



MUMFORD & SONS BY DREW TEWKSBURY

In 1972, George Carlin famously ranted about seven words that couldn't be uttered on television. The verboten expressions were offensive to the sensibilities of purportedly well-mannered people everywhere. For some in the music world, however, there are not seven forbidden sounds, just a single four-letter word: folk.

The London quartet Mumford & Sons, however, realigns folk's paradigm with soaring harmonies, banjo, upright bass and a single kick drum. The stigma of a genre seemingly relegated to youth groups and corporate coffeehouses is beginning to heal, as folk continues to evolve and grow. "Folk music suffers from [people's perception] that it is a soft art form," says keyboardist Ben Lovett. "But I think it's the hardest to write and perform. You can't hide behind fancy frills and bells and whistles. You're not singing about something you don't care about."

On Mumford & Son's U.S. debut, *Sigh No More*, the band culls its stripped-down sound from three self-produced EPs released since 2007. Marcus Mumford is essentially a one-man-band as he confidently croons and strums the guitar while stomping a tambourine and bass drum with his feet. Joining him are Lovett on keys, Ted Dwane on upright bass and Country Winston

Marshall, who plucks the banjo with rapid-fire precision.

To complete *Sigh No More*, the band worked with Marcus Dravs, who has produced Björk, Peter Gabriel and Arcade Fire albums. "[Dravs] really encouraged us to think hard about the songs before we recorded them," Mumford says, "to play the best we could, and to be self-controlled with the kind of crazy ideas that new, over-excited bands get the first time they go into a studio."

Although the influence of Arcade Fire in Mumford's powerful voice is undeniable, Mumford & Sons' sound is shaped more by the distinct colors of folk in Britain. "American folk was partly born out of the ever-evolving forms of blues and civil unrest, whereas British folk has more classical origins from composers like Haydn infused with traditional Celtic music," Lovett says. "But it's important to our music to digest everything around us, from music to literature to everyday life. If you put all that stuff in, the music you write will only be richer."

Sigh No More is emboldened by riches. The lush vocal harmonies concluding "White Blank Page" rise to the sky as the instrumentation falls away, leaving the voices to tower like a Sequoia that withstood a forest fire. "Roll Away Your Stone" shifts

from a ballad squeezed deep from Mumford's lungs to a swirling square dance, best performed from back porches or in veterans' halls. Squeezeboxes, floor stomps and tambourines evoke an intimacy carved out by Mumford & Sons. These songs are invitations to spaces long forgotten.

With rhythms more at home in the Laurel Canyon of the 1960s, it's hard to believe that the band comes from the urban sprawl of West London, but it embraces this dichotomy. "We are both urban and rural folk," Lovett says. "We live and breathe the city of London and whichever cities we have the fortune of visiting on tour, but we run for the hills when we can and relish the space and the beauty of our countryside." In London, they are not alone as folk rock revivalists; along with rough-folksters Noah & the Whale and the honey-voiced Laura Marling (with whom Mumford occasionally drums), Mumford & Sons are in good company. But unlike their cohorts, Mumford & Sons stays true to songs of old that were hummed in the times of yesterday, plucking strings connected to history and the heart.

"We're not writing coffee table music," Lovett says. "We want to write with a purpose. We want to write music that matters." **F**

3 artists that inspired Mumford & Sons' Ben Lovett to make music



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