

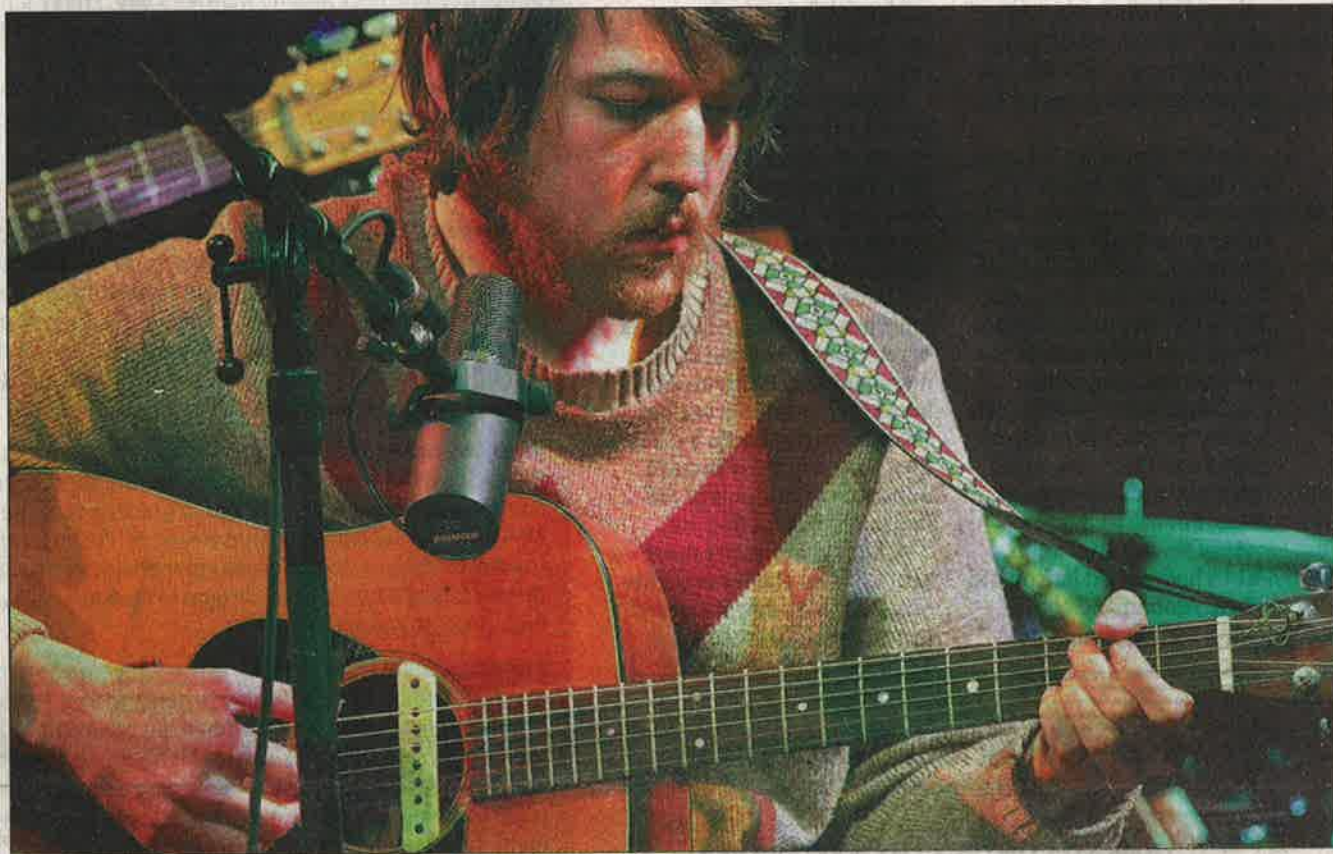
The Seattle Times

Sunday

THEY SOUND LIKE SEATTLE LOOKS*

* = sunny or gray, depending on the song

Seattle band Fleet Foxes is catapulting into stardom with a lyrical Northwest vibe that appeals to both the young and their boomer parents. That combination could turn the group into the biggest local band since Nirvana.



