

= For Emma , Forever Ago =

For Emma , Forever Ago is the debut studio album by American indie folk band Bon Iver . It was first self @-@ released in July 2007 , and later saw wide release on the Jagjaguwar label in February 2008 . The album is principally the work of singer @-@ songwriter Justin Vernon , who had previously performed in the band DeYarmond Edison . After college , the group moved to Raleigh , North Carolina , but broke up in 2006 . Vernon fell ill with mononucleosis and a liver infection , and grew frustrated with his songwriting and life . He left Raleigh and drove an hour northwest of his hometown , Eau Claire , Wisconsin , hoping to be alone .

The album was recorded at Vernon 's father 's remote hunting cabin over late 2006 to early 2007 . He abandoned his old songwriting methods and instead focused on wordless melodies that he later set to words , which he felt evoked a more subconscious meaning . The record 's lyrical subjects include lost love and mediocrity . His folk @-@ infused songs include heavy choral arrangements , featuring Vernon 's falsetto , and horns . He hunted his own food and spent much of his time isolated . Though he did not intend to make an album , he received strong encouragements from friends and decided to self @-@ release For Emma , Forever Ago in July 2007 . After several performances and online exposure , he was signed to Jagjaguwar later that year .

For Emma , Forever Ago attracted wide acclaim from music critics , achieving a spot on dozens of end @-@ of @-@ the @-@ year lists , as well as several awards . It became a major commercial success for Jagjaguwar , an independent label , and has been certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) , for sales of over 500 @,@ 000 copies . " Skinny Love " became the album 's best @-@ performing single and also went gold . Vernon gathered together several musicians to form a band to tour with . The album 's touring cycle lasted two years , ending in late 2009 , and visited several countries and music festivals worldwide .

= = Background = =

Justin Vernon was born in Eau Claire , Wisconsin , and grew up pursuing music . He saw the folk duo the Indigo Girls in concert in middle school and it proved formative on his life . He attended the University of Wisconsin ? Eau Claire (UW ? Eau Claire) , where he played in a number of bands . One such group , Mount Vernon , consisted of ten members and contained saxophonist Sara Jensen , who became his first love . He and Jensen broke up in the middle of his college years , but would remain friends . He studied music theory for a time as well as jazz , but ended up with a degree in religious studies . DeYarmond Edison became his next musical project , as he graduated from college and relocated to Raleigh , North Carolina in August 2005 . The group chose Raleigh hoping for an adventure and a more vibrant musical scene .

Over the course of his time in Raleigh , he became frustrated with his songwriting as well as personal life . He worked at a local sandwich shop that he felt took too much time from him . He started to have health problems : he first contracted pneumonia , then mononucleosis , which developed into a liver infection that kept him bedridden for three months . Members of the band began to fight , and Vernon was kicked out of the group . Many of his bands had held similar members ? some he had known since his adolescence ? which amplified the pain of breaking apart . Afterwards , he spent time as a band member for the Rosebuds ; his contributions feature on their third album , Night of the Furies . Vernon also recorded a solo extended play , Hazelton , which he distributed in 100 self @-@ made CD @-@ Rs . He lost his money playing online poker , which he viewed as a microcosm for his other problems .

Vernon , then 25 , felt his life had spiraled into mediocrity , as though he had lost the sense of purpose he had a half @-@ decade prior . He sensed he had compromised with bandmates and in his personal life . His depression was fueled by indifference , and he decided to get away from Raleigh and return to his hometown . He broke @-@ up with his then @-@ girlfriend , Christy Smith , and tossed his recording equipment into the trunk of his car . He drove home to Eau Claire over eighteen hours through the night . He first stopped at his parents home while they were out . He sat on their couch and felt " claustrophobic " and " super @-@ empty . " He returned to the road , in

search of silence and hoping to be alone .

