with their sympathetic piano ballad "A Symptom of Being Human"



*Shinedown are determined to bridge cultural and musical divides with their crossover hit "A Symptom of Being Human." SANJAY PARIKH\**

BRENT SMITH WAS sitting in a slow-moving line of ATVs and golf carts at the Blue Ridge Rock Festival in September when he saw them start to assemble. Thousands of fans — a growing sea of humanity — were slowly recognizing the lead singer of [Shinedown](https://www.rollingstone.com/t/shinedown/) as he, members of Papa Roach, and viral country singer [Oliver Anthony](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/who-is-oliver-anthony-rich-men-north-of-richmond-1234878370/) all motored into a nearby field in search of a stage.

The festival, held at a remote raceway in Alton, Virginia, had just been [called off](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/virginia-blue-ridge-rock-festival-cancel-severe-weather-1234821770/) early by promoters citing bad weather, and Shinedown had been slated to headline that night. Smith, a tattooed nomad of hard rock — he refuses to buy a house and chooses to live on the bus or in an endless string of hotel rooms — wanted to find a way to play for those still on the grounds.

“We kind of used the model of *Field of Dreams*. We had our tour manager go out and assess the area. I was like, ‘Just find a platform where the audience can come.’ There was a section of tires, this gazebo, and this little wooden deck. It was perfect,” Smith tells *Rolling Stone* over Zoom. “We got a golf cart, and we packed up Oliver and his crew, all of Papa Roach, and we were this convoy. There were probably close to 7,000 people that had congregated. We got up there and yelled out to everybody like, ‘Yo, we don’t have a PA, but we got guitars and we got our voices. We’re gonna play some music if you guys are cool with it.’”

Video of the set, especially one of Smith guiding the impromptu supergroup through a [singalong of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Simple Man”](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/papa-roach-shinedown-oliver-anthony-cover-lynyrd-skynyrd-1234822072/) on a rickety postage-stamp stage, quickly circulated online, leading some fans to praise the artists for their show-must-go-on approach. “No microfone [sic], no autotune, no massive speakers,” one commented on the video. “Just raw, pure, good damn music.”

A person standing on a truck with a crowd of people around

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*Brent Smith of Shinedown meets with fans during an impromptu performance at the Blue Ridge Rock Festival last year. Photo: Sanjay Parikh\**

That Smith would find himself performing a Southern-rock staple with one of the progenitors of nu-metal and the songwriter of “Rich Men North of Richmond” doesn’t seem odd to him. Talking to the Knoxville, Tennessee, native over two separate Zoom interviews, he is repeatedly adamant about two things: gathering the masses and not allowing his band to be pigeonholed.

“I never want the band that I’m in to be put into a box,” he says. “I don’t look at genres. I don’t look at rock music or pop music, or rap music or country music, or metal or any of that. I look at it as all music.”

It’s the kind of speech that many artists like to give, but Smith is emphatic as he extends it to Shinedown’s fans. “Anyone from anywhere is welcomed at any time,” he says of his audience, who are musically diverse but band loyal and help upend the notion that hard rock fans are only young white males.

A recent video popular on TikTok shows a gray-haired woman rocking out against the barricade at a Shinedown concert. As the band throttles through its 15-year-old song “Sound of Madness,” she shouts along, pumps her fists, and bangs her head, her orange earplugs in danger of popping out.

Smith has spotted the woman from the stage numerous times and says she’s a longtime fan who once told him that his group “is medicine that actually works.”

“There’s always been this 8-to-80 element about this band. Because we talk about the human spirit,” he says. “It really is about the human condition. And what does that actually mean? That we truly do believe that human beings are inherently good and we’re here for one another, even in all the chaos that’s going on.”

Shinedown’s latest single, “A Symptom of Being Human,” speaks to that. Written by Smith and the group’s bassist Eric Bass during the pandemic, it’s a mid-tempo piano ballad about self-doubt, anxiety, and anything that threatens our mental health. “Sometimes I’m in a room where I don’t belong/And the house is on fire and there’s no alarm/And the walls are melting too,” Smith sings. “How about you?”

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Already a hit on the rock and alternative charts, “A Symptom of Being Human” has crossed over to Billboard’s Adult Pop Airplay chart, where it’s connecting with a traditionally older listener. Spotify recently added the song to its Just Good Music playlist, alongside songs by pop stars like Kelly Clarkson, [Dua Lipa](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/dua-lipa-third-album-influences-dating-life-acting-1234945422/), and Smith’s friend Jelly Roll. (The pair sang “Simple Man” together with Skynyrd during a Nashville show in 2022.)

But when Smith suggested that Atlantic, Shinedown’s longtime label, spend money to promote the song in the adult contemporary format, he was met with some blank stares. “I said I want to be able to take ‘Symptom’ and start it at the Hot AC format. And people were like, ‘Why?’ And I said because it’s an audience that we don’t have and it’s the most difficult chart to maneuver.”

The gambit worked, and the song hit Number 15 on Adult Pop Airplay. Smith says that if Shinedown can make a showing on the Hot AC charts, then the rock format should make room for artists outside its walls, too. He brings up Olivia Rodrigo.

“Everyone had given her a little bit of, you know, sauce, because she got [nominated](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/grammy-nominations-2024-list-1234874199/) in the rock category for a Grammy,” he says. (“Ballad of a Homeschooled Girl” is up for Best Rock Song at the February 2024 ceremony.) “I listened to the record — there’s some amazing jams on that record,” he adds. “I want to see who the first active rock station is in North America to play Olivia Rodrigo. It works both ways.”

Shinedown are even making inroads into the country music space. In July, they’ll headline one night of the Tailgates N’ Tallboys festival in Iowa, a country-rock gathering with Jelly Rolly, Bailey Zimmerman, Nate Smith, and the Cadillac Three on the bill. “Last year, it was extraordinary to watch everything that was happening with Hardy and the country music scene and the crossover [of] our boy Jelly Roll,” Smith says. “You’re seeing the evolution of the way that people consume music. And I’m here for it.”

In the end, it may be “A Symptom of Being Human” that smashes Shinedown’s hard-rock label once and for all. Smith views “Symptom” as a great unifier — a song that can help connect listeners of different musical tastes, but also at different ends of the political and cultural spectrum. He says he recently alluded to the war in Gaza onstage before performing “Symptom,” asking his audience to remember that there are innocent people in “the throes of war.”

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“At this time in human history, you notice the polarization of people’s opinions and their ethics as opposed to the other person,” he says. “The conversation has turned from speaking to one another and being passionate, to screaming at each other, because you don’t like what the other person has to say. It’s a tough thing, man… How will I navigate this and not alienate an audience and not divide our audience?”

The answer may lie in the title of Shinedown’s unexpected hit: Just be human.