

PROFILE



BEACH BOYS Wargo, Tillman, Pecknold, Skjelset and Wescott (clockwise from bottom) at Seattle's Lincoln Park Beach in September

# Fleet Foxes' Perfect Harmony

**Just a few years out of high school geekdom, the Seattle indie buzz band is still awesomely weird**  
 By Austin Scaggs

WHEN FLEET FOXES SINGER Robin Pecknold was in high school in Seattle, he was overweight, bad at sports and way too into *The Lord of the Rings*. "It was a pretty isolating time," he says. "I was never invited to anyone's party. I felt invisible." If that wasn't bad enough, he suffered allergies so debilitating he was often unable to go to school. "Once, I sneezed 23 times in a row," he says. "I could barely leave my house. My face would turn red and I'd, like, die."

But he did have a best friend, the supremely shy Skyler Skjelset. And together, they had music. Before the first bell and during lunch breaks, Robin and Skyler hung out with the computer geeks in the science lab. "It had the best stereo system

in the whole school," says Skjelset. "We'd sit around and blast Neil Young and Bob Dylan — and the teacher would always squeeze in some ELO and Yes."

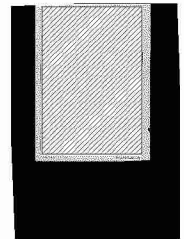
Now 22, Pecknold and Skjelset front one of the most buzzed-about young bands in America. Since releasing the pastoral, folkie EP *Sun Giant* in February, and their debut album in June, Fleet Foxes have scored a gig on *The Late Show With David Letterman* and an opening stint with Wilco — during which the Foxes shared the stage for a nightly encore of "I Shall Be Released." "It was amazing," Pecknold recalls. "Just last Christmas I was harmonizing 'I Shall Be Released' with my family."

On a warm afternoon in September, Pecknold sits at an outdoor table at a coffee shop in the Capitol Hill district of Seattle. He's wearing his favorite tattered blue-plaid flannel over a stained white T-shirt and a pendant around his neck engraved

with his girlfriend's name, Olivia. His hair is long and greasy, curling around his chin; beneath a scraggly beard he has a long face, high cheekbones and dark skin.

Despite his success, he's still a loner. He says he's never been to a party and he hates bars, due to overwhelming social anxiety. "I don't really hang out with anyone," Pecknold says. "I'll hang out with my band, because I love them, but I don't have any friends aside from that."

"White Winter Hymnal," from the band's debut album, *Fleet Foxes*, epitomizes their sound: open and melodic arrangements, chiming four-part harmonies (lots of "ooing" and "ahhing") and primarily acoustic instrumentation. "It's basically pop music," says Pecknold. "It's not rock, not a lot of jamming out. It's focused." Pecknold's lyrics, though, stray farther from basic pop tropes. Pecknold wrote "White Winter Hymnal" about friends who ditched him when he was in middle



school. "The songs are written from personal experience," he says. "There are no love songs."

Though he has no formal training, Pecknold has a natural grasp of music theory, and many of his tunes are dense with ambitious countermelodies. In a live setting, the Foxes' sound seems to exceed the sum of its five parts – including Skjelset on guitar, drummer J Tillman and multi-instrumentalists Casey Wescott and Christian Wargo. "I wanted to use the voice as a way of embellishing the arrangements of the songs, like someone might use strings," says Pecknold. "Now we have four people singing and five people playing instruments, and Skye playing a bass pedal while he plays the guitar. That's 10 things happening all at once."

In the liner notes to *Fleet Foxes*, Pecknold writes, "Family is the only important thing in this world." With his brother, Sean, and sister, Aja (named after the Steely Dan album), Pecknold grew up in the wealthy Seattle suburb of Kirkland, near the home of Microsoft. With his father playing acoustic guitar and his mom playing piano, the kids grew up like the Partridge Family, harmonizing on tunes by CSN, Buffalo Springfield and others. Aja, who also writes about music for *Seattle Weekly*, is now the Fleet Foxes' manager, and Sean directs the group's videos.

