

Clap Your Hands Say Yeah – Complete Artist Bio

In any discussion regarding songwriters and lyricists of 21st century indie music, Alec Ounsworth and his moniker, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah, will feature prominently. Few have been as consistently brilliant, eclectic, and intimate; fewer still remain defiantly independent, refusing to sign deals that compromise artistic vision. That is what characterizes Ounsworth's oeuvre, especially the lifetime project he initiated sometime in the early 2000s, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah. And with each release since its landmark self-titled debut, he has refined and broadened his sound, indulging an ever wider set of influences.

Prolific and enigmatic as ever, his recent works marry the quirky, left-field spirit of the early years with a well-earned confidence, and grander sense of scale and ambition. Always heading down new avenues of song arrangement and organic connection to his audience, after nearly two decades Ounsworth remains one of music's most distinctive voices.

“Around 2004 and 2005, when we were receiving attention from labels and were presented with the choice of signing or remaining independent, what really cemented the decision – after the coin toss – was an inscription my friend wrote in a book he gave me, titled I, Lucifer.

He quoted Paul Bowles:

“Security is a false God. Begin to make sacrifices to it and you are lost.”

– Alec Ounsworth, 2020.

Sometimes you work hard for years with very little recognition, and then success comes almost overnight. So it was for Alec Ounsworth, a musician from Philadelphia whose rise to fame as the creative force behind **Clap Your Hands Say Yeah** was the result of talent, great songwriting, and a unique DIY outlook meeting serendipity, and a seismic shift in the digital realm and modes of communication.

In 2003, Ounsworth was doing what any aspiring musician does – writing songs, playing small gigs, and making the most of any opportunities that came his way. Tinkering in his basement studio in Philadelphia, he had already been writing songs for five or six years, and would test new material on acoustic guitar at a weekly, two-song slot at Jeffrey Marsh's drag performance at a venue called L'Etage. He'd later reshaped them in that basement using drum machine, bass, guitars, keyboards, and vocals to, as he puts it, “fit something bigger, not yet knowing what that might be.”

His influences at the time included Wire, Suicide, Lou Reed, Brian Eno, John Cale, and he was seeking “a balance between sonic experimentation and good lyrics, of joining the sensibilities of Brian Eno and Bob Dylan. It seemed not at all too far reaching at the time.” Ounsworth would travel to New York, often by Chinatown bus, to practice and within a few months the band was playing shows – “Anywhere that would have us,” says Ounsworth – as they already had a bunch of songs: ‘Details Of The War’, ‘In This Home On Ice’, ‘Over And Over Again’, and ‘Heavy Metal’.

And the chosen moniker for the project? That came about thanks to serendipity. After practice one day, he was driving the band back to Brooklyn when a friend called, asking if he could open for his band. At that moment, some graffiti caught someone's eye, huge letters on a wall: “Clap

Your Hands Say Yeah". It was agreed to use the phrase for one night, and then to change it after the show. Ounsworth never did.

A plan was hatched to commit some of this new material to tape, initially as a four-song EP. Yet granted extra studio time, Ounsworth wrote more material, and the EP morphed into a self-titled debut record. "It evolved into an album rather than starting as one," he explains. Recorded between Providence, RI and Red Hook, Brooklyn, it was made for around \$5000 and was first released – completely independently – in 2004. CDs and vinyl were hand delivered to stores in New York and Philadelphia, and the band kept playing live in both cities.

Demand for Clap Your Hands Say Yeah grew so great that the album was re-released, somewhat more officially, in 2005, completely with proper distribution. A national tour supporting The National followed, along with plenty of critical acclaim. A lot of famous people (mostly actors, but musicians too) showed up to the shows, including Davids Bowie and Byrne, yet Ounsworth refused to compromise his independent spirit to capitalise on his newfound fame. "It seemed something of a dirty secret to people," he says of the time. "I think it was maybe a little more enticing because of the independent nature of the band, which meant that it would always be a little more underground than some of the other bands who were pushed forward."

But that fame turned out to be something of a double-edged sword. "What people said about the band really never had anything to do with us, but it was unfortunate that they so often got it wrong without ever asking what the story in fact might have been," says Ounsworth of the buzz and hype that engulfed him. "At the time, it was as if there were a glimmer of hope that bands could move forward truly independently, but this paradigm seemed to fade almost as quickly as it appeared, which was very disappointing to me."

His mantra remained "art first, business second. It was innocent, but anything creative should be innocent, or at least try to be." As such, he remained defiantly independent, refusing to sign deals that compromised his artistic vision or cash in on his burgeoning reputation – after all, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah remained in demand, playing to enthralled audiences across the world and topping many critics' choice lists in 2005.

Yet the touring and success of the first album upended Ounsworth's fantasy of what it might be like to be a touring or professional musician. Many of the songs on their second album, 2007's *Some Loud Thunder*, were a direct reaction to this, songs like 'Some Loud Thunder' and 'Satan Said Dance'. The album was created away from the noise and clamour of the industry, as Ounsworth decamped with renowned producer Dave Fridmann (Mercury Rev, The Flaming Lips) to his cabin studio in the woods. It was, says Ounsworth, "a lonely, revelatory experience."

"Fridmann really helped to shift the album away from a repeat of the first," says Ounsworth. "That was really important to me – that a band takes a chance and tries to challenge itself is the point. I remember some people being disappointed that it [the second album] was different." In many ways, this tension between Ounsworth, the press, and the music industry at large permanently altered the arc of Clap Your Hands Say Yeah's career and caused rifts that never healed.

