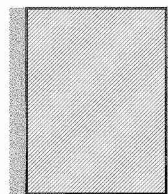
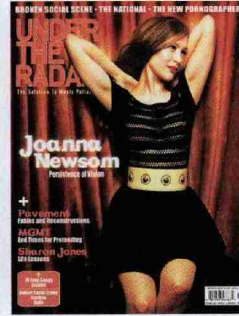
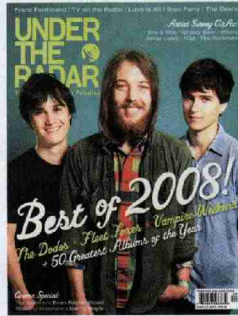


Photographed at The Woods,  
in Portland, OR  
(www.thewoodspartland.com)



10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

FLEET FOXES'  
 ROBIN  
 PECKNOLD  
 VS.  
 JOANNA  
 NEWSOM



The Sword Swallower and  
 The Iceberg Maker

Intro and Moderation by Chris Tinkham | Photos by Wendy Lynch Redfern

**J**oanna Newsom and Robin Pecknold are two singers and songwriters whose intricately crafted, exquisitely arranged music reflects the extraordinary standards that they set for themselves as artists. Newsom took four years to write the title track of her 2010 triple album, *Have One on Me*. As the leader of *Fleet Foxes*, Pecknold, an admitted perfectionist, had difficulty signing off on his band's two albums, *Fleet Foxes* (2008) and *Helplessness Blues* (2011), scrapping recordings and toiling over myriad sonic alterations until the eleventh hour.

In conversation, Newsom's and Pecknold's artistic intensity peeks through, but mostly they come off as easygoing, sharing laughs, and occasionally becoming uninhibited with their words, grasping at metaphors to convey their admiration for each other's work. Newsom compares Pecknold to a sword swallower, and Pecknold refers to Newsom as an iceberg maker.

"The record is just the tip," Pecknold reasons, referring to Newsom's albums. "There's so much more informing the whole thing, under it all."

"He sings like a sword swallower," Newsom says of Pecknold. "Like someone who's the combination of strength and ease, and deadly sharpness, just this incredible timbre. It freezes the whole room."

Newsom, raised in the gold mining town of Nevada City in Northern California, began writing songs on the piano at age five.

She took up folk harp a few years later, before graduating to classical training on the pedal harp. Pecknold grew up in the suburbs of Seattle and was in his early teens when his father bought him a guitar, taught him his first chords, and then bought him a 4-track recorder for Christmas. With those tools, Pecknold experimented on his own and unwittingly came up with unconventional chord changes. Both artists play piano but are confounded by the other's primary instrument. Their music intersects in the folk realm, and both have drawn from Appalachian music, but there are other influences at play. Newsom's harp playing has been informed by styles ranging from West African to classical, while Fleet Foxes, essentially considered a rock act, point to the vocal harmony-leaning bands of the 1960s.

Newsom and Pecknold had not met before he opened a show for her in Nashville in March of 2010, but after two tour legs, where each artist, at various times, was accompanied by a brother and sister, the two formed a familial bond and friendship. At an Oakland show during the summer of 2010, Newsom and Pecknold were joined onstage by their siblings as they performed a cover of the Kid Rock/Sheryl Crow song, "Picture."

"We've since bonded pretty deeply and irrevocably over our shared love of *Game of Thrones*," Newsom reveals.

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, *Under the Radar* asked Newsom and Pecknold to appear on the cover of this special

issue and sit down together for an interview. In early 2008, *Under the Radar* was the first national print magazine to interview Fleet Foxes, in advance of the band's self-titled debut album, and Pecknold subsequently appeared on the cover of the magazine's Best of 2008 issue. Newsom was first interviewed in the magazine for her 2006 album, *Ys*, and last year appeared on the Spring cover.

On a warm day in late August, Newsom and Pecknold met up for the interview and photo shoot at The Woods, a funeral home turned concert venue in Pecknold's recently adopted hometown of Portland, Oregon.