Allergic to fame, Robin Pecknold's songwriting, strumming and airy tenor, delivered with eyes closed from an "ignore everything" zone, leads Seattle band Fleet Foxes.

STORY BY ANDREW MATSON / *Special to The Seattle Times*

• PHOTOS BY ELLEN M. BANNER / *Seattle Times* photographer

It's drizzling through the streetlights out on Rainier Avenue, where local sextet Fleet Foxes plays, tucked inside the wood-and-brick Columbia City Theater. The house is packed, and smells like rain evaporating off denim.

Everyone here knows they're part of something special. And while the band looks great on the picture-frame stage, the venue is way too small for the biggest Seattle group since Death Cab for Cutie,

since Modest Mouse — since, well, yeah, maybe — Nirvana.

During the existential lullaby "Blue Spotted Tail," the multigenerational audience is so transfixed by 25-year-old frontman Robin Pecknold's tenor voice, hardly anyone notices — least of all Pecknold himself, who is singing with eyes closed — when a woman collapses mid-song. Two men drag her

See > **FLEET FOXES, A16**



In addition to Robin Pecknold (top), the Fleet Foxes are (clockwise from upper left) Casey Wescott (keys, vocals, strings), Christian Wargo (bass, vocals), Skyler Skjelset (guitar, mandolin, vocals), Morgan Henderson (woodwinds, strings) and Joshua Tillman (drums, vocals).

What they're saying about Fleet Foxes

“That sound is very soothing, and very friendly and gentle, and very familiar in a lot of ways. It’s the type of harmonies you would hear on records by The Byrds, and The Zombies, and all these kind of classic rock records we all grew up with in our subconsciousness.”

Chris Weingarten,
The Village Voice

“He has one of the rare, truly great voices. It’s bracing, it sets your teeth on edge a little bit like lemon or aluminum, and it’s baldly, plainly beautiful. I also believe he’s as creatively incorruptible as a person may be.”

California neo-folk star
Joanna Newsom

< Fleet Foxes

FROM A1

NORTHWEST APPEAL GOING WORLDWIDE

New album, tour boasts sleek vocals, outdoors vibe

through the crowd to the bathrooms, where she regains her footing, and is escorted out into the hallway.

“No way, really?” says Pecknold, eight days later on the phone from his new home in Portland, where he just moved. “I had no idea. I was in the ‘ignore everything’ zone.”

One thing Pecknold might be trying to ignore is the media attention washing over the band as its second album, “Helplessness Blues,” nears its May 3 release. Allergic to fame, he’s the kind of guy who would much rather talk about the late Portland singer-songwriter Elliott Smith’s unsung guitar chops than where the Foxes’ album will land on the Billboard charts. But it will very likely debut in the top 10.

Fleet Foxes’ appeal to the millennial generation and its boomer parents could spell gold-record-level success. Seattle has had famous bands before, but this one is the first to break into the mainstream sounding exactly like what this place looks like — a sleek city in the middle of beautiful woods.

The group’s self-named debut went double platinum in England in 2008, where The Guardian called it “a landmark in American music, an instant classic.” It sold more than 400,000 copies in America, where the band is seen as part of a “neo-folk” movement that also includes The Avett Brothers and, closer to home, The Head and the Heart.

Both Fleet Foxes shows at the Moore Theatre on Monday and Tuesday sold out immediately. From there, the Foxes embark on a four-month, mostly sold-out North

unofficial house producer Phil Ek is also key to the story.

Fleet Foxes’ layered vocal harmonies are sometimes like the audio equivalent of a ferryboat ride from Anacortes to the San Juans, with the Cascades and Olympic mountain ranges on the distant horizon. At other times, they’re more melancholy and interior. But there’s a sophistication to the band that also reflects our scrubbed post-Microsoft urban landscape — glassy skyscrapers with clouds reflected in the windows.

