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Less Fleet, but More Mature, Foxes

By WILL HERMES



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It was the autumn of Robin Pecknold's discontent.

Last October Mr. Pecknold, the singer-songwriter — hair pulled into a ponytail and reddish-brown beard roaming free — was nibbling an asparagus roll at a sushi joint on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan, fretting over what he'd thought was a finished album by his band, Fleet Foxes. He and the producer Phil Ek had flown to New York from their home base in Seattle to do final mixing at Sear Sound, a boutique studio on West 48th Street known for its analog recording.

But upon relistening to the tracks Mr. Pecknold realized that the record, in fact, was not finished. The final segment of a three-part song needed rethinking. Some louder tracks needed more punch. And, perhaps most disturbingly, certain songs and arrangements made the LP sound, as he put it, "like it exists a little bit too much in the context of contemporary indie rock."

"I'm optimistically crestfallen," Mr. Pecknold concluded. Outside the restaurant he sucked nervously on a cigarette, smiled widely but wanly, and bid adieu, heading back to Seattle and back to work.

Now the second-guessing is over, and the record, titled "Helplessness Blues," is slated for release by Sub Pop on Tuesday. It's a rich, handsome set of songs, often centered on acoustic guitars, marked by sumptuous vocal harmonies but with an emphasis on Mr. Pecknold's introspective lyrics. It's a throwback to the late '60s sounds of Crosby, Stills and Nash; Simon and Garfunkel; and other period acts. At the same time, Mr. Pecknold's apprehensions notwithstanding, it also exists very much "in the context of contemporary indie rock" — in part because his group has had a hand in shaping that context.

"Helplessness Blues" follows Fleet Foxes' self-titled 2008 debut, a set of woody, imagistic folk-rock songs that struck a chord with a remarkably broad range of music fans. It sold 400,000 physical copies in the United States and 700,000 in Europe, striking numbers for a small-label debut of this sort, with equally impressive digital sales. It received a rare 9.0 rating from the tastemaking Web site Pitchfork, known for its 20-something readership. It was also selected as Album of the Year in an online poll conducted by National Public Radio, whose demographic skews quite a bit older. The record earned the band a spot on "Saturday Night Live"; on the coveted point-of-purchase racks in Starbucks; and, apparently, on the playlists of innumerable restaurants throughout the country that serve local produce.

The album also became something of a stylistic bellwether. Along with Panda Bear's "Person Pitch" in 2007, Grizzly Bear's "Veckatimest" in 2009 and Dirty Projectors' "Bitte Orca" in 2010 it heralded indie rock's infatuation with extravagant vocal harmonies, an abstracted flashback to the days of street-corner doo-wop that feels appropriate to tough economic times, in its implicit low overhead and reliance on

community. All of this attention threw Mr. Pecknold, 25, for a loop, and ratcheted up expectations for "Helplessness Blues." Meanwhile his songwriting had shifted from the fablelike song narratives — most written before he was 21 — that defined the first album.

"I can't go back to the place that allowed me to write that way," he said last month via phone from his new home base in Portland, Ore. "Now I'm enjoying writing more directly about myself, I guess."

The new songs sound like someone coming of age and thinking hard about his place in the world. The record begins with the declaration "So now I am older/than my mother and father/when they had their daughter," the singer wondering what that says about his own life choices. On "Bedouin Dress" he weighs his tendency to take and not return — whether in reference to love or hedge trimmers he doesn't specify.

On the title track Mr. Pecknold considers his individuality, then decides he would "Rather be/a functioning cog in some great/machinery, serving something beyond me."

A chat with Mr. Pecknold is a similar exercise in close self-examination. He begins an answer, doubles back to rephrase, punctuates his thoughts with qualifiers and apologizes for conversation that might be "too much like therapy." Your heart goes out to him — it must be exhausting sometimes — but it's also endearing and admirable in a world of flippant sound bites and ill-considered Twitter memes.

