

Mike Campbell & The Dirty Knobs

Mission of Mercy



photo credit: Sheva Kafai

KEEPING THE DREAM ALIVE

Gracefully disheveled, Mike Campbell slinks down the narrow hall of Hocus Pocus Studios, a.k.a. his garage, past kaleidoscope rows of vintage electric guitars and a window looking out on a flock of clucking chickens, two massive gobbling turkeys and a sleeping, grunting pig. He snakes through the control room with the Neve board, computer screens and a cluttered array of amps, into the small side room that houses his Little Richard-autographed upright piano and settles onto the worn couch beneath the blue tie-dye tapestry that frames him in countless online videos, podcasts and interviews. Three cheerful, slobbering bloodhounds trot behind him like baby ducks. With a wave of his arm, he dismisses them. He adjusts the brim of his floppy hat and gives the *now what?* look.

“Now what?” is *Mission of Mercy*, Campbell’s fourth album with The Dirty Knobs, the close-knit collective of musicians and fellow travelers he pieced together delicately in the waning years of his previous band, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. Following Petty’s death in 2017, Campbell released 2020’s *Wreckless Abandon* by The Dirty Knobs, followed by 2022’s rollicking *External Combustion* by Mike Campbell & The Dirty Knobs, after putting up a gentle hem and haw against including his name before the band’s. He followed them up with 2024’s excellent *Vagabonds, Virgins and Misfits*.

Each release represented a leap forward that drew heavily from the massive archives of unheard music the prolific guitarist had composed during near daily writing sessions for decades. Harder and more driving than much of the Heartbreakers’ later material, the songs balanced Campbell’s love of ’60s blues rock with his surprising facility with tender character portraits, love songs and ballads. The quiet Campbell settled uneasily into the role of front man, singer and songwriter, promoting the albums with summer tours.

The road brought a humbling but joyful ground-up struggle of building audiences, an experience Campbell hadn't known since 1979 and the smash success of the Heartbreakers' *Damn the Torpedoes*. Summer after summer, Campbell connected with old fans, many still struggling with Petty's death, plus increasing numbers of new fans drawn to the Knobs' walloping guitar boogie. From center stage, Campbell watched more and more people singing along to not just the Heartbreakers' songs he sprinkled into the sets, but his own. It was a series of healing, literal journeys across the country, with his missus and pups in tow, that led him from the bottom of three-act bills to slots opening for The Who and Chris Stapleton and headlining the theaters he had always hoped to play.

Mission of Mercy once again explores and expands the sound and style that Mike Campbell helped pioneer. A collection of beautifully played and recorded guitar-driven rockers and reflections, the album finds Campbell loosening his grip on the boogie with forays into bongos, jazzbos and even strings.

The hard-charging Knobs have settled and solidified into the current lineup with a notable addition: Steve Ferrone, the swinging and meticulous Brighton-born drummer who kept a steady beat for the Heartbreakers' last 20-plus years, is now a permanent fixture behind the kit. Chris Holt, a dexterous multi-instrumentalist and singer who moonlights in scrappy

country rock upstarts The Eagles, provides second guitar, keys and pitch-perfect harmonies. And bassist Lance Morrison—who Campbell calls “our secret weapon”—keeps his thrumming, melodic low end in a gorilla glue lock with Ferrone.

“I’ve got a great band,” Campbell

of albums, with an iron core of rockers: “Bongo Mania” featuring Kate Pierson of the B-52s, “Wrecking Ball” and “Done to Me.” Sonically, *Mission of Mercy* feels and sounds very much like what it is: a Mike Campbell record.

Make that lyrically, as well.

“Lately writing lyrics has been a real joy for me, because I never used to do it. I don’t sit down with pen and paper so much anymore. I write it all on my phone and now the lyrics just come when they come. Sleeping, as soon as I wake up. I’ll write whole sets of lyrics and then go write the music, which is the opposite of what I have always done.”

The results are often bittersweet, even when raucous; full of characters looking for spiritual connections and earthly redemptions, often at a loss for words, be they bellowed or crooned.