The music press characterizes Fleet Foxes as “neo-folk,” a reference to its roots in ‘60s singer-songwriters such as Joni Mitchell, Neil Young and Simon and Garfunkel. Forty years later in Seattle, folk is back in vogue. Though Pecknold doesn’t align himself with the local resurgence, centered on the Ballard pub Conor Byrne — “We’re not in that community,” he says — it’s a convenient way to understand the band’s music.

Pecknold and singer/guitarist/mandolinist Skyler Skjelset started the group in 2005. Its first concert was a low-key engagement at the Redmond Fire House Teen Center. The group played the usual round of Seattle venues — Neumos, the Crocodile — but after the first album it jumped straight to TV, appearing on “The Late Show with David Letterman” and “Saturday Night Live.”

Simon Raymonde, head of the band’s United Kingdom label Bella Union, sensed mainstream potential the first time he saw the band.

“Around me in a square meter was pretty much every person on the planet,” he said by phone from his London office. “Fifteen-year-old kid. Thirty-year-old couple. Fifty-five-year-old fella. A Japanese tourist. A couple of boys holding hands. A mom and a dad. It was everyone from 15 to 65.”

With indie bands such as Arcade Fire winning the 2010 Grammy for Album of the Year, Fleet Foxes just might have a shot.

CONCERT PREVIEW

Fleet Foxes

7:30 p.m. Monday and Tuesday
at the Moore Theatre,
1932 Second Ave., Seattle;
both shows are sold out

from the outside world, preferring email to face-to-face conversation.

But he is unusually outspoken online. He writes on twitter.com/fleetfoxes every day, leaves comments in online articles and blog posts all over the Internet and, in interviews, famously advocates illegal downloading. (After The Stranger and the Weekly made fun of the band last week — the former ran pictures of zoo animals “reacting” to the band’s new album, the latter compiled Pecknold’s tweets for a fake Q&A — he chastised them on Twitter for their “joke-y, belittling” tone.)

He categorically rejects the idea of being extolled as somebody special. In what will surely become the band’s signature song, “Helplessness Blues,” Pecknold earnestly declares his desire to become “a functioning cog in some great machinery/ Serving something beyond me.”

Though the singer likes his privacy, he enjoys hanging out with the Pecknold clan.

Fleet Foxes is a family affair: Sister Aja manages, brother Sean makes videos, father Greg builds guitars for the band and mother Lisa helps organize some of the business. The whole family is musical. Pecknold’s father played in the R&B band The Fathoms, a Seattle fixture in the ‘60s.

Though the younger Pecknold has no formal music education, his parents had a record collection stocked with ‘60s and ‘70s folk, and fed their kids musicals.

“At about age four, Robin would dress up as Curly from ‘Oklahoma’ and sing the entire show,” writes his dad, in an email. who savs Rob-

Like many creative suburban youths, he opted out of Lake Washington High School for the Runnit Start program and attended what was then called Bellevue Community College. Pecknold’s combination of artistic integrity and popular appeal could be a godsend for Sub Pop, which prides itself on putting out weird, noncommercial music, but needs an occasional winner to support its alternative music habit. Fleet Foxes may well become one of the label’s big earners, such as the Nirvana back catalog and albums by Postal Service, Band of Horses, the Shins, Iron and Wine and Flight of the Conchords.

Though nobody at the label wants to jinx “Helplessness Blues” by predicting it will be a hit, the label has put considerable muscle into promoting the band.

Fleet Foxes producer Ek has worked on several breakout local albums, including ones by the Shins and Band of Horses. His production accentuates wide open spaces and sometimes uses reverb to play up the epic side of the human voice. As such, Ek is an architect of the Pacific Northwest post-grunge sound.

When he first heard the group, Ek said it was very ‘60s pop, but found the newer songs more advanced, as Pecknold learned “technical chord shapes and open tunings, which is more folk, for sure.”

Of the new album, Ek said, “Fans are going to become even bigger fans, or they’re going to hate it. And that’s when you know you made a great record.”

It does seem like Fleet Foxes is headed for the big time. And as an added bonus, the world gets to hear what Seattle looks like in the process. Through it all, we can expect Pecknold to close his eyes, sing out. When he opens them, he may find himself staring at 25,000 people in an arena.

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