

Music

10 Years Later: How Did Bon Iver's 'For Emma, Forever Ago' Give Rise To 'Man Of The Woods'?

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Ten years ago today, Bon Iver's debut album *For Emma, Forever Ago* changed the folk music landscape forever.

Actually, it was technically more than ten years ago—while Bon Iver's label, Jagjaguwar, officially released the album on February 19, 2008, Bon Iver founder Justin Vernon dropped it on MySpace seven months earlier, in July 2007.

And some might argue that Vernon revolutionized not just popular folk music but popular music as a whole. Vernon's signature falsetto, uniquely poetic lyrics, and knack for blending acoustic and digital sounds together encouraged people to question how music could and should sound...and forced them to admit that folk music is actually kind of cool. *Rolling Stone* claimed that *For Emma* is the 92nd best album of the 2000s. Kanye West immediately recruited Vernon to work with him on *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*. Ed Sheeran even got a *For Emma* lyric tattooed on his arm (it's "Everything that happens is from now on" from "re: stacks," in case you're wondering). The platinum-certified album may have only reached 64 on the *Billboard* 200 chart, but permanently influencing the world of contemporary music is a far more meaningful accomplishment than temporarily being ranked number one on a chart. Vernon himself would probably agree.

Admittedly, *For Emma*'s lasting impact is probably, in part, due to its wild and borderline unbelievable backstory. Vernon wrote the entire album while living in his father's isolated Wisconsin cabin in the dead of winter, though he tweaked and cleaned up each of the tracks once he returned to his North Carolina home. The fact that he literally chopped wood and hunted for food while writing what would turn out to be one of the most influential folk albums of all time is almost a little too perfect.


But Vernon's self-imposed isolation allowed him to examine the feelings of despair, hopelessness, and heartbreak that had undoubtedly been escalating for months. Right before relocating to the cabin, Vernon left his former band, lost a good amount of money playing poker, and broke up with his girlfriend. In fact, *For Emma* is often dubbed a breakup album. Almost every track on the record hints at Vernon struggling to get over a lost love, and no track does so more directly than the ultra-popular "Skinny Love."





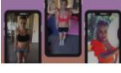


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From its painfully sincere lyrics and deceiving simplicity to Vernon's willingness to be his own backup vocalist, "Skinny Love" embodies everything that makes *For Emma* so great. And while it may not be *For Emma*'s best or most impressive track—Vernon's falsetto shines more in "Flume" and "The Wolves" is a better showcase of his vocal manipulation abilities—"Skinny Love" is unquestionably and understandably its most popular.

For Emma helped pave the way for other folk-pop acts like Mumford and Sons and Of Monsters and Men, and its impact is far-reaching enough that people continue to cover "Skinny Love," "Flume," and other well-liked tracks to this day. It's so far-reaching, in fact, that critics and fans alike immediately drew comparisons to Bon Iver and *For Emma* when Justin Timberlake (who, funnily enough, impersonated Vernon on *Saturday Night Live* almost six years ago to the day) announced his newest album, *Man of the Woods*.

Timberlake is far from the only pop star who's gone in a "rawer" and more mellow direction in recent years—just look at Miley Cyrus and Lady Gaga. He's probably, however, the pop star who's gotten the most flack for moving in said direction. Ever since dropping the very first *Man of the Woods* teaser trailer in January, Timberlake fans and detractors alike questioned JT's decision to record what looked to be a country album, and for good reason. Why would the man whose entire solo career is built on groovy, synthy tracks like "SexyBack" and "Rock Your Body" mess with a good thing by replacing his vests and ties with jeans and flannel shirts?

But as Timberlake continued to release single after single, the problem seemed to be less that JT had gone country and more that he was sending us very mixed singles. He gave us the *Man of the Woods* trailer and two days later gave us "Filthy," an electronic track accompanied by an appropriately futuristic music video. Then he gave us the lacklustre "Supplies," "Say Something" and "Man of the Woods" both sounded much more in line with the Timberlake who spent an entire video running alongside horses and wandering through fields. But at that point, it seemed like many had already written the album off entirely.



Constructing a rustic, contemplative alter ego for yourself because you want to make a folksier and more personal album is one thing. Constructing a rustic, contemplative alter ego for yourself because folk music is hip and trendy is quite another. And because we want our artists to be effortlessly and naturally talented, we tend to react negatively when an artist works noticeably hard to chase a trend or change their public image (see: Taylor Swift). Justin Vernon made *For Emma* not because he wanted to create a hit album or become a folk music sensation but because he wanted to make music that represented how and what he was feeling. Can the same be said for Timberlake?

That's not to say that *Man of the Woods* doesn't have merit. "Say Something" is a legitimately good song, and "The Hard Stuff" has the potential to become a slow-burning country hit. But Timberlake employing a woody, folksy aesthetic to sell an album that, despite its name, is neither woody nor folksy is basically the music equivalent of your 54-year-old aunt using Facebook and throwing around terms like "YOLO" to try to seem cool. They both mean well. But unbeknownst to them, they're letting the rest of us know that it's time to move on to newer, greener pastures. Twitter and Instagram replaced Facebook. A countless number of slang words and terms quickly replaced "YOLO." And now it might be time for something to replace the bearded, flannel folk cliché that Timberlake adopted and Vernon unknowingly originated.

Maybe that something will come from a musician we haven't even heard of yet. Maybe that something will come from Vernon himself—he helped usher in a new era of folk music when he first stepped on to the music scene as Bon Iver back in 2007, so it's entirely possible that he could be the one to transform folk music once again. Regardless of who carries the folk music torch moving forward, we're ready and excited for the next *For Emma*, *Forever Ago* to enter into our lives.