

Isolated Vocals: investigating Bon Iver's 'For Emma, Forever Ago'

Few albums in the modern indie canon tout origins as storied as Bon Iver's *For Emma, Forever Ago*. Justin Vernon's debut release under the Bon Iver moniker would go on to become a touchstone for an entire generation of folk driven balladry throughout the latter half of the 2000s. But the story of how the album was recorded, along with the myths which inevitably precipitated around it, would go on to build an equally enduring mythos around Vernon himself.

At 25 years old, Justin Vernon was deeply unhappy. DeYarmond Edison, his band at the time, for which he had moved across the country from his childhood home in Wisconsin to North Carolina to be with, had splintered. The band had consisted of close friends, many of whom he'd known since early adolescence. Soon after, Vernon became bed ridden for a period of three months due to a liver infection and, unable to work, was soon broke. He split with his then girlfriend around the same time - although they remained roommates for the remainder of his time in North Carolina. Disillusioned with the way it seemed his life was headed, Vernon decided to return to Wisconsin. As winter began to take root in his home state, Vernon retreated to his father's log cabin alone - save for a sparse collection of musical equipment and recording gear. It was here he would record the majority of what would go on to become *For Emma, Forever ago*.

For Vernon, *For Emma, Forever Ago* represented a cathartic outpouring of the pent up culmination of a long period of intermittent self-reflection. "I felt very un-special. So when I made *For Emma, Forever Ago*, I was very much making a record that I needed to make." said Vernon of the record after its release. "It wasn't because I thought the record was my chance to be successful; it was because the record actually meant something to me. I felt like I was actually applying myself." It seems that the overarching theme of *For Emma, Forever Ago* is not love, heartbreak, or loneliness, but isolation. Isolated from the pervasive trappings of the day to day, from expectations of who might hear his music, and from friends and family, on the record Vernon captures an uncompromising self-portrait. By lavishly layering many, many vocal takes one top of another throughout the album, Vernon's stream-of-consciousness lyrics envelop the whole stereo field while preserving a humanising vulnerability in his glassy falsetto, which floats above the chorus of harmonies. It is only him; secluded, isolated.

The Covid-19 pandemic has temporarily changed the way society operates on every echelon of hierarchy in every nation around the globe. It will inevitably have profound and irreversible consequences for better and for worse that will stretch far into the future. Perhaps at no other point this century have so many people simultaneously become so isolated, both physically and emotionally, from one and other. However, the exceptional motivation for this self-induced isolation lends a unique, almost oxymoronic sense of camaraderie to those affected. There is a sense of togetherness and reciprocity felt universally by everyone in isolation right now. We are isolated but not alone in being so; separate but not divided.

The depth and profoundness of works like *For Emma, Forever Ago* rely on a similar mechanism of empathy. *For Emma, Forever Ago* is an impressionistic snapshot, a moment, beautifully suspended in time so that we may have the luxury of being able to visit and revisit it again and again. In doing so, for a moment, we inhabit our own wintry cabin, soothed knowing we are not outliers in our isolation. During the ongoing pandemic our sense of national and international camaraderie works to lessen the burden of self-induced

isolation, albums like *For Emma, Forever Ago* lessen the same burden by viscerally letting us share in the isolation of another.

The music on *For Emma, Forever Ago* deals with themes of love, loss, and heartbreak but on a deeper level, woven into its very being, it is an album motivated by isolation. For Justin Vernon, his self-imposed exile from everyday life was a necessary step for him to grow and heal both physically and mentally. For Emma, *Forever Ago* was merely a cathartic by-product of this process. Millions of us now find our immediate futures placed on a curiously similar trajectory, this time our mutual self-induced isolation serves not only to protect ourselves but everyone close to us. Personally I have been finding catharsis in exploring all the different winding, eroded paths in the empty forest near to where I live, that I have never investigated before, often while listening to music. Doing so might not land me any guest spots on Kanye West's next album or any Grammy Awards like *For Emma, Forever Ago* did for Justin Vernon, but it is certainly doing a good job keeping me sane. It is my catharsis and I think once this is all over, I'll be better for it.