**Chris Tinkham (*Under the Radar*):** Do you remember how and when you first discovered each other's music?

**Joanna Newsom:** Yes. [*Silence, then laughter*]

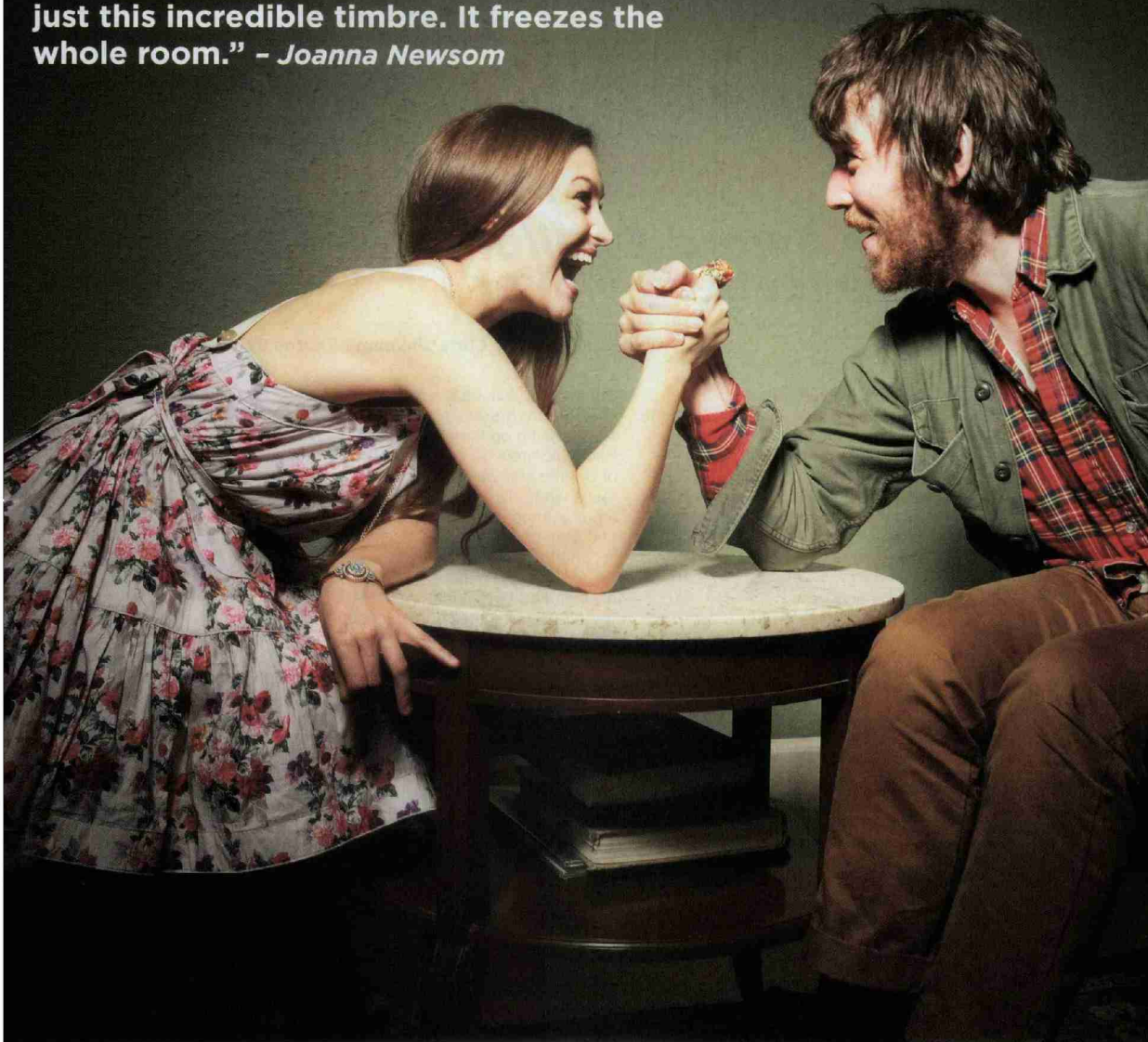
**Robin Pecknold:** Next question.