In middle school, Pecknold's growing pains and loneliness were exacerbated when Sean and Aja – five and seven years older, respectively – took off for college. But the key to his salvation arrived around the same time, when his parents bought him a Martin acoustic guitar for Christmas.

Pecknold dropped out of school in the 10th grade to spend more time with his ax. "By that point, every person at the school was loaded," he recalls. "Teenage girls with no perspective were doing coke. It was so infuriating." (Surprisingly, given his shaggy look, Pecknold doesn't use drugs. "I don't need to pay \$20 for a sleeping aid," he says about weed.) He earned his remaining high school credits at community college, picking up cash through a job at a grocery store while immersing himself in classic-rock and folk albums. "Dylan," he says, "was the gateway to everything. He was so young when he made *Free-wheelin'*, and Brian Wilson was 23 when he did *Pet Sounds*, which is just insane. I figured I should start young."

At 18, Pecknold moved to his own place and got a job as a line cook at Bimbo's Bitchin' Burrito Kitchen, where he got a valuable musical education. "I had spent so much time listening to music alone, learning about music from the Sixties and Seventies, so I felt like I knew everything," he says. "I was like any cocky kid." But the burrito joint employed a bunch of established Seattle musicians, including guys who had played with Modest Mouse and



STRIPPED-DOWN FOLK Wargo (left) and Pecknold onstage in New York in July

Tiny Vipers. "They'd play me songs that I'd never even heard before, songs that were just amazing," Pecknold says. "I was humbled. I definitely couldn't just put on a post-*Smile* Beach Boys compilation and wow anybody. I had to dig deeper."

Acclaimed Seattle producer Phil Ek (he's worked with Built to Spill and Modest Mouse) first heard Pecknold's music around that time. "I met him about four and a half years ago, and he'd be in the corner of the room playing Sixties-style pop songs, like the Zombies," says Ek. "It was not as folky as the stuff he writes now, but it was obvious that he had talent coming out of his ass."

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In 2006, Pecknold and Skjelset created their first demo that bore the name Fleet Foxes. "You know how you see those needlepoints in every antique store of fox hunters riding the horse with the dog?" Pecknold asks. "I thought that a fox hunter might say, 'Fleet foxes today!' or something like that. I liked that it was alliterative, but I regret that it was an animal. Animal names are all over the place."

In early 2007, on a shoestring budget, the Foxes began recording an album in earnest. When they had cash, they'd book studio time with Ek, but mainly they'd lay down parts in their apartments or in the basement of Pecknold's parents' place.

On January 18th, 2008, a headline on *Seattle Weekly's* Website declared, "It's Official: Fleet Foxes Sign With Sub Pop" – Aja, of course, wrote the piece and broke the news. While Pecknold was thrilled to be on Seattle's most famous label, he was concerned that the basement-bedroom-studio recording of *Fleet Foxes* didn't adequately represent them. "What I wanted to happen, and I told this to Sub Pop, was for the record to tank so we could get started on the next one sooner," he says. "I wanted it to fail."

It didn't. And now, on a two-week break from the road, Pecknold is hanging out on his parents' patio with his bandmates, plucking slices of pizza off the table. "I want to write a book called *Pizza and Me*," says Skjelset, a cheese-slice purist who is on a global quest for the perfect pie. (So far, the winner is Una Pizza Napoletana in New York.) Drummer Tillman – a respected singer-songwriter in his own right, and the opening act on the Foxes' current European tour – mentions his ability to perfectly draw the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Soon, everyone is geeking out about music: Levon Helm's *Midnight Ramble*; Rodriguez's long-lost album *Cold Fact*; the Walkmen's new single "In the New Year"; folk singer Karen Dalton; and Past Lives, a Seattle band that just signed to Suicide Squeeze Records.

Tonight, Pecknold will pick up his girlfriend, drive to his family's cabin and demo 11 new songs. But for now, as he's surrounded by his family and his band, this is Pecknold's kind of party – and he couldn't be more content. "I'm so used to being alone that it's been hard to tour and be thrown into that kind of social environment," he says. "But I'm getting used to it."