Mr. Pecknold grew up in Seattle, the youngest of three, and performed in musical theater in high school. His sister, Aja (named, yes, for the Steely Dan song), was struck by his talent when she heard him sing Bob Dylan's "Boots of Spanish Leather." He was 14; she was 21. He began writ-

ing his own songs. She wrote about music for Seattle Weekly and started helping her brother when, amid the buzz over his band's debut LP, touring suddenly spiked. ("There was a clear need for someone to step in and handle the chaos," she said from Seattle.) As things snowballed, Ms. Pecknold began functioning as the band's manager; their brother, Sean Pecknold, stepped in to handle photography. Even their dad, Greg, a musician himself, got into the act, customizing guitars and other instruments for the band.

Oh yes: the band. The guitarist Skyler Skjelset has been making music with Mr. Pecknold since the two were in high school. The keyboardist and multi-instrumentalist Casey Wescott joined them around 2006, followed by the bassist Christian Wargo and the drummer Josh Tillman. Morgan Henderson, who plays woodwinds

and upright bass, signed on during the recording of the new record. Mr. Pecknold has always been the songwriter, leader and frontman. But his centrality grew even greater during the making of "Helplessness Blues." Rather than shaping songs collectively during practice sessions, as they did for their debut, Mr. Pecknold delivered songs that were more fully developed; arrangements were often worked out via e-mail.

The intimate lyrics presented a challenge for a group branded by its choral harmonies. "A lot of songs expressed

sentiments that didn't sound right being performed by four guys," said Mr. Wescott, who wrote many of the vocal arrangements. Consequently Mr. Pecknold sings alone on many parts of the record or — on "Someone You'd Admire" and "Bedouin Dress" — alongside his own multi-tracked voice. On the five-part harmony section of the title track Mr. Wescott curbed his contrapuntal tendencies in favor of a unified wash of voices. "We treaded very carefully," he said. "The parts were rewritten many, many times."

Arrangements were also a balancing act, employing modest instruments that

would not overdramatize the songs. They included zithers, Tibetan singing bowls (Mr. Wescott took a tuner into the storeroom of a New Age shop and tried more than 300 bowls until he got the correct tones) and a Challen upright piano, the vintage British parlor instrument best known for its appearance on the Beatles's "Day in the Life." (The band encountered one during a trip to Abbey Road Studios in London.) They all addressed the songs' emotional koans in their own way. At the end of the multi-part "Shrine/An Argument" Mr. Henderson double-tracks riotous bass-clarinets lines in what amounts to a shouting match between id and ego.

The shift in Mr. Pecknold's writing came partly of necessity. In early 2010 the harp-playing singer-songwriter Joanna Newsom asked him to open some shows for her. "I'd heard him play solo in recorded form a few times before — like the song 'Blue Spotted Tail,' which I thought was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard," she wrote in an e-mail. "I felt like a whole set of his songs performed like that, just him and a guitar, would really be something to see."

Since much of the Fleet Foxes material was ill suited to a single voice, Mr. Pecknold shaped a batch of new songs as solo vehicles, and these became the core of "Helplessness Blues." In March he even released three songs under his own name via his Twitter account (@fleetfoxes). One, "I'm Losing My-

self," finds him collaborating with Ed Droste, the lead singer of Grizzly Bear.

So what does this suggest for the future of Fleet Foxes? For now, Mr. Pecknold still has the desire to be "a functioning cog" in something greater than himself. He is looking forward to a band tour, which comes to the United Palace Theater in Upper Manhattan on May 18 and 19. For their next project he'd like his band mates to do some songwriting.

And in any case, being a solo act in the context of a band seems easier than the alternative. "The guys played a huge part" in shaping the new record, Mr. Pecknold said. "It wasn't just about following my whims. I respect them so much as musicians, so when they tell me something is worth keeping, that means a lot to me. I don't necessarily trust my opinions all the time."