

Spanning more than two decades, Mike Kinsella's widely influential songwriting has steadily sharpened and evolved with each new chapter. In his solo vehicle as Owen (in addition to his roles along the way with American Football, Cap'n Jazz, the more recent LIES, and other collaborative ventures), Kinsella's ability to seamlessly stitch jagged emotional currents into crushingly beautiful songs has remained at the forefront of his art. This contrast has become more distinct as Owen expanded from unassuming acoustic beginnings into more ornate production, reaching new levels of complexity and clarity by the release of 2020's *The Avalanche*. *The Falls of Sioux*, Kinsella's newest Owen full-length, levels up even further. As much as these nine songs represent a type of reinvention, they also feel like the natural next step in Kinsella's growth, both artistic and personal. The album perforates an established sound to explore unlikely musical ideas, while the songs document a time of moving through life-altering turmoil into brighter days. Heavy themes are turned over with a gentle hand, and Kinsella inhabits the deeper perspectives that come with hard-earned life experience.

*The Avalanche* was an unbuffered exposition of some of Kinsella's darkest days, laying bare the emotional fallout of his divorce along with several other gradients of grief and loss. Those days aren't forgotten, but the pieces have been picked up on *The Falls of Sioux*. Solidly on the other side of a painful chasm, moments of intensity now come across as confident and exploratory rather than tormented. The songs detail interpersonal situations that might have instilled panic and self-loathing in younger days, but now Kinsella meets them with a relaxed smirk. It's there in the way gliding synths and warm vocal harmonies juxtapose brutal lyrics of doomed love on "Virtue Misspent," one of the album's most upbeat songs. It's also there in the jaunty, nearly classic-rock bounce of "Mount Cleverest," a lively banger that feels like the highpoint of a sunny summer day but boils down to exhausted, "fuck all y'all" sentiments.

As with the past few Owen albums, Kinsella worked with co-producers Sean Carey (Bon Iver) and Zach Hanson (Bon Iver, Low, Waxahatchee) and also brought in Now, Now's KC Dalager to contribute backing vocals. Russell Durham (Fleet Foxes, Andrew Bird) composed the string arrangements, Corey Bracken (from American Football's touring band) played synths, and a few other friends stopped through to add upright bass, pedal steel, and various auxiliary contributions. Kinsella's sound palette was influenced heavily by his recent work with his cousin Nate in their boundary-pushing group LIES. Experimenting with the limits of electronic production inspired Kinsella to lean into sounds he hadn't considered before when writing for Owen. The acoustic guitar strums of "Beaucoup" are slowly washed up against by a bedding of shoegaze texture, a deep synth bass sequence, and waves of noisy electronics. "Hit and Run" is steady and restrained chamber pop, speckled with gorgeous strings and distant piano, while the Western-noir vibes of opener "A Reckoning" are emphasized by tubular bells so dramatic Kinsella had to fight with his producers to keep them on the song. The aim was to embrace the excitement of the unknown rather than make safe, surefire choices.

The open-ness of the music offers even Kinsella's weariest lyrics an almost playful counterweighting, giving *The Falls of Sioux* a new positioning that hasn't quite appeared before now in the Owen discography. It's like watching a difficult winter melt into a nicer-than-expected spring, with the kind of distance from bad times that makes them easier to laugh at in retrospect. More than anything, the album is marked by a sense of self-acceptance

that can be felt regardless of how cutting the one-liners or how melancholy the songs. Kinsella seems comfortable with himself and his craft in a way that only happens when artists round a certain corner on their creative path. On *The Falls of Sioux*, he's unafraid to share any and all angles by which he might be viewed. To some extent, this has always been Kinsella's M.O., but it's different when the songs stop being about the hungover guilt and communication breakdowns of early adulthood and move into the very real disappointments and discontinuations that inevitably surface as life keeps happening. Never one to retreat, Kinsella portrays the confusion, regret, and renewal of where he's at presently with grace, honesty, and of course some biting humor. Throughout *The Falls of Sioux*, the things about Owen that have changed become just as valuable as those that have remained the same.