**Chris:** Care to elaborate?

**Joanna:** I heard "Blue Spotted Tail." It was on my friend's computer. It kept coming up randomly when we were on a trip, and I kept being, like, "What is that? Who is that? That's the most beautiful voice I've ever heard." Just got really obsessed with it, and weirdly, that was my in. But it was a while after [Fleet Foxes'] record had come out when I heard that, so I missed out. I remember I was hearing from people whose taste in music I really admire, I had heard of Fleet Foxes so many times, but it often takes me 30 or 40 recommendations before I finally go out and buy a record. So, I hadn't gotten it yet, and then

10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

“[Robin] sings like a sword swallower. Like someone who’s the combination of strength and ease, and deadly sharpness, just this incredible timbre. It freezes the whole room.” - Joanna Newsom



that was my little rabbit hole moment, where, from there on I listened—a lot of YouTube and stuff. But I don’t know how long ago that was.

**Robin:** I think that that was a live thing that I did, I played that on the radio, in June 2009, so it was after that.

**Joanna:** That sounds about right.

**Robin:** I don’t remember the

first time I heard [Joanna’s] first record, but I’ve been a really big fan for the duration. I had some friends that had the early EPs [Joanna’s self-made EPs, *Walnut Whales* and *Yarn and Glue*], from before *The Milk-Eyed Mender*, so [my friend] would always play that in her little store.

**Chris:** You were hearing those even before *The Milk-Eyed*

*Mender*?

**Robin:** No, after that came out. But, after *Ys* came out, I was listening to that exclusively for like a year.

**Chris:** How did you come about covering Joanna’s song, “On a Good Day”?

**Robin:** Oh, that was after she had asked me to do the tour, because I was just stoked, and that’s—when you’re lazy—the

one learnable jam.

**Chris:** After you got her invitation, you felt compelled to work out a song?

**Robin:** Yeah, that was in the middle of writing the second album, ‘cause I wrote that record from October 2009 to March or April of 2010, and the tour, the first one, was in April, so I was just going to the practice space every night

## 10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



and writing. I set up a PA, so I could sing into the PA, and playing guitar through the amp, listening to myself vocally masturbate or whatever every night. And so I probably recorded that at 5:00 in the morning during one of those writing nights.

**Chris:** Do you remember the first time you heard your own music covered?

**Joanna:** I think, for me, it was maybe The Decemberists covered a song from the first record ["Bridges and Balloons"]. 'Cause the Internet wasn't quite as Internet-y at that point.

**Chris:** It was getting goin'.

**Joanna:** It was getting going. It was raring up, but I don't think I was quite with it enough to be hearing individuals covering stuff on YouTube or whatever. Was YouTube around in 2001, 2002?

**Chris and Robin:** No.

**Joanna:** So, I think that was the first thing that was brought to my attention.

**Robin:** I lived in the suburbs, and there was this movie theater. It wasn't a mall, but it was like an outdoor mall type thing, like a strip mall that had been folded into itself. So, there was a movie theater, and there was this really shitty restaurant called Intermissions next to the movie theater, and there was this guy who worked there who started putting on open mics, so I would walk with my guitar from my parents' house down to this open mic place, like two days a week. That's why I started writing songs, to have new songs for this open mic thing when I was 15. It was rad meeting all these psychopaths... The guy that always won was either the hula hoop guy or the John Mayer impresario—

**Joanna:** —It was actually just John Mayer.

**Robin:** [Laughs] Just needed the validation constantly. But there were a couple of really rad guys who would do these every week, and we would hang out and talk about writing songs and stuff, and one of those guys covered one of the songs I played a couple weeks before. But I think the first **Fleet Foxes** one was the two girls singing one of the songs ["Tiger Mountain Peasant Song"] on the first album, *First Aid Kit*.

**Joanna:** Are there Robin Pecknold deep cuts? Are there solo songs before *Fleet Foxes* ever came out?

**Robin:** Oh my God, yeah. I've been trying to track it down, because a friend of mine has two records that would be, like, finished, but I never got the files from him, when I was 17. But then there are like four EPs. It's weird, I was thinking about that. I feel like my most productive songwriting was before any of this band shit happened. I think

about what I've written in the last three years, since we've started touring and everything, and what I wrote in the seven years before that, and it's kind of sad.

**Joanna:** There's that cliché, you have your whole life to write your first record, and you have a year-and-a-half to write your second and so forth, so it kind of makes sense.

**Robin:** Yeah, but all of the songs on the first one, they were written in the same [period]. There's nothing from when I was 15. They were all written in the same six months. How wide was your first?

**Joanna:** Those early EPs are kind of a document of the exact moment that I started trying to sing. And that was, I'd say, two years before *Milk-Eyed Mender* came out. But there's tons of instrumental stuff. I have an entire CD I will release at some point—but we've never decided when the right time to do it is—of just instrumental compositions.

