

HOUNDMOUTH

UNRULY FOLK

BY JONATHAN BERNSTEIN | PHOTO BY KARA SMARSH



Houndmouth from left to right: Shane Cody, Zak Appleby, Katie Toupin and Matt Myers

WHEN THE MEMBERS of Houndmouth called up Dave Cobb to see if he might want to produce their second record, Cobb had only one qualification. “Yes, but I’m not going to make another fucking Americana album,” he told the band. Despite the fact that Cobb has become one of the most in-demand country/roots producers in the country, and despite the fact that Houndmouth had already been pronounced one of the brightest young voices in Americana (this year the band was nominated for Emerging Artist of the Year by the Americana Music Association), Cobb’s remark was just what the band was hoping to hear.

“It had just happened,” says Matt Myers, guitarist and singer for Houndmouth, calling from home in New Albany, Indiana. Myers is talking about his band’s early adoption by the larger Americana folk community. “The scene happened, and it kind of took folk music and put it in a box. I love folk music so much that I didn’t know how I felt about that.” Myers says that the band’s first reaction when they heard Cobb’s caveat was “this is going to be perfect.”

Houndmouth was formed in New Albany, where its four members had all grown up playing in a variety of local bar bands. After releasing its debut *From The Hills Below The City* in 2013, the band, composed of Myers on guitar, Katie Toupin on keyboards, Shane Cody on drums and Zak Appleby on bass, has gradually become one of the most exciting young live acts working today. Houndmouth honed its chops on the other side of the Ohio River, in Louisville, Kentucky, where the group became part of the city’s burgeoning music community. “There’s amazingly talented people here in a very creative way,” says Myers. “In Nashville, everybody is a session pro. In Louisville, it’s the exact opposite. Because there isn’t this drive to be the greatest technically, there’s this weird creative spark going on that makes up for the lack of technicality.”

Louisville’s unhinged creativity has found its way into Houndmouth’s raucous, roots-minded take on rock and roll. Their sound, big on four-part harmonies and scruffy tales of wayward vagabonds, earned them the immediately predictable comparisons to groups like The Band, a comparison Myers has no problem shrugging off at this point. “We all sing, and clearly people are going to make that relation.”

“Houndmouth has great spirit,” says Jim James, who the band considers to be a “big brother” and mentor. “There is something so real there, real to see and feel when you hear it live. You see real people putting art into the world. Real blood, sweat and tears.”

On their second album, Houndmouth came into its own as a group of songwriters. The album is full of plenty of the free-wheeling sing-along rockers reminiscent of their debut, but *Little Neon Limelight* also represents a growing up for the young group.

“On the first album we were just starting out so we just put some songs together, and they didn’t quite mean a lot to us. There were a few songs on there that were personal, but with this album we got to take our time and actually figure out what we wanted to say,” says Myers.

On one song, “For No One,” Myers faces a quarter-life crisis in a dark, solo acoustic tale of sober reckoning. “Go and take the millions, take the derby hats and stick ‘em up your ass,” Myers sings with venomous resentment. “I’ll take the cheap seats, because my company don’t come served inside a glass.”

“I was turning 26 and starting to grow up, so I made a list of statements that I wanted to put out to the world,” Myers says of the song, which he says is one of the most personal he’s ever written.

Elsewhere on the album, drummer Shane Cody slows things down with the moving country-soul ballad “Honey Slider.” The band took the name for the song from a story they learned about their current favorite artist, Neil Young, who had coined the phrase “honey slides” for his infamous recipe of honey mixed with marijuana during the recording of his 1974 masterpiece *On The Beach*.

Once they released their Cobb-produced follow-up record this past spring, Houndmouth wanted to continue on its mission of gradual dissociation from the vintage, rustic-fetishizing aesthetics of contemporary Americana. When the band performed on David Letterman this past spring, they dressed in a disarming mix of fringe suede jackets, sparkly dresses, felt blazers and tight leather coats. It was a far cry from their first appearance on Letterman two years earlier, when Houndmouth came dressed up mostly in t-shirts and jeans.

Houndmouth’s newfound rock and roll flamboyance has become a mainstay of the

group’s live act of late, a way to gently poke fun at the expectations and strict aesthetic conventions of seeing an Americana act live in 2015. “It didn’t start out as an intentional thing, but it was always in the back of my mind. The more we would play shows, the more I would see people in rustic wear, wearing top hats and shit,” says Myers. “We did it first for fun, to remind ourselves to not take it too seriously, but it became addicting after a while.”

“I’ve always looked up to David Bowie and Mick Jagger,” he continues. “Especially Jagger, when they were playing a lot of country/Southern music and still wearing the most flamboyant stuff, I thought that was the coolest thing. It didn’t fit.”

Houndmouth prides itself on not fitting. They’re a country-rock outfit that dresses in campy blazers, a traditionally-minded band that sings about trust funds and hipsters, a fast-rising indie act that has flown under the radar of publications like *Pitchfork* and *Rolling Stone*, a wholly collaborative band that has almost no interest in collaborating with outside artists, a band equally at home covering Funkadelic, Lefty Frizzell and Dion. Lately, Houndmouth has been closing each show of its recent tour with a messy bar-band rendition of the latter’s “Runaround Sue.”

“That song’s a banger,” Myers says of the Dion hit. “We used to come out to that song as our walk-out music to the stage, and people would just go crazy, and we’d have to cut the song and start playing ourselves.” Houndmouth decided they might as well perform the song themselves because, as Myers puts it, “You play it like complete shit and it’s still going to go over well.”

Over the past few years Houndmouth has slowly become one of the most cohesive, tight-knit sounding young touring groups today, but their live show has managed to retain its loose drunk bar-band-meets-folksy-campfire sing-along appeal. Myers and Appleby switch microphones for a song, just for kicks; Myers wanders the stage in between verses for a bit too long, returning to his mic when it’s his turn to sing just a second too late. Or he’ll play guitar on a song he’s not singing from on top of Cody’s drum riser. Or they’ll all switch instruments: Cody to bass, Appleby to keys, Toupin to drums. “We’ve always kept it like that,” says Myers. “It’s fun to keep things simple, and then build off that.” ★