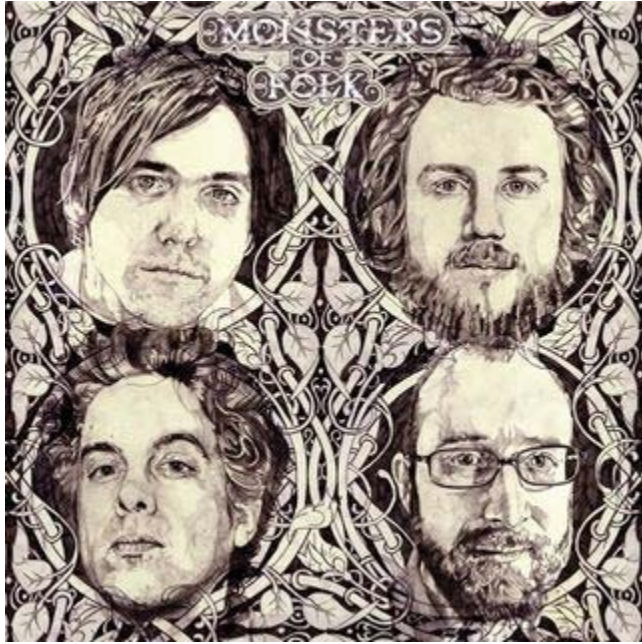


## CD Review: Monsters of Folk -- Monsters of Folk



[Monsters of Folk](#)  
*Monsters of Folk*  
[Shangri-La Music](#)

By [Al Kaufman](#)

Supergroups are often hit-or-miss affairs. For every successful [Traveling Wilburys](#) (George Harrison, Bob Dylan, Tom Petty, Roy Orbison and Jeff Lynne), there are two or three extremely disappointing [Thorns](#) (Matthew Sweet, Sean Mullins, and Pete Droge). Monsters of Folk would certainly fall in the former category.

Monsters of Folk reads like a who's who of indie rock. It consists of [Bright Eyes'](#) Conor Oberst, [My Morning Jacket's](#) Yim Yames (Jim James), [M. Ward](#) and multi-instrumentalist [Mike Mogis](#), who has worked with Oberst and Ward in the past, and whose engineering skills were integral in making the album come to fruition.

These guys are all friends who have shown up on each other's CDs and tours. They like hanging out with each other and making music together. But friends having fun working together do not necessarily make a great finished product. Think about those Burt Reynolds movies of the '70s, in which he and his pals Loni Anderson, Dom DeLuise and the like cracked each other up repeatedly, but did not have the same effect on their audience. Their outtake reel was always funnier than their movie. Monsters of Folk (the name started as a running joke and just stuck) do not suffer from this problem.

The friends had two basic rules going into the project: The four of them would write the songs together, and they would play all the instruments. The results bring a certain cohesiveness to the

CD. It is virtually impossible to determine who took the lead in writing which song (with the possible exception of "Ahead of the Curve," which sounds like a Bright Eyes song), while various styles - folk, rockabilly, Americana, country, rock and even a touch of gospel - shine through on each track.

The CD opens with "Dear God (Sincerely M.O.F.)," which will someday be included with Tori Amos' "God" and Joan Osbourne's "One of Us" on a *Greatest of Theological Rock* CD. The band's earnest plea, "Why do we suffer?", while sounding a bit simplistic, works in this Dido-esque format of putting a folksy melody over a beat. And the CD continually revisits the theme of searching for something more, be it spiritually, mentally, or physically. On their own, Oberst and Ward tend to become a bit self-righteous while spouting their platitudes. Here, possibly thanks to Yames and Mogis, they are tempered.

Things heat up a little more with Mogis' guitar solo on "Say Please." It's a pleasant melody that, like "Losin to Head," has a certain Wilco groove to it. "Temazcal" (more searching for God and love) demonstrates that they can harmonize as well as Crosby, Stills and Nash, while they bring just the right amount of twang to "The Right Place," in which they search for what is good.

They incorporate swelling orchestration, a la latter day Beatles, to "His Master's Voice," (God again, but also Mohammad and Jesus playing dice), and are also able to punch out the mandolin-drenched, spaghetti western number "Man Named Truth," which offers the sage advice, "Don't ever buy nothing from a man named Truth."

These are guys who are searching for meaning, but believe one can search and laugh (or at least give off a wry smile) while doing so. Yes, there are a couple of times when the CD gets bogged down. "Slow Down Jo" and a few others slow down too much. But there is always something like "Magic Marker" lurking around the corner. A pretty song that desires to get to the center of the age old question, "How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop?" Yames proclaims, "Ordinary don't mean nothin' no-how/Look what's ordinary now." If this is ordinary, I can't wait to hear it when Monsters of Folk do something that they think is special.