**Robin:** On just harp?

**Joanna:** Just harp. When I was 17 and 18, I made that. There's a few dismally awful, awful, song-songs, but other than that, I think every song I ever wrote and sang exists out in the world in some form, even if it's just those little home recordings. So, I don't have the time [frame], but it did come fast. Like what you were saying, it did come faster. It came easier in the beginning. There was more urgency and less, maybe, self-censoring or whatever.

**Robin:** Yeah, totally. I have probably 50 or 60 songs from when I was a teenager—

**Joanna:** Dude!

**Robin:** —till I was 21.

**Joanna:** I want to hear that.

**Robin:** Some of it's actually kind of cool. I think about it like, have you heard of that Paul Auster book, *City of Glass*?

**Joanna:** No.

**Robin:** The main character is named Paul Auster, so it's this postmodern, noir, whatever.

**Joanna:** Right.

**Robin:** But one of the subplots is, this crazy old man locks his son in his room, from his birth, so that he never hears any English, to see if the kid will start talking the language "of God," if there's a natural human language or whatever. So, I see early songs kind of like that, where you're really

uninformed and you're trying to make it work. I'll hear chord changes in the songs I wrote when I was 16, and I just made it up completely, with no idea that this is how you should do it or this is cool. So I kind of miss that. It's interesting to hear them that way.

**Joanna:** Absolutely. Yeah, I totally relate to that.

**Robin:** 'Cause now I just have all these ideas based on stuff I've heard since then.

**Joanna:** Right. I was going to ask, when you first started writing, to what extent, if any, you had in your mind, "This is a good song. This is a good record." Like, if you listened to music very much or if you had any sort of touchstones like that when you first started writing.

**Robin:** Yeah, I did, for sure. I was really into Elliott Smith and really into Love, *Forever Changes*, so it's like Elliott Smith covering Love. Before teenagerdom, I was into musicals. Were you ever into that stuff?

