



OF MONSTERS AND MEN

Conor Oberst, Mike Mogis, M. Ward, and Jim James team up to conquer folk music

By Laura E. Marcus • Photo by Jennifer Tzser

Painters have long been depicted as temperamental, mysterious creatures. They explore the recesses of the human experience so often left buried. Musicians, who can touch the heart through a strum and a yelp, are no different. The members of Monsters of Folk are perfect examples — exalted for their talents, but often misread as reclusive and press shy. Nestled in a pristine townhouse in New York's East Village, Conor Oberst and M. Ward chat about their appreciation for seltzer water while Jim James and Mike Mogis casually munch on trail mix nearby. Any preconceived notions of the standoffish rock stars vanish. What remains is a group of friends hanging out and talking about their latest project. Friendly, enthusiastic, and relaxed, the foursome opens up about their colossal collaboration and the long road that led them there.

Oberst is first to admit that Monsters of Folk arose out of an admiration he held for James and Ward. "I had one of Matt's records and I really liked it. Through a strange turn of events, the first time we met we ended up getting in my van and driving from Portland to San Francisco to play a show," he says. That was in 2001, and two years later Oberst and James met at the now infamous wetland spectacular that was 2003's Field Day Festival. A fast friendship formed. "It can go either way when you meet people — you like their music more than the person — or sometimes you like the person more than their music — but sometimes you get the best of both worlds," Oberst says, flanked by Ward and James at either side. In 2004, James, Oberst, Mogis, and Ward united for their first run of shows, on a tour appropriately called *An Evening With: Bright Eyes, Jim James, and M. Ward*. This was their first taste of what would be dubbed Monsters of Folk, and with each musician's career on an upward trajectory it would take time for the project to become fully realized.

"After we did the tour, every time we would see each other we'd be like 'Let's make a record! Yeah, we will one of these days!' But I think we all had it in the back of our minds that we really would at some point," James explains. Juggling multiple bands and tour schedules was a challenge, but things eventually fell into place. "After we did the first recording session, I thought 'Wow! We're really going to do it,' and then I got really excited and started putting aside material for this project," Oberst says.

It was February 2008 when the musicians were finally able to schedule a time for recording, and Mogis was ready for them. "It was one of the easiest records I've been a part of," the producer says. Although the band could have easily pulled material from past performances, the album they set out to create was made up of completely new tracks. "We came in with 15 skeletons and then fleshed it all out, starting from square one. Creating our own world was so much fun," Ward says. One would think that with such strong talents in the studio, creative control may have been an issue, but amongst this crew equality was the main goal. With all four members playing every instrument on the album, each track showcases individual talent, and signature sound, without any trace of pageantry. Oberst says: "When you're in your own band, you're the captain of the ship, but in this situation everyone is a captain, and there are so many opportunities to learn from each other. I found that I was learning things just by watching the way they [James and Ward] make their records, and it was eye opening for me. I feel like I bet-

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tered myself by stepping down from the captain role and letting others steer the ship. Watching two people I really admire — there are a lot of things I can steal and take credit for," he says with a hearty laugh.

It's this deep-seated collaborative energy that finds its way off the record and into your soul as the songs unfold. Perhaps it was the leisurely pace at which the record formed or the sense of freedom that came from recording without external pressures, but the result is something fresh and exciting. "For me it was more like when I first started making records, still working a job, and trying to figure out when you can all get together to work on it as a whole," James says. "There's something special about this record, there's an energy coming from it that I think came from that feeling." From the toe-tapping bass of the opening track "Dear God (sincerely M.O.F.)," to the down home twang of "Man Named Truth," the album emanates the magic that can happen when good friends come together and make music from the heart.