Burned by what he saw as unrealistic expectations and unwilling to compromise, Ounsworth buried himself in creating. He worked tirelessly, constantly writing, challenging himself, and expanding his musical horizons. He wrote a song for the film *The Great Buck Howard*, starring Tom Hanks and John Malkovich, and the band even had a cameo. In the wake of Hurricane

Katrina, he headed to New Orleans to write and record *Mo Beauty* under his own name, an album meant to highlight his affinity for the people of the city after the devastation.

“Producer Steve Berlin (Los Lobos) and I hired musicians down there, not only to send money their way, but also to introduce them to a potentially different audience,” says Ounsworth of the project. “Musicians like George Porter (Meters, Allen Toussaint) and Stanton Moore (Galactic), and a lot of other great players, many of whom were accessible, just a short walk from the studio over to Frenchmen Street.”

Ounsworth also built a studio in a barn behind his house to record *Skin And Bones*, an album made as Flashy Python with a group of Ounsworth’s friends including Matt Barrick (The Walkmen), Scott McMicken and Toby Leaman (Dr. Dog), among others. Both projects helped Ounsworth escape the conventional rock mythology narrative – that he’d killed his band with a “difficult” second album – and gave him the creative space to contemplate the future. By 2011, refreshed and recharged, he recorded *Hysterical* with John Congleton as producer, in both Hoboken and Dallas. Again, Ounsworth found inspiration in collaboration - improv pianist-composer Mike Garson played on ‘Adam’s Plane’, something he describes as being “a big deal to me and, more importantly, very helpful to the song.”

Throughout this period, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah continued to tour, gaining new fans and breaking new musical ground. They played to tens of millions on primetime TV, invited by David Letterman, Conan O’Brien, and Jimmy Fallon among others. Throughout it all, Ounsworth continued to promote his work in a DIY way, remaining true to his vision and finding new, organic ways to connect to his audience – the rise of MySpace and blogging, and the very early iterations of social media, helped with this.

Such a “doing things differently” approach was clear with 2014’s *Only Run*. Ounsworth asked fans to submit “relationship stories” which were worked into some of the tracks, a humble touch aimed at rewarding loyal, longstanding followers. So too was his decision to start doing house shows and more intimate tours, bringing his audience closer to his art and exploring new ways to tour the country.

“The house shows helped me remember why I started doing this in the first place,” says Ounsworth. “The connection to the audience was what I felt at the very early shows, and what was somewhat lost soon thereafter. I’ve driven alone around the country at least five times now, doing shows along the way with just a guitar. This was what I pictured when I began, except in my mind I was on a motorcycle instead of in a Prius.”

And that album, *Only Run*, was itself a triumph. Once again, Ounsworth and Fridmann decamped to the latter’s remote cabin studio to wrestle with the demos. Shaped by influences that had guided his songwriting from the very beginning – The Blue Nile, John Cale, Brian Eno, late-era Scott Walker, Robert Wyatt, and Stereolab – and including collaborations with the likes of Kid Koala and The National’s Matt Berninger, the result, says Ounsworth, was “the best CYHSY record to date. The synthesizers were carefully considered and the album was meant to have a floating quality, with a bit of muscle.”

By the time of 2017’s *The Tourist*, Ounsworth had cemented his status as one of music’s most distinctive voices, further refining and broadening his sound, and indulging an ever wider set of influences. “The most complete CYHSY album,” says Ounsworth. “It really was a blend of every record, including Flashy Python and *Mo Beauty*. It was also more concise, and there was very little that did not absolutely need to be on there.”

Helped by frequent collaborator Dave Fridmann's luscious mix, *The Tourist* sounded both immediate and cinematic, and framed Ounsworth's more idiosyncratic tendencies within huge choruses, soaring melodies, and shimmering anthems. Inspired by personal turmoil, the dark, sombre lyrics and imagery were tempered by moments of sly humour and clever word play.

Musically, it was as eclectic as ever – beside Ounsworth's trademark charming indie, there's some giddy disco, organ-fuelled waltz, psychedelic funk, and post-punk – and this, coupled with his songwriting smarts, pointed to an artist completely at ease in his work. "*We can be whatever we want!*" he sings at one point, a mantra Ounsworth totally took to heart.

It's a sentiment that continues with new album *New Fragility*, a record that's as musically rich as ever but one that marks a slight thematic departure. *New Fragility* sums up our collective state of unease and anxiety at the state of the world, and dissects several years of personal trauma and the break-up of Ounsworth's marriage. "It's pretty personal," he says. "It's about trying to move forward in an incredibly uncertain time."

It's powerful too, taking aim at what Ounsworth calls "the apparently failing democratic experiment that is the United States of America" and the supine hypocrisy of those currently in government. State-sponsored pollution, the ubiquity of advertising, and apathy towards fatal mass shootings are all raked over, soaring choruses and the melodic chug of Ounsworth's guitar providing a stark contrast to lines that drip with fury and rage.

Few artists remain as consistently brilliant and inventive after twenty years of music; fewer still managed to do it on their own terms, refusing to compromise or dilute their vision. Alec Ounsworth has never let anything come between him and his art, a testament to his dedication, drive, and talent. Through all the highs and the lows, he's remained creatively fulfilled, pursuing the noble goal of playing honest, heartfelt music to an appreciative audience, regardless of how big or small that may be. He might not have enjoyed the "security" or financial windfall granted to some of his peers, but that inscription – and the coin toss – granted him something more important: autonomy, and independence. Over the last twenty years, Ounsworth has made the most of both.