



## BIOGRAPHY - 2020

In the springtime of 2019, Mipso headed out on several writing retreats around their home state, with a mission of laying down the framework for their self-titled sixth album. In a particularly charmed outing for the North Carolina-bred four-piece—fiddle player Libby Rodenbough, mandolinist Jacob Sharp, guitarist Joseph Terrell, and bassist Wood Robinson—Mipso holed up on a farm near Chapel Hill in the middle of May, teasing songs out in a barn whose tin roof rattled wildly during the near-daily downpours. As with all their writing sessions for *Mipso*, the band brought in instruments outside their usual repertoire (analog synths, lap steel guitars, a toy piano), slipping into a prolonged period of playful experimentation even as they sketched some of their most emotionally challenging songs yet. The outcome is an album that's sonically adventurous and lyrically rich, each moment charged with the tension between textural effervescence and underlying despair about the modern world.

Their debut release for Rounder Records, *Mipso* arrives as the band's most communally realized work to date—a triumph that's especially remarkable considering they discussed breaking up after their 2018 album *Edges Run*. As Sharp reveals, that turn of events had much to do with reimagining their approach to the sharing of songwriting and vocal contributions. "A lot of the doubt and unhappiness we felt after the last album stemmed from being a four-person unit where everyone deserves equal space to be heard, but not really knowing how to navigate that," he says. "With this album we learned how to celebrate and amplify what's different about each of us, rather than compromising in a way that just buries those differences."

Mainly recorded at Echo Mountain in Asheville, North Carolina, *Mipso* finds the band joining forces with Sandro Perri (a musician/producer known for his work with acts like Great Lake Swimmers, as well as his own post-rock/experimental-electronic material). In overseeing the production process, Perri guided Mipso toward their goal of shaping a sonic landscape that is expansive and atmospheric yet surprisingly personal—"like an intimate voiceover to a dream sequence," as Terrell puts it. To that end, the band formed *Mipso*'s resplendent textures by pushing the limits of their acoustic instruments, a feat that included Rodenbough's expressive use of sweeping violin harmonics to generate synth-like tones ("Big Star," "Like You Never," "Never Knew You Were Gone") and Terrell's experimentation with foam to dampen acoustic guitars, producing the staccato warmth of a mbira ("Coyote," "Caroline," "Shelter"). At the same time, Mipso got inventive in their use of percussion, sculpting the album's kinetic rhythms with everything from congas to an old turtle shell. With additional musical contributions by artful engineer/guitarist Mark Goodell (Julian Lage, Margaret Glaspy), Mipso's touring drummer Yan Westerlund, and their longtime collaborator Shane Leonard (on banjo,

percussion, and synth), the result is a body of work with spacious arrangements that gently illuminate the idiosyncratic details and refined musicianship at the heart of every song.

Though much of *Mipso* conjures the peaceful summertime idyll of its recording environment, its lyrics explore dark subject matter. "Before we started writing, we had a few conversations about the things we'd been hung up on," says Rodenbough. "We talked about climate change and the anxiety of living in this time, and about feeling the weight of adulthood a bit more." In those conversations, *Mipso* made a point of removing any barriers to true vulnerability. "Even though we've spent what feels like half our lives on the road together, it's still sometimes hard to share the emotions that are buried deepest," says Sharp. "This time we worked harder to share."

The opening track to *Mipso*, "Never Knew You Were Gone" offers a stunning introduction to the album's shapeshifting sound and mood of quiet longing. With Terrell's warm vocals narrating a childhood memory of lonesome escape, the track ultimately builds to a beautifully rambling instrumental outro. "That song really lent itself to our sonic explorations on the rest of the record," says Robinson, whose standout performance on "Never Knew You Were Gone" references the fingerstyle playing of iconic Motown bassist James Jamerson. "We let it play out for as long as there was momentum, and we found ourselves sinking our teeth into the idea of, 'How can we keep things interesting without having to add more and more layers to hold attention?'"

While *Mipso* unfolds in endlessly mesmerizing moments, its sound design never overpowers the lucid sincerity of the band's songwriting. Graced with a simultaneous guitar/fiddle solo from Terrell and Rodenbough, "Hourglass" is a feel-good existential-angst anthem whose hook would feel right at home on a car stereo ("I meant to make it by now/But the making's no good anyhow"). On "Your Body," *Mipso* create a heady tension between the song's potent groove and pensive lyrics. ("It's a song about something I struggle with, which is how I want to present my body to the world, especially as the only woman onstage most nights in our band," Rodenbough notes.) And on "Just Want to Be Loved," Sharp delivers one of *Mipso's* most poignant songs, a delicate epic adorned with heartrending vocal work and sweetly lilting piano melodies.

Perhaps the most spellbinding track on *Mipso*, "Big Star" begins in languid reverie before drifting into a bit of lovely chaos, its strange textures merging perfectly with Rodenbough's ethereal vocals and surrealistic storytelling ("Had some candy from Colorado/Let the sunlight lay us flat"). "That's a song about going to the beach with a friend and falling asleep when it's bright sunlight out, then waking up in this eerie late-afternoon darkness," she explains. "It's about feeling disoriented in that moment, but also feeling disoriented in a broader sense."

One of the final tracks to *Mipso*, "Shelter" finds Robinson mining inspiration from British folk as he shares some poetically expressed social commentary. "My family is from one of the poorest counties in North Carolina, which was hit hard by a hurricane and never got FEMA assistance,"

says Robinson. "It was such a clear example of society's failure to help people even when something isn't their fault. We took the concept of shelter and put it in a multitude of contexts, from something as insignificant as falling and hurting your knee as a kid to trying to cross the border." In a subtle yet undeniably moving nod to the song's message of mutual uplift, each member of Mipso took a verse on "Shelter"—marking the first time the entire band has lent lead vocals to a single song.

Despite venturing into so many new directions, *Mipso* preserves certain elements that have defined the band since their acclaimed 2013 debut *Dark Holler Pop*: their finely layered vocal harmonies, a shared fluency in and fascination with North Carolina's timeless musical traditions, a near-telepathic musical connection and familiarity with each other's strengths. That connection was threatened after the release of *Edges Run*, when Mipso experienced a potentially catastrophic car accident. "Libby, Yan, and I were on the way to a show and stopped for traffic, and the car behind us hit us at highway speed," recalls Terrell, who was behind the wheel. "The van was totally crushed, and I was bloodied and passed out on the highway. It was a heavy reminder of the big picture, that aside from the occasional quibble, we love each other like family."

In looking back on the making of *Mipso*, Terrell refers to the album as "a recommitment to the reasons we want to make music together," a factor reflected in their decision to self-title the record. And at a time when tremendous tension is woven into the fabric of everyday life, Mipso point out to an essential lesson extracted from contending with the impossible cacophony of that tin-roof barn. "These songs are full of frustration and alienation and wistfulness, but they don't come from drowning out the noise of the world—they come from getting better at listening to it, and learning to translate it," says Terrell. "I hope they can give people a bit of insight into the problems we've worked out among ourselves, and the love that we have for each other."

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