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Newsletter Article

Grammy Award-winning band, Mumford & Sons, wins the Steinbeck Award

In the Bing Concert Hall at Stanford University, San Jose State University professor and director of the Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, Nick Taylor presented British folk-rock band Mumford & Sons with the John Steinbeck award on Wednesday, September 18th. The proceeds for the award ceremony will go towards the Steinbeck Gentlemen of the Road Service Fellowship created by Professor Taylor and Stanford Professor Gavin Jones. The new Steinbeck fellowship will allow students to participate in service projects embodying the ideals of Steinbeck “for compassionate community engagement.” Mumford & Sons represents Steinbeck’s ideals through their organization, Gentlemen of the Road, which fights “for social justice and common good around the world.”

The award ceremony began with radio host, Rita Houston, interviewing Mumford & Sons about the significance of receiving the John Steinbeck award. Marcus Mumford, the lead singer, gave a heartfelt speech about how John Steinbeck’s stories helped influence him and his career. Crediting the famous author for inspiring songs like “Dust Bowl Dance” and “Rose of Sharon,” the band played those and other songs during the ceremony. Professor Taylor explains, “community was something really important to Steinbeck. [He] presented a lot of models for his reader of ways humans need each other... We do best when everyone in our community does best – this is something Mumford & Sons has internalized.” Mumford & Sons is dedicated to humanitarian services throughout their tours, helping raise money for local charities and projects.

The British band Mumford & Sons is commonly known for their folk-rock music and Grammy-winning album *Babel*. Their lead single, “I Will Wait,” was their most successful hit, named the 13th best song of 2012 by *Rolling Stone* magazine. In 2009, Mumford & Sons founded the Gentlemen of the Road, an organization dedicated to supporting global and local issues. In addition to the millions of dollars in charitable donations, Gentlemen of the Road performs shows in places where shows aren’t usually played. The band wants to reach out in communities to bring people together. Taylor said, “People helping strangers who just happen to be in their community – that’s just something that [Marcus Mumford] and the band members feel that they could credit Steinbeck for.”

The band was nominated when one of the Steinbeck board members received a letter from a previous pupil saying how she was working on tour with Mumford & Sons. She felt that they would be a great candidate for the Steinbeck Award. The board members agreed. This made Mumford & Sons the youngest recipient and the first British recipient of the Steinbeck award, but that didn’t matter to the board, “The award is about Americanness being a state of mind,” said Taylor.

The new program is about the mindset of Americanness by helping strangers in our communities. The Steinbeck Gentlemen of the Road Service Fellowship pilot group would

include three students from SJSU and three students from Stanford to earn a fellowship stipend so they don't have to work and may focus on community service for part of the summer. "The band was really into this idea and decided they wanted the proceeds from the ceremony to go towards it," said Taylor. This single event has generated enough money to support the fellowship for multiple years. They're hoping to grow the program in the future.

The Steinbeck Studies director was describing how the ideal applicant would be someone who is familiar with Steinbeck's work and understands through Steinbeck the context of what it would mean to have endured tough times, referencing migrant workers from *The Grapes of Wrath* as an example. Taylor went on to say how Mumford & Sons is excited to come back to see how the fellowship develops. Applications for the fellowship should be available before Spring 2020 for SJSU students.