Life

Mumford & Sons get cheerfully vapid on "Prizefighter"

by Elijah Polance
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/THEY/THEM
elijah.polance@uconn.edu

It's been some time since the U.K. folk-rock act Mumford & Sons have been in the public eye. While relatively prolific in the 2010s, the group slowed down in the 2020s, waiting until 2025 to release their fifth album "Rushmere."

But the band quickly followed up with the release of "Prizefighter" on Friday, Feb. 20. Unlike their prior efforts, it's a guest-heavy effort with Aaron Dessner's production, writing credits from both Finneas and Brandi Carlile and plenty of features from popular contemporary folk-pop stars.

Country star Chris Stapleton makes the first appearance on the opener "Here," a duet with lead vocalist Marcus Mumford. In alternating verses and a shared chorus, the two men present all their emotional shortcomings and baggage and put it on the table — a preview of the album's themes of reflection and growth. While the mixing feels flat with a distinct lack of instrumental texture, the track is catchy enough to invite listeners into the album.

"Here" also begins the album's trend of the guest artists overshadowing the vocal contributions from Mumford & Sons. Stapleton's voice sounds less raw than typical, but still exudes more emotion than Mumford, whose pitch-corrected singing sterilizes any conviction that might have been there. It's a different vocal style from Mumford & Sons' earlier days where they sounded more acoustic and loose.

Lead single "Rubber Band Man" brings a bit more to the table, opening with catchy fingerstyle acoustic guitar and jubilant swells in the chorus. Hozier makes an appearance, and while his harmonies with the chorus don't offer much, the soft delivery of his verse is one of the most tender and genuine moments on the album.

The track is almost great, but the writing holds it back. The chorus opens with the lines "You're a world away / But you're still the same" and ends with the even more overused sentiment "Nothing lasts forever, babe / You know it breaks my heart." There's no end of lyrics that have already been said a million times across the album, and "Rubber Band Man" isn't even the most egregious. The mountain of cliches makes it hard to get invested in any of these songs, whether they're trying to communicate sadness or catharsis.

Take "Run Together," which builds layers of vocal harmonies, strings and synths atop calming banjo to communicate a sense of adventuring. The band maintains a good ebb and flow of the louder and quieter moments, staying spirited and engaging. But the chorus, built around the lines "When we run, we run together / When we're apart, we fall apart / I will love you, now and ever," fails to communicate anything meaningful. What could've been a defining anthem shrinks into a jumble of phrases of unoriginality that won't make you want to run anywhere.

The band does the best job minimizing these sonic and lyrical issues on "Conversation With My Son (Gangsters & Angels)", which unravels as a parent telling a message to their child. The presence of musician Amelia Meath enlivens the harmonies that fill what begins as a mellow folk composition. But everything swells exponentially on the ending refrain, which builds into the most cinematic and emotionally resonant point of the album.

The title track takes a quieter approach than the rest of the album. Mumford sounds tired and worn down as he reflects on a past relationship and where he might've ended up if it hadn't ended. While it moves slowly, the harmonies with guest vocals from Justin Vernon, frontman of Bon Iver, ensures it doesn't get too boring.

The ninth track, "Icarus," uses the Greek myth of Daedalus — who fashioned wings for himself and his son Icarus to escape imprisonment, only for his son's wings to melt upon flying too close to the sun — to trace a love story. The song starts awkwardly, with both Mumford and the featured Gigi Perez, who exploded in 2024 with her song "Sailor Song," singing louder than the instruments demand. But it soon develops into a heavier rock sound that lets Perez really let loose with her powerful singing.

While most of the featured artists' presence make sense given how their own music builds on or relates to Mumford & Sons' sound, Gracie Abrams' appearance on "Badlands" feels more random. While Abrams helps give the song life, her vocals don't fit the best with Mumford during the empty refrain "Don't look down now / I'm not done here yet." They mesh better on the slightly more lyrically emphatic chorus, but the track would probably work better as a solo effort from Abrams.

The final run of three tracks might be the strongest connected effort. "Shadow of a Man" comes across with respectable conviction, while "I'll Tell You Everything" and "Clover" are slower introspective cuts that close the album in a satisfying way.

