

Music Review: The Monsters of Folk

By C.W. Rogers
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The Monsters of Folk is a collaborative “supergroup” composed of Conor Oberst and multi-instrumentalist-producer Mike Mogis of Bright Eyes, Jim James of My Morning Jacket, and singer-songwriter M. Ward. Their eponymous first album was released September 22, 2009 on Rough Trade Records.

The foursome began playing live shows together in 2004, but—committed to their own individual bands and projects—waited until early this year to get to work in Mogis’s Omaha, Nebraska studio and begin laying down the tracks for the album. In my opinion, it is an exceptional record.

Though the four musicians have definitive ties to American roots music, including rhythm and blues, gospel, country, rock and folk, and the tongue-and-cheek name for the band cleverly lowers expectations, the work is neither a folk record nor a supergroup toss-off. “Monsters of Folk” is for the most part a tasty chef’s stew of seriously crafted rock and roll, country rock, and hymnal blues and folk-infused ballads, complete with catchy hooks, soothing harmonies, woeful narratives, and lush production, with smatterings of electronic drum loops thrown in for good measure.

With the cohesive sound on this record, Monsters of Folk manage to achieve something far more than a vanity side-project for a collective of singer-songwriters. Together, Mogis—demonstrating his skills behind the board (he has produced and played on numerous releases for artists on the Saddle Creek label)—and the three principal songwriters, Oberst, James and Ward, achieve a unity of disparate elements in the record’s 15 songs. Possessing quite distinct voices and visions, the group members nevertheless manage to form a composite whole that seems to bring out the best in each one of them.

“There’s a lot of styles throughout this record and it could go off the rails,” Mogis recently said of the album. “That was more of my role, kind of a censor in a way, or helping glue things together. If someone had an idea, I helped materialize that idea to make it actually work.”

Many of the songs on the record were brought into the recording sessions as sketches or incomplete ideas that the

group then fleshed out and completed as a whole, in many cases with astonishing results. The effort produced a series of songs with vocalists taking different verses and with added harmonies on choruses and turnarounds that meld together so splendidly that, despite the singular quality of each of the voices, one is hard pressed at times to determine who is singing.

On “Say Please,” the hard rocking second track, three singers trade verses as the song chugs forward in 3/4 time. Mogis plays a ripping electric guitar solo in both good taste and good tone, while Jim James plays the drums (both James and Oberst pick up the drum parts on several songs, and while both claim not to be “real drummers,” the listener might be forgiven for thinking otherwise).

The album’s opener “Dear God (Sincerely MOF),” is a slow R&B-styled plaint driven by a programmed drum loop (sampled from Trevor Dandy’s “Is There Any Love”) and elaborate production (including sampled harp) and high harmonies in a chorus that evokes Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On?” Lyrically, the song takes the form of a conversation with God. Though this may not strike one as the most original of ideas, it does seem to achieve its goal (in a similar fashion to Andy Partridge’s song of nearly the same name on XTC’s 1986 album “Skylarking”): that is, to pose the question of how there could be a God in any world that resembles the one we live in—“I know I’m thinkin’ out loud ... but if your love’s still around ... why do we suffer?”

The album takes off from here, and enters an eclectic and yet cohesive world, whose various turns still manage to retain the stamp of the individual songwriter who brought a particular song to the table—with occasionally mixed results. “Temazcal” sounds like Oberst from days past. A melodically satisfying song, it unfortunately feels like somewhat of a repeat acoustic ramble through mystical time and space with Mayans and magnets and “ovnis on the lawn”—a familiar lyrical terrain of his that was indeed a theme on Bright Eyes’ 2007 release “Cassadaga” (which was overall a superb record).

And “Whole Lotta Losin’”—although it was, according to Mogis, an “improvisational experiment” between the three songwriters—does carry a heavy M. Ward stamp. The song

comes out of the gate sounding like Ward's recurring melancholic, wispy drone, but is immediately picked up with a tableau of synthesizer and Mogis's skillful baritone guitar overlay that almost feels as though Dave Edmunds, circa Rockpile, dropped into the session to say hello—which then carries over to a refrain for a chorus of “bye & bye ... bye & bye,” reminiscent of a lilting Everly Brothers harmony.