**Joanna:** Into musicals?

**Robin:** Yeah. [Waits for Joanna's answer] No. [Laughs]

**Joanna:** Yes, but less as a genre and more on a case-by-case basis.

**Robin:** Oh, completely.

**Joanna:** I remember I loved *Les Mis*, and I loved *West Side Story*.

**Robin:** Bernstein.

**Chris:** Robin, I get the sense that after you've recorded something, you're never satisfied.

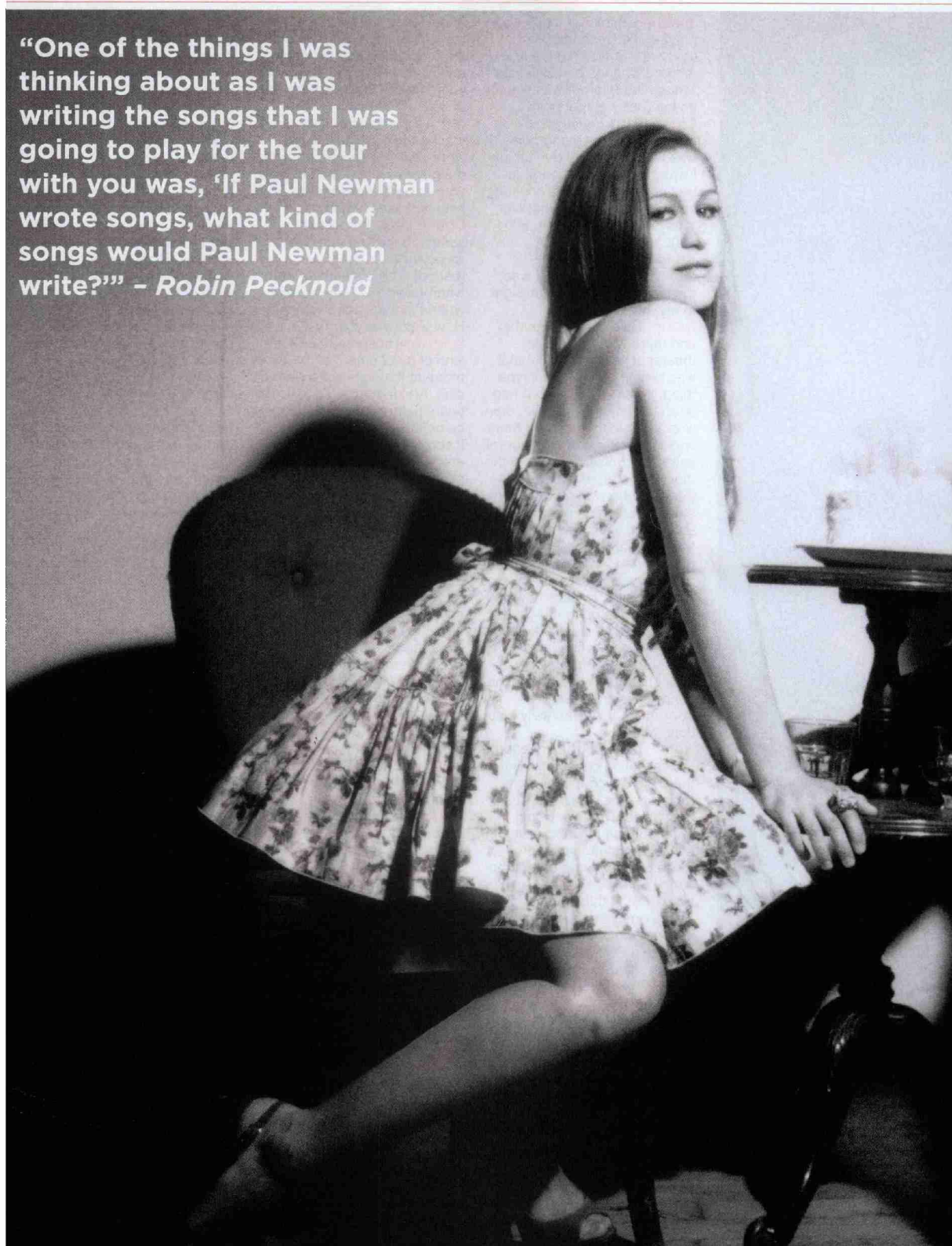
**Robin:** I don't think I've done a record yet where I haven't been completely under siege personally and escaped with it. I've just put a lot of unnecessary pressure on myself, just mental feedback loops that you get caught up in while you're working on something. I haven't had the confidence yet to be just like, "This is what this song or piece of music is." I feel like I'm still really learning how to even do music. Any weird, "This song could use more of this x." That's all out of self-doubt. That's just grabbing in the dark at some possible answer, because you're tired of whatever answer you thought was right and you hate yourself. [Laughter]

**Robin:** That's that. That's what perfectionism is.

**Chris:** Can you relate to that at all, Joanna?

## 10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

“One of the things I was thinking about as I was writing the songs that I was going to play for the tour with you was, ‘If Paul Newman wrote songs, what kind of songs would Paul Newman write?’” – *Robin Pecknold*



## 10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



**Joanna:** Um.

**Robin:** I feel like you have a different... OK, excuse my inferring.

**Joanna:** Please, infer, infer.

**Robin:** Didn't you major in creative writing?

**Joanna:** I did for a little while, yeah.

**Robin:** Not to put words in your mouth, but it feels like you have this set of tools, you seem really well equipped. You know what I mean?

**Joanna:** [No response]

**Robin:** In terms of the act of working on something or creating something. Maybe I'm totally wrong.

**Joanna:** There are elements where I feel better equipped than others, but it's hilarious to hear your take on your own creative process, in light of what the end result sounds like. I think that that can be true for you, while simultaneously coming from a place of extreme—

**Robin:** —melodrama.

**Joanna:** [Laughs] No, deeply seeded sense of musical self. You're talking about bumbling in the dark reaching for something, but I think that might be more clearing away the noise, because everything you make sounds... Probably, the very first word I would use to describe it is "realized."

**Robin:** Really?

**Joanna:** Yeah, very realized and contained, and that is antithetical to flailing or fumbling.

**Robin:** Yeah, I mean, everyone has their threshold of, "This is somewhat acceptable."

**Joanna:** [Laughs]

**Robin:** You know, like, "This'll do." But then you hope for a layer beyond that of like, "This is awesome," and then you're like, "Do it as much as you can to get there," with the thing that might be able to go there.