= = Recording and production = =

Vernon 's travels brought him to his father 's hunting cabin , roughly an hour northwest of his hometown and outside of Medford , Wisconsin . He and his father had often spent weekends at the 80 @-@ acre rural property ? an area they dubbed " the land " ? when he was growing up . In an interview , he described it as " a little alpine @-@ style , timber @-@ frame cabin . " The cabin was not necessarily ramshackle ; his father had replaced its dirt floor and installed plumbing years before . For roughly three weeks , Vernon sat alone in the shack , drinking beer and watching seasons of the television show Northern Exposure on DVD . He mulled over thoughts about his relationship with Jensen , a break @-@ up he had struggled to get over . He hunted his food , a practice that he had learned from his father . He killed two deer in his period at the property , which lasted the entire three months " and then some , " according to Vernon . At one point , he faced a wild bear that entered the cabin late one night , enticed by his stew . His father would drop by " every 10 days or so , " supplying his son with beer , eggs , and cheese . Vernon completed tasks for him , such as stripping wood , clearing brush , and stacking lumber . He did not intend to stay for long , viewing the excursion as " an opportunity to escape the trap of society , to not pay bills , to play music and live really cheaply . " Instead , he stayed for three months in the harsh Wisconsin winter .

After three weeks , Vernon grew tired of his " self @-@ indulgent , lazy behavior " and began forming song ideas . He had an idea for a song and brought inside his musical equipment , which consisted of several guitars , microphones , and an old @-@ model Macintosh with ProTools LE . Shortly before exiting Raleigh , he had developed song ideas but ceased working on them in his depression . He began recording songs and layering his vocals atop more vocals , imitating a choir . He sang in falsetto , which he had first tried with his previous band . He gained freedom in singing in a higher register , feeling he accessed " painful melodies " unattainable in his previous work . He further manipulated his recorded vocals using the software Auto @-@ Tune . Soon , he began developing more songs , which were worked on in 12 @-@ hour " bursts " of productivity . " I would work for 14 hours a day and start to feel a little insane , " he later commented . The work was " labor @-@ intensive , " as he often merged over a minimum of eight tracks of vocals on each song . He likened the singularity of the process to his teenage years , where he worked alone with an eight @-@ track . According to Vernon , days were hazy and began to run together for him . He would wake each morning at sunrise , due to the light reflecting from the snow . To help repair his 1964 Sears Silvertone guitar , he traded venison in the nearby town . By February , with winter drawing to a close , Vernon emerged from the cabin with nine songs . He left still feeling physically sick from the infection , nor did he feel " renewed " from his creative catharsis . He spent additional time in Raleigh recording brass in " re : stacks " , and he invited friends Randy Pingrey and John Dehaven over one day to play trumpet and trombone on the songs .

While stories of the " cabin " would become oft @-@ repeated and mythologized , Vernon never viewed it that way : " It 's sort of odd to look back and see it as magical , because it felt like a lonely few months at the cabin , where I plugged in the laptop and fucked around . " Rolling Stone 's Josh Eells later summarized its romanticized story as " part Into the Wild , part Basement Tapes , part Walden , part Unabomber . " Vernon later viewed the album a victory for his mental health , a metaphor for taking " personal steps " to improve his life . He characterized his growth as a " small internal dialogue between me and the microphone . " The album 's title comes from the middle name of Jensen , though he refrained from confirming that she was the central inspiration behind the album . He felt the titular " Emma " was evocative of " a statement , a sentiment and a closing of my own history . " He went more in @-@ depth in a later remark : " Emma isn 't a person . Emma is a place that you get stuck in . Emma 's a pain that you can ? t erase . "

= = Composition = =

For Emma , Forever Ago is a summation of Vernon 's life events at the time , ranging from " lost

love and longing " to mediocrity . His lyrics on the album aspire to tell stories , which was inspired by musician Bruce Springsteen , and the song structures are unorthodox . He discarded his old method of songwriting , both metaphorically and literally : on one occasion , an old PowerBook crashed , losing dozens of unfinished old songs . Vernon buried the laptop in the snow , later remarking , " They were taken from me but it was good that they were , as it really gave me a new face . " Music came first , after which he would create wordless vocal lines . He felt this process brought forth " weird , subconscious melodies and sounds . " He considered this method a " back @-@ door way , " as they fit more to his unintelligible syllables than words . He expanded upon this process in a 2008 interview :