"Prizefighter" is far from a terrible album, but it's not great. There are plenty of engaging instrumental moments, but the sterile mixing and plain harmonies make it hard for anything to land. But the biggest downfall is the lack of lyrical nuance and substance, which really takes away from every emotional moment the band tries to get across.

Bruno Mars plays it too safe with 'The Romantic'

by Ayyan Tamjeed
STAFF WRITER
HE/HIM/HIS
art24001@uconn.edu

Don't let the track list fool you. There may be nine different songs with nine different titles, but Bruno Mars functionally made the same song for 31 minutes in his latest endeavor, "The Romantic."

Released on Feb. 27, this is the pop hitmaker's first full-length solo project in almost 10 years, and his first full-length album in five after the release of "An Evening with Silk Sonic," his collaboration with Anderson .Paak, the stage name of rapper and singer-songwriter Brandon Anderson.

The opener "Risk It All" lays down the template for most of the songs on here, with its Latin soul-infused production and Mars' admittedly beautiful, passionate singing about romance. Mars is well-known for his retro sound and his faithful genre pastiches; this album may well be his love letter to Latin music and soul.

"Risk It All" is also a great companion to Mars' 2010 hit "Grenade" lyrically. Instead of jumping in front of a train, he'd rather learn how to fly. Character development! The music video and dreamy production also add to Mars' attempt to join wedding playlists for the next decade.

The second song "Cha Cha Cha" starts with some lovely string swells, before the trumpets kick in and Mars enters the ring. It's more of the same from Mars, but this time he's looking for someone to "Cha Cha Cha" with him on the dance floor.

Lead single "I Just Might" is one of the most upbeat songs on here. Little moments like the guitar lick or the trumpets on the chorus add to my overall appreciation of this song and of Mars' company's technical prowess. Nevertheless, this feels like the kind of song Mars did when he first got big over 15 years ago — a good, technical, authentic genre pastiche a la "Treasure" — and the sheer unoriginality is starting to rear its head.

After the big single you have "God Was Showing Off." Here, Mars bombastically preaches his love to his partner with a bevy of references to religion and God. It's a standout track for the trumpet section right here, who really kick into final gear on the chorus when Mars exclaims his belief that "God was showin' off while making you."

Despite the title, "Why You Wanna Fight?" is less about fighting and more about Mars making up with his partner. It also overstays its welcome as one of the longer tracks on this album, with little to no justification for its four-minute run time apart from Mars flexing his vocal chops and a cool guitar solo at the start.

On my soul, the track "On My Soul" has the best vocal performance on this album by Mars; his raspy tenor really shines through during the chorus. It's also a lot more upbeat than the previous ditties, making for a nice change of pace before we have to slog through the final third.

"Something Serious" stands out for its percussion-heavy production — shoutout Carlin White — and for the use of cowbells, which makes any song 10 times better through its inclusion. In this case, the cowbells and sick drum solo on the bridge upgrade this song from terrible to tolerable.

The last two tracks are probably some of the most unique on this album; for one, they're not soul tracks, but R&B. On "Nothing Left," Mars sings rather pensively, instead of constantly flirting with the song's subject as he did in previous tracks, as he talks about his love for a woman who doesn't reciprocates his feelings.

Mars closes the album with the ballad "Dance With Me." Here, the focus is on his magnetic singing voice, as he pulls out all the stops to display his three-octave vocal range. The first half also includes a touch of a twinkling indie-rock guitar riff to complement Mars' vocal gymnastics. Once wedding DJs get bored of playing "Risk It All," they may just turn over the disc and put this on repeat instead.

"The Romantic" certainly shows off Mars' charming side and gives us another reminder of the man's brilliant vocal talents and musicianship. Regardless, the songwriting may be some of the weakest on display, especially after how well-received that whole Silk Sonic phase was. Before the last two tracks provided a nice respite, the whole middle section from "God Was Showing Off" to "Something Serious" was a slog to get through. Just listen to the lead single to hear the whole album.



Singer-songwriter Bruno Mars performing in the music video for his single, "I Just Might." The song is included on his latest album, "The Romantic," which released on Feb. 27, 2026.
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RATING:



2.5/5