Against the stunning and lush *Pet Sounds* Brian Willson tribute of the title track, Campbell sings in sweet harmony with Holt:

*In your hour of despair
Words add up to nothing
Nothing at all
When you’re feeling sad and scared
There’s no use in talkin’
I’m on a mission of mercy
To keep this dream alive*

In a bouncing country duet with the wonderful Morgane Stapleton, they sing:

There’s nothing I can say



album artwork

says. “I’m very lucky. This record has a little bit of everything. I want to show some growth and take some chances.” He laughs, “By the fourth album, you better!”

Campbell acknowledges that some songs—the crackling acoustic-and-slide *Wildflowers*-style opener “No Regrets” and the big *Long After Dark* guitar and piano of “I Remember,” for instance—“are in a Heartbreakers’ vein.” But the album feels squarely grounded in the sound and power that Campbell has developed with the Knobs over the past decade

*That ain't been said before
anyway*

*I'm just trying to chase some
ghosts away*

It's a theme that rings authentic across the Knobs' full breadth of styles: the futility of words as kissin' cousin to the eternal power of the boogie. The irony being that the notoriously tight-lipped Campbell has blossomed into what Marcie, his wife of 50 years and counting, calls "quite a chatterbox" in his golden years.

More ironic still is that a man almost compulsively averse to nostalgia released *Heartbreaker*, one of the most critically acclaimed memoirs of 2025.

The book is a dizzyingly detailed and profound look back in gratitude at the forty-plus year journey that transformed Campbell from Jacksonville dead-end kid to one of the most significant and influential American guitarists of all time. An instant best-seller, it was praised as akin to Keith Richards' *Life* and Bob Dylan's *Chronicles*.

The book both honors and frees Campbell of his legacy—if birds can ever be free from the chains of the skyway, as Dylan once wondered. He took it seriously and did his best, for both his many fans and his handful of grandchildren. The response, he says, has been "an outpouring of love. Sweet emotional positivity. People know me better." But now he would prefer his music, his songs and his band do the talking. *Mission of Mercy* is Campbell's first album release since the memoir.

"As you know," Campbell asserts, "I'm not a fan of looking back."

But as some songs on *Mission of Mercy* suggest, looking forward is not always a cakewalk, either. On the *Nuggets*-era start-stop stomp "Let Me Back In My Dream," Campbell snarls,

Let me back in my dream

I'm not ready to wake up yet

And I don't want to forget

Let me back in my dream

Before it slips away

I'm falling apart

Yeah, I'm bent out of shape

Living in a digital world

And I'm an analog tape

He worries that the ominous and thundering "Armageddon," that hangs dark as a storm cloud near the end of the album, might freak people out a little bit:

*Acid rain falling down, we're
chasing the dawn*

Dark shadows on the ground

You know we're heading on

To Armageddon

"I don't try to get too political, but you can't ignore that the world's kinda fucked up right now," he says. "'Armageddon' says that, without making a big deal about it. There's hope at the end, so it works out."

More shocking still may be the album's closer, "Vagrant," a jazzy vamp over which Campbell paints a stream-of-conscious portrait of a Beat hipster hobo floating through a surreal San Francisco:

The vagrant rides the cable car

down Divisadero Street

*Spots a shooting star riding in the
shotgun seat*

*Mission district junkies, college
drop-out flunkies*

Flea-bitten mangy-monkeys

When the melodic Campbell-esque chorus comes, he addresses the out-of-time boho wiseman directly:

*Who will save you now? Who can
pull you out?*

Campbell waves away any deeper meaning or comparisons.

"I had the guys here and I had these words I made up, I thought, let's just do something jazzy here to warm up, and I'll talk over it as a joke. I did it one time and they said, 'Wait a minute! There's something cool about this.' I thought, this needs a chorus, this needs something in there. And then in a dream, it came to me."

The song, he notes, is in 5/4 time. Think "Take Five" and "Mission: Impossible."

It closes *Mission of Mercy* on a grooving, creative note that underscores the hard-won artistic freedom he now holds most dear. At this point in his life, Mike Campbell can do, sing and play whatever he wants. It's a gift from the universe he does not take lightly, and receives with his characteristic understatement and humility.

"I'm lucky to have something to do every day that I like, you know? So I just keep on doing it. It's art. I'll create it and record it and share it with anybody who wants to hear it."

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT
JOE COHEN OR CARLA SACKS AT SACKS & CO., 212.741.1000,
JOE.COHEN@SACKSCO.COM OR CARLA@SACKSCO.COM.