Vernon listened to little music while creating the album , but was inspired by a myriad of sources . He had listened to Vienna Boys ' Choir recordings months prior , which inspired him to incorporate choral arrangements into his work . He also felt inspired by Appalachian folk singers who employed the falsetto register , which inspired him to use his . As a result , he felt more comfortable singing certain complicated phrases , as though he could express pain or joy more clearly . He suggested in one interview it could have been a reaction to his favorite black singers , such as the Staple Singers , Mahalia Jackson , and Sam Cooke . " Flume " was created at his girlfriend Christy Smith 's house in Raleigh , preceding his trip to the cabin . He later dubbed " Flume " as the " catalyst " for his move to the cabin and creation of Bon Iver : " that was the song that made me leave . " While " Skinny Love " has been considered a reference to his relationship with Smith , Vernon countered this as " not entirely accurate [...] it 's about that time in a relationship that I was going through ; you 're in a relationship because you need help , but that 's not necessarily why you should be in a relationship . And that 's skinny . " " re : stacks " , meanwhile , references his gambling problem .

= = Release = =

After completing the recordings , Vernon returned to North Carolina to play guitar on tour with the Rosebuds , who toured through that spring . It took several months for him to have thoughts on his recordings . He viewed them as potential demos he would later re @-@ record , but Ivan Howard of the Rosebuds convinced him to leave it as is , commenting , " This is your record . " He consulted friends to listen first before deciding to self @-@ release it . He mixed his recordings himself , hoping to send them out to labels who would give him an advance to record a " real " album . While at the cabin , Vernon had written to Kelly Crisp of the Rosebuds , concluding his letter with " bon iver , " a misspelling of " bon hiver , " which is French for " good winter . " Its origins lie in an episode of Northern Exposure , wherein two characters greet one another . Crisp encouraged him to name the project Bon Iver . While on tour with the Rosebuds , he asked to play a small solo set , his first , prior to a performance at that year 's South by Southwest (SXSW) . Encouraged , more performances followed in New York and in Wisconsin .

For Emma , Forever Ago was first self @-@ distributed on MySpace in June 2007 , and gradually became an independent hit throughout that year . My Old Kentucky Blog was the first to popularize the record . A release party was held at the House of Rock in Eau Claire on July 8 , 2007 , marking the album 's CD debut . It was a limited run of 500 copies , as Vernon had no idea who would be interested . He intended to send out 100 copies to press outlets . Positive reviews increased within weeks , from music blogs such as BrooklynVegan and Pitchfork . An appearance at the CMJ Music Marathon in New York increased Vernon 's popularity among music blogs , and he began to see offers to release the album from record labels . According to Vernon , major labels were " desperate " to sign him , offering contracts in which he chose the deal . He chose to sign with independent label Jagjaguwar in late October 2007 because he liked the label 's president , Chris Swanson , who had first opened communication in the summer , and its Midwest roots . 4AD would distribute the album in Europe .

= = Commercial performance = =

Upon its February 2008 release , For Emma , Forever Ago sold 4 @,@ 000 copies in its debut

week . That placed it on several U.S. album sales charts , including at number 182 on the Billboard 200 and a number five entry on the Top Heatseekers chart . Sales for For Emma were " slow @-@ building , " according to music publication Billboard , but eventually became a " commercial smash " for Jagjaguwar . The album eventually peaked at number 64 on the Billboard 200 in the issue dated January 24 , 2009 . Prior to its official release on Jagjaguwar , the album was widely available online . The label offered sales incentives in response , including a free poster with pre @-@ ordered copies , a bonus track on the iTunes Store edition , as well as purchasing a copy required for in @-@ store performances . The album was mostly successful among triple @-@ A radio stations in the U.S. , including many public stations in the Midwest , where the label focused their marketing campaign .

In the United Kingdom , the album debuted at number 42 on the UK Albums Chart ; it was later certified gold by the British Phonographic Industry (BPI) for sales of over 100 @,@ 000 copies . It achieved its largest international success in Ireland , where it debuted at number 16 ; it was also a top 40 hit album in Flanders , Portugal , Australia , and Denmark . In Australia , the album was eventually certified platinum by the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) , denoting shipments of 70 @,@ 000 copies , and it was also certified gold by IFPI Denmark , denoting shipments of 10 @,@ 000 copies .

