

Animal magic

Intriguing and ever-changing full length debut from lauded Seattle baroque-folk pop band. Sylvie Simmons relaxes and floats downstream. Illustration Joe Wilson.

Fleet Foxes



Fleet Foxes BELLA UNION



I'VE PLAYED this album over and over since the advance copy arrived, hot on the heels of the five-piece band's Sun Giant EP. Most times I've taken notes. Reading back what I wrote, I could have been listening to a different record every time. Fleet Foxes are shape shifters. Like the daemons in Philip Pullman's Golden Compass or the Dylans in I'm Not There, they wilfully take on different forms, often as not within the same song, sometimes within the same line. They're serene old English folkies, spooky young backwoods Americans, grave and playful, sunny and wintry, joyously communal and mysteriously alone. The harmonies – these are pretty much a constant; great, often intricately carved chunks of four or five male voices – will sound, at the same time, if I'm to believe my notes, like church choirs and waves, Beach Boys and Rumours Fleetwood Mac, The Association and Crosby, never Stills but maybe Nash. And as for the tunes, they're up there with London cabbies in taking unexpected turns.

On their MySpace page – where the band, not long out of the egg, conducted most of its career until recently; their debut EP got its official release just weeks ago – Fleet Foxes describe themselves as “baroque pop, music from fantasy movies, Motown, block harmonies, hymns, a couple moments approaching shaggy rock stuff, but mostly rather tempered and restrained.” In an earlier posting, before they'd got rock criticism down to the same art as they have album making, they cited Judee Sill, Crosby, Stills & Nash and Fairport Convention. By the time you read this, it might be another bunch entirely, but their conclusion might still apply: “Not much of a rock band.” Still, one that's already being hailed, in the words of MOJO's editor-in-chief, as “America's next great band”.

Since it's rare for a new band to deliver MOJO's album of the month, a bit of background. They're from Seattle, home of grunge, caffeine and rain, forming around two years ago as an outlet for the songs Robin Pecknold, 22, had been writing since his early teens with best friend Skye Skjelset. Sharing Norwegian ancestry, both have the musical tastes of discerning MOJO readers more than twice their age – Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Simon And Garfunkel, Van Dyke Parks, Procol Harum, The Zombies, Karen Dalton, Steeleye Span. Their three bandmates are Casey Wescott and Christian Wargo, who have a parallel career in mellow electronic band Crystal Skull, and Joshua Tillman, who replaced original drummer Nick Peterson.

The band had a ton of songs when they began recording this first album – self-funded, mostly made at home, with the odd studio and equipment rental charged to Pecknold's groaning credit card. After picking the 11 that made the grade, they went straight to work on new songs, five of which became the Sun Giant EP.

The album credits Phil Ek (Mudhoney, Band Of Horses, Built To Spill) as the producer. As for the various instruments, which include banjo, mandolin, autoharp and guzheng (a big Chinese zither), it says, “We all played many an instrument. An itemised and individualised list would be egotistical and tiresome.” Not to mention out of step with the communal, vaguely neo-hippy ethos of the band. Soon after



FACT SHEET

- Fleet Foxes were known as Pineapple until a '70s punk band demanded their name back.
- Their debut album was recorded mostly at home last November and finished by December, when they began the Sun Giant EP, which was released first.
- Home is Seattle, birthplace of grunge; frontman Robin Pecknold was eight years old when Kurt Cobain died.

Key Tracks

- Sun It Rises
- Heard Them Stirring
- Oliver James

recording, they were signed by hometown label Sub Pop and in the UK by Bella Union (the label run by Cocteau Twin Simon Raymonde). The album was put on the release schedule and, while they were waiting, the band cut the EP to sell at shows. It's since been officially released in the US.

Musically they're very much a pair. The LP, like the EP, opens with a cappella harmonies, a marvel of voices whose sweeping beauty, magnified by reverb – imagine My Morning Jacket in a large cave lit by church candles and incense – almost guarantees goosepimples. It's full and dense but also spacious, like a choir in a vast cathedral where the voices can echo and swirl.

On the album's first song Sun It Rises the vocal whirl becomes a waltz-time hybrid of Americana and melodic early '70s psych-rock. Somewhere along the line it switches into a lost track from a dream about David Crosby's *If I Could Only Remember My Name*.

These breathtaking blocks of harmony are all over the record – from the lyric-less Heard Them Stirring, whose vocal spookiness recalls Crosby's Song With No Words (Tree With No Leaves), except with banjo and Beach Boys piano, to the hummed voices behind Pecknold's delicate lead on Meadowlark. On the intriguing White Winter Hymnal, harmonies that start out in an empty church, echoing and devotional, horseback ride into something more Iron & Wine, before joining The Association on a carousel, then on the last word, “summertime”, morph into the brothers Wilson. It's heady stuff.

The lyrics for the most part are concerned with nature and the seasons, forests, rivers, mountains, love, home and community. Once or twice they'll read like an enigmatic text message (Blue Ridge Mountains: “I heard that you missed your connecting flight... You're ever welcome with me any time you like”) though mostly the language is more heightened and archaic (“Wanderers this morning came by/Where do they go, graceful in the morning light?/To Banner fair/To follow you softly in the cold mountain air”; or “Meadowlark, fly your way down/I hold a cornucopia and a golden crown/For you to wear upon your fleeced down”).

It's very olde worlde – that fantasy mediaeval England of madrigals and courtly love that's seduced a lot of post-Donovan nu-folkies, only in Fleet Foxes it's mixed with old, weird, Smithsonian Folkways Americana. Your Protector, for example, is an Over Jordan with sun-kissed harmonies in place of high lonesome, and Tiger Mountain Peasant Song and the achingly tender Oliver James are both essentially folk-Americana, focused on a spare lead vocal and guitar.

When you think about it, this mashing of very different rural folk music – putting Appalachian banjo on misty English pastoral – is no different to the various religious musics – cathedral hymns, monastic chants, clapboard gospel – used on these secular songs. Or the glorious pile-up of '60s pop and early '70s rock songs that a band born in the mid-late '80s discovered and downloaded via the internet. The music that fuelled Fleet Foxes' vision wasn't something they grew up with or fought and took sides over, but like beautiful books in a library or paintings found on a shelf in an old garage. The sense of wonder in Fleet Foxes' songs is matched only by the discipline and talent that created this adventurous, evocative record. One which is already shaping up as an album of the year.

TALKING FOX!

Fleet Foxes' Robin Pecknold on the joy of harmony, Crosby and monastic zeal.