In “The Right Place” there is a jolt of electricity where the band brims over with life. It's a Jim James-led country rock-styled number harking back to the movement's origins in the figure of Gram Parsons and his International Submarine Band, or during his brief but influential period with the Byrds. A fuzz-guitar part holds up the bottom, coupled with a weeping steel guitar that wraps around James' trademark reverb-drenched high-end of the register vocals. Oberst plays a plonking honky-tonk tack piano line on the turn-arounds that sounds like a boozed-up Floyd Cramer, to very good effect. And the band then joins together in fervid harmony for the choruses, and later a bridge where the four voices fuse together in a rousing evocation of Crosby, Stills and Nash.

Oberst comes through with “Ahead Of The Curve,” one of the album's many highlights, and “Man Named Truth,” the latter clearly warning us not to trust what we are being sold/told in official narratives about the world in the mandolin-guided refrain: “Don't ever buy nothin' from a man named truth.”

“Ahead Of The Curve” echoes Oberst's more recent work with The Mystic Valley Band, a group of talented friends he leads, that includes the gifted songsmith Nik Freitas. Like the MVB, this tune reflects Oberst's broad melodic turn in both song and voice, while pushing in a rock and roll direction. It's a wonderful song about a restless soul on the move, “I'm staying above the flatline ... I'm ahead of the curve ... take a piece of the sunshine with me on a red-eye flight to another world,” who in the end longs only for a place to begin his life meaningfully.

On the second half of the record there is the indelible “Magic Marker” delivered by Jim James. It's a beautifully arranged lament painting a portrait of a disillusioned and alienated boy, “just another frozen kid who's tryin to make it thru tonite,” who resorts to “freaked out measures” trying to make his “sicko” peers smile. The chorus almost angelically tugs at the heartstrings with harmonizing voices exclaiming “Ordinary don't mean nothin no-how—look what's ordinary now—It's got a magic marker stain on its face and it needs a shower.” This could easily be a reference to the entire cultural and political climate in which we find ourselves today.

Another notable track, near the end of the record is M.

Ward's “Sandman, The Brakeman And Me.” It's a remarkable and chilling delivery of a ‘train song’—a format that has deep roots in traditional American blues, folk and country music. Ward presents it in his familiar breathy vocal style—with the usual serving of heavy reverb—accompanied by an acoustic guitar with reverb-laden blues/folk voicings. During the chorus we get the feeling of a fully fleshed-out choir that hovers in the background, let's say, somewhere in the depths of a church or out on the front lawn, but ever-present, and like much of Ward's material, takes us back to a strange and nostalgic landscape.

The final track is James' “His Masters Voice,” where arguably the album reaches its peak. It's a haunting portrayal of a young soldier being called to war and hearing his “master's calling.” A quiet electric guitar arpeggio joins a cadence of sampled percussion, synthesizers and sirens, and turns into a sullen war march. James' high-note singing melts into the background and takes on an almost ethereal quality as he tells the tale of a soldier being struck from the side (by what we assume is a roadside bomb) as he “sees his inner-child” and “hears his mother's voice,” and goes on to die. His master takes the form of his own religion's spokesmen as well as his government—“Their job tonite: rewrite the bible—for a whole new generation of non-believers ... there's evil that must be put down ... and it touches the soldier boy ... he heeds his master's voice ... his life is calling.”

It's a stunning song, in my view, both musically and lyrically, and a powerful ending to a collaborative collection from four of the most talented young musician/singer-songwriters in America at present.

The Monsters of Folk are currently touring the record internationally and will be in New York November 6 and 8, Philadelphia on November 9, and Richmond, Virginia, November 10. For other future dates see: <http://monstersoffolk.com>

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