For Emma , Forever Ago has been a top @-@ selling title on vinyl for many years during the format 's revival in the U.S. ; it sold over 102 @,@ 000 copies on vinyl in the first half of the 2010s . " If you ? d told me when we put out For Emma , Forever Ago that we would sell almost 100 @,@ 000 copies on vinyl , I would think that was just absolutely insane , " said Nick Blandford , managing director of the Secretly Label Group . Its overall sales were last estimated at 335 @,@ 000 copies in the United States , according to Nielsen SoundScan , in June 2011 , but the album was certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) in 2013 for shipments of 500 @,@ 000 copies .

= = Reception = =

For Emma , Forever Ago received widespread acclaim from critics . It scored an 88 on review aggregate site Metacritic . One of the earliest reviews came from Pitchfork 's Stephen M. Deusner , who praised Vernon 's " soulful performance , " describing the record as " a ruminative collection of songs full of natural imagery and acoustic strums ? the sound of a man left alone with his memories and a guitar . " Rob Sheffield for Rolling Stone christened it a " quiet marvel , " praising Vernon 's " light touch , with zero interest in narrative or confessional lyrics . " The Guardian 's Jude Rogers praised Vernon 's restraint , noting , " nothing is overplayed , but nothing feels throwaway either . " Steven Hyden of The A.V. Club characterized it as " quietly startling , " opining , " The power is in how these songs sound rather than what the opaque lyrics don 't quite spell out . " Tim Sendra of AllMusic wrote that " For Emma captures the sound of broken and quiet isolation , wraps it in a beautiful package , and delivers it to your door with a beating , bruised heart . It 's quite an achievement for a debut and the promise of greatness in the future is high . "

David Marchese , writing for Spin , suggested Vernon 's " sturdy folk chords , earthy melodies , and plainspoken , pastoral lyrics prevent the album from descending into self @-@ pity . " Uncut 's John Mulvey deemed the record " a hermetically sealed , complete and satisfying album " that " operates so securely and intensely in its own world that to listen sometimes seem like an intrusive act . " Darcie Stevens of the Austin Chronicle described the record as a " paradigm of uninhibited closure , a gentle touch on a sad day , " writing , " [Vernon] ' s pain is so visceral it provides warmth , the therapeutic definition of music . " The New York Times called the record " irresistible . " On the other hand , Robert Christgau , in his review for MSN Music , stated that the album ultimately had little to say about " shared aloneness " , comparing Vernon unfavorably to Robert Creeley and writing that Vernon 's " solitary meditations ... lose definition faster than an angel 's breath on a January morn " .

= = = Accolades = = =

== Touring ==

Vernon first toured as Bon Iver along the East Coast , supporting Elvis Perkins , in late 2007 . One of the biggest concerts came in December 2007 , when the band performed at the Bowery Ballroom . For the major touring cycle after the album 's official release , he gathered together several musicians for the trek , including former guitar student Mike Noyce and drummer Sean Carey . Carey , a jazz drummer from UW ? Eau Claire , was a fan of the album , and had approached Vernon at one of his first performances . Vernon felt comfortable performing the album live , though it was very personal : " It ? s weird that I ? m still behind these songs , " he told PopMatters . " It ? s weird that I ? m still able to float with them and be with them and find new and old pain in the song . The fact that they haven ? t just run their course , that they ? re not old hat after a year is really exciting . " The band toured with label @-@ mates Black Mountain , which allowed the two groups to attract a " diverse crowd , " according to Billboard . In summer 2009 , the band played various festivals , including Bonnaroo , Lollapalooza , and Austin City Limits . Some shows were performed with support from the Indigo Girls , one of Vernon 's favorite groups . He held one memorable show at Hollywood Forever Cemetery at six in the morning . The album 's main touring cycle was complete by late 2009 .

== Track listing ==

All songs written and composed by Justin Vernon .

== Personnel ==

Information in this section is adapted from the album 's liner notes .

== Charts ==

== Certifications ==

== Release history ==