**Joanna:** Yeah, but nothing is ever going to seem awesome or sound awesome when you have to hear it as many times as you hear your own record. So you have to fall back on small things that you know are correct for yourself.

**Chris:** This being *Under the Radar's* 10th Anniversary Issue, do you recall where you were, what you were up to in 2001?

**Joanna:** I was babysitting a young man named Robin Pecknold, potty training him.

[Laughter]

**Joanna:** No, 2001, I had an asymmetrical haircut. Actually, that's probably a little late. I was firmly ensconced in Gunne Sax dresses and moccasins by that point, and in a house in San Francisco with six other people trying really hard to figure my shit out.

**Robin:** You're 19, 18?

**Joanna:** 19. Yeah, I had just graduated high school, gone to college, dropped out of college, and I'd gone to city college briefly, I think all in the year of 2001.

**Robin:** I guess I was at that Intermissions gig—

[Laughter]

**Robin:** —covering Velvet Underground songs.

**Chris:** Was contemporary music, at that time, having any impact on you?

**Robin:** Yeah, totally. I was way into Radiohead and The Strokes. For sure, Belle and Sebastian. That was when I started going to independent record stores, buying *The White Album* and saying that I lost my other copy.

**Joanna:** Dude, I still do that. I still totally do that. Or I make conversation at the counter at Amoeba

**10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE**

and be like, "Yeah, I'm getting this for my sister." Whatever, like some album that I maybe have on CD or don't have at all. It's really embarrassing.

**Robin:** So, I already had indie rock shame.

**Joanna:** How important, if at all, are other mediums for inspiration? **Fleet Foxes** has amazing album covers, and great shirts and posters, all the aesthetic stuff is really wonderful. It makes me wonder whether you get any inspiration from the visual or the tactile, from mediums besides music.

**Robin:** Sure. I feel like the point of view of a Richard Brautigan book jibes with the point of view of a Stanley Kubrick movie, but they're not necessarily the same decade. I finally finished *East of Eden*.

**Joanna:** I just bought that.

**Robin:** Really? Fuck, it's so good. But that, to me, is in the same emotional family as a Haruki Murakami book, not in the writing style at all, but the point of view or something.

**Joanna:** There's a kinship.

**Robin:** Yeah, but a lot of that is also just me projecting my own, "This is the stuff that I think is cool, so it has the same"—

**Joanna:** —Yeah, but that's a little chicken-and-egg. Obviously, there's gonna be something that aesthetically unites everything that is interesting to you. You are the thread.

**Robin:** One of the things I was thinking about as I was writing the songs that I was going to play for the tour with you was, "If Paul Newman wrote songs, what kind of songs would Paul Newman write?"

**Joanna:** That rules! He's my favorite.

**Robin:** Really?

**Joanna:** Yes.

**Robin:** 'Cause, what would Paul Newman think is good or has dignity?

**Chris:** How comfortable are you about licensing your music?

**Joanna:** I think we have very different views on this. This man is a paragon—

**Robin:** —Oh, no. I've licensed stuff for TV shows and for a couple of movies. We haven't really gotten that many requests that we've even said no to. The ones that we've gotten were things that I was just kind of morally opposed to. It was like, a credit card company or the lottery, just things that were uncomfortable, given the world



climate. My friend Morgan [Henderson, Fleet Foxes multi-instrumentalist], before he joined the band, his other band was considered for a car commercial or something, and I was hoping that they would get it, so he could pay rent. It's easier to say no to stuff when you can. The only things we've even been able to say

no to are just things we didn't want to be associated with, but that's not everything.

**Joanna:** [To Chris] You were talking about changes over the last 10 years or whatnot in the music industry. That's something that I've personally felt as a big change. I've been in less and less of a position to say no to things that I used to

when I put out the first record. Commercials were the things that I said no to over and over again. Some that I would still say no to, but others because I was just like, "Nah, because every time someone hears that song, they're now going to think about Levi's or they're going to think about Volkswagen or whatever, and I don't like

# 10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



a lot more fun to do someone else's project, and it's a lot harder to do my own. But, ultimately, after months and months and months, it has ended up being something I'm really glad I did. I've had incredible blessings and luck in knowing amazing people who are open to working the way I'd like to work on those particular projects.

