

1/18/08	2/28/08	4/8/08	6/3/08	8/4/08	8/23/08	9/30/08
Sign to Sub Pop, their hometown label	Set off on their first North American tour, opening for Blitzen Trapper	The five-song <i>Sun Giant</i> EP is released	Their self-titled debut album is released	Play "Blue Ridge Mountains" on <i>Late Show With David Letterman</i>	Record a cover of Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released" with Wilco	<i>Fleet Foxes</i> available for sale at Starbucks

VOICE OF THE YEAR

Robin Pecknold

With robo-vocals ruling the charts, the rise of Fleet Foxes' Robin Pecknold and his otherworldly pipes is nothing less than a small, hairy miracle

IN 2008, INDIE ROCK discovered a brand-new mecca: the woods. Skinny ties and neon art-rock ensembles were supplanted by wool hats and *Twin Peaks* plaid, and Seattle's Fleet Foxes, led by singer and guitarist Robin Pecknold, saw their self-titled debut album—with its beckoning harmonies, Peter Pan melodies, and ax-swinging backwoods charm—emerge as one of the year's most celebrated rookie efforts. *Fleet Foxes* has sold nearly 120,000 copies in its first six months, and you'd be hard pressed to buy a venti caramel latte without brushing your arm against a stack of 'em. "It's been a little strange," Pecknold admits, sheepish and fatigued, en route to taping an episode of *Later With Jools Holland* in London. "It's not like there's a tangible bridge between the experience of the last six months and the six months prior to that, the 20 years prior to that."

Pecknold has been writing songs since he was a teenager, but he didn't begin garnering national attention until Fleet Foxes signed to Sub Pop and issued the *Sun Giant* EP in April. The full-length followed in June. Although those releases earned the band copious buzz (and a distribution deal from Starbucks), the journey hasn't been all sunshine and honeybees. The bus Fleet Foxes were scheduled to take out on their current European tour caught fire before they arrived to claim bunks, leaving them with an ancient, illness-inducing old rig that has had the entire band coughing for days. Shortly thereafter, their sound engineer suffered—wait for it—sudden deafness. "There's been a lot of poisonous moments in the last year, but a million touching and true moments, too," Pecknold says. "If it goes away tomorrow and my

next interview is for *American Whittling & Scrimshaw Quarterly*, that's more than okay."

But less than likely. Unlike the alien whines of Auto-Tuned pop stars and vocoder-addicted MCs, Pecknold's vocals feel homemade and imperfect, like a tattered, pilling old sweater—grizzled beyond his 22 years. "By the time I was 15, I was pretty checked out of any peer group," he says. "I was playing music and writing songs all the time, not really ever going to school. By the time I moved into the city and started working at a restaurant, most of my coworkers were very accomplished musicians. I lost any feeling of being special as soon as I put on that apron." Accordingly, Pecknold doesn't presume that he'll write anything of "actual merit" until he's closer to retirement age. "I'd like to be less Jonathan Safran Foer," he says, "and more Haruki Murakami."

While not unprecedented (see Gram Parsons, Neil Young, Jim James), Pecknold's pipes invariably invoke trees-and-mountains imagery, all seemingly unique to Fleet Foxes' home turf. That unmistakable sense of place—along with some sneakily sophisticated arrangements—is a big part of what makes their songs so evocative. It's hard to listen to Pecknold murmur and wail about shivering dogs and frozen rivers without also thinking about the Pacific Northwest—about Douglas firs and percolator coffee and, of course, impenetrable tangles of facial hair.

"Robin's beard is all his own, and I'm sure with every touring day it gets knottier and more fragrant," says fellow rustic songsmith Daniel Rossen of Grizzly Bear and Department of Eagles, who first met Pecknold at a potluck last summer

(Pecknold brought a plate of homemade vegetable pakora). "I'd certainly hope people would pay attention to him even if he shaved it off and dropped all that plaid for a nice tracksuit."

Pecknold says that nature isn't an intentional theme in his songs. "When I was writing those lyrics, I had just come home from this really long trip with my brother and sister," he explains. "It was a total REI granola trip, just wandering around. But it doesn't mean that the next thing is going to have that same feeling. It wasn't a conscious choice, like, 'Let's be a nature band!'"

Fleet Foxes are perhaps most beloved for their golden harmonies (Pecknold mews alongside bassist Christian Wargo, drummer Josh Tillman, and keyboardist Casey Wescott, while guitarist Skye Skjelsset smiles silently), which pull from a variety of vocal traditions. But Fleet Foxes' layered, textured vocals never feel exclusionary. Instead, their harmonies recall the intimacy of early secular music and are reminiscent, in particular, of Sacred Harp (or shape-note) singing, a gospel style that allows every member of a congregation—even those who can't read music or don't possess the strongest singing voice—to join in tunefully. It's an inclusive and deliberately straightforward style, and a departure from the histrionic, finger-waving song theater heralded by *American Idol*. "Those [Sacred Harp] songs are so simple," Pecknold says. "It's all very easy to understand."

The openness of his writing invites massive, campfire-style sing-alongs, and even if you're not much of a singer, it's not difficult to figure out how to howl along: "I think the beauty of a band like Fleet Foxes lies in their ability to make accessible some musical ideas that would otherwise escape a mass audience, and it's Robin's voice that reels the listener in," Rossen says. "He can fill the room with his voice alone."

Pecknold willingly acknowledges that Fleet Foxes might be part of a new community of like-minded, oft-hirsute folk artists—from his Sub Pop labelmates Iron and Wine, Band of Horses, Death Vessel, and Fruit Bats to emerging acts like Bon Iver, Grizzly Bear, and Horse Feathers—even if its members aren't united by place. "Music has become a lot less regional," he says. "But I can listen to new music now, like Vetiver or Department of Eagles, that I'm really excited about, which wasn't always the case four years ago."

He pauses. "I don't have to feel like an old man anymore." ❧

BY
AMANDA PETRUSICH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CLARE SHILLAND

Robin Pecknold,
photographed for
SPIN in London,
November 5, 2008