**Robin:** Ideally, you're working with people that you really respect, that are there to make everything better.

**Chris:** What's next for you? What will keep you busy the rest of the year?

**Robin:** We have a few more tours, but I'm just trying to start writing and hopefully start recording soon, in some capacity.

**Chris:** Do you have to set aside time to write, or are you always writing?

**Robin:** It's sort of always in the back of your mind. I feel like, more than ever, I'm just trying to open myself up to everything that I'm seeing or hearing and always be thinking. It's more mental than anything else. That one word, like, make sure to remember that word, or make sure to remember that chord change or whatever, be in the mindset of your writing. That's what I'm trying to do right now.

**Chris:** Do you carry anything with you, like a pad or a recorder?

**Robin:** [Laughs] iPhone, just the notes and the voice memos. But yeah, I have tons of voice memos.

**Joanna:** Robin's always standing around me, [clears throat, sarcastically formal voice] June 2003, C chord with a B flat bass.

**Robin:** [Laughs] Damn.

**Chris:** Joanna, how about you?

**Joanna:** I'm supposed to be writing.

**Chris:** You said you had some stuff.

**Joanna:** [Sheepishly] Yeah. I don't know. [A backup tape recorder shuts off.]

**Joanna:** [Laughs] And! [Feigns relief, pretends interview has ended.]

**Chris:** No, I've got the digital recorder.

**Joanna:** Oh, OK. Dammit! Um, yeah, I'm writing. Let's say I'm writing. I've written a little bit this summer and been all over the place this summer. Starting about September, I'll be more still and sedentary, so I'm hoping

that." And, I felt a shift over the last few years, as my music is bought less and less, I'm like, "Well, this is subsidizing my ability to stay home and write music and pay for records that cost more than they will make."

**Chris:** Would you be reticent about collaborating with someone you admire, if they

approached you?

**Joanna:** I think I just always need to be clear what my role is. I'm happy to step in and be a studio harpist for someone I admire. I've done that, and I can do that. I can take direction. If it's my project, I become much less easy to work with. [Laughs] I work with people who I admire hugely for

what they do on their own, the folks I've worked with in the past. And I also am very grateful for how much they have understood that I am trying to make a record that represents my specific vision, which is not always the same as theirs. And it's not always easy getting to that place. I really like collaboration. It's



10TH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



that writing will come with that, but I'm not totally sure. I have an album title, which is good. I think that will be a prompt, even if it changes. So that's good, but I would not be surprised if it took me two years to write the next record. It takes me so long, so we'll see.

**Chris:** Back to collaboration, would you two consider anything beyond what you did together onstage?

**Joanna:** I totally would.

**Robin:** Would a—

**Joanna:** —Does a Lannister pay his debts?

**Robin:** [Laughs] Is the ringworm a collaborator?

**Joanna:** [Laughs] In a heart-beat.

**Chris:** But under the conditions you stated earlier?

**Joanna:** I actually don't think it would be under those conditions, because Robin is a different animal. I've never collaborated with a person with whom I'd be collaborating specifically because of who they are as a singer and

a songwriter. I've collaborated with orchestral arrangers. I've collaborated with drummers. I've collaborated with orchestral guitarists. Perhaps all of them are also singers and songwriters, but that's not the capacity in which I'm collaborating with them. So, I think it would be a new thing to think about. [To Robin] You know what I'm saying?

**Robin:** I couldn't do it. I just don't have anything to add at all. [Laughs]

**Joanna:** That's bullshit.

**Robin:** Like, less than zero. It would be really hard for me in this conceptual, theoretical collaboration to get over that. Speaking honestly, just being honest.

**Joanna:** [Sighs] I wish I had a cadaver to hit you with. Yup, that's bull.

**Robin:** But, if I felt like I have anything to add, that would be the best thing ever. [Laughs] But, maybe I will.

**Joanna:** Yeah, I hope so! C'mon, man.

ELLIOTT SMITH | RILO KILEY | THE FLAMING LIPS | BAT FOR LASHES

# UNDER THE RADAR

The Solution To

PAUL RUDD vs. THE DIVINE COMEDY  
DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE  
CAMERA OBSUCRA  
TEGAN and SARA  
GRANDADDY

+  
**29 FREE**  
Songs Inside!

10<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary  
Issue

FLEET FOXES'  
ROBIN  
PECKNOLD  
vs.  
JOANNA  
NEWSOM

