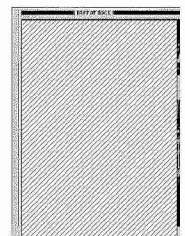




Skjelset,
Pecknold and
Wargo (from
left) in Seattle





BEST BREAKOUT BAND

Fleet Foxes

Fleet Foxes have made the album of their lives – so can't Robin Pecknold unwind? BY JOSH EELLS

ROBIN PECKNOLD is stoked. It's not the awesome weather, although Seattle is finally getting real sun. Nor is it the fact that his band has finished rehearsals for its tour and is sitting around a ratty rehearsal space with nothing to do for the first time in weeks. It's not even the fact that he just spent the past half-hour having warm wax poured into his ears (getting molds made for new in-ear monitors), which sounds painful but was actually superpleasant. ("Like being in the womb," drummer Josh Tillman says.)

No, the reason that Pecknold is smiling beneath his bushy beard, that his doleful green eyes are a little brighter than usual, is that Fleet Foxes' new album has leaked. You might think this would be cause for concern: The official release is six weeks away. But considering the torture he and the rest of the band – Tillman, guitarist Skye Skjelset, bassist Christian Wargo, keyboardist Casey Wescott and multi-instrumentalist Morgan Henderson – went through just to get the record out the door, the leak is cause for celebration. It's proof that the thing actually exists.

"It's such a relief to be getting feedback on it," Pecknold says, scrolling through Twitter on his iPhone. "The reaction so far has been really good – even from people who didn't think the first album was amazing." Pecknold is the kind of guy who's constantly bracing himself for the worst – a chronic second-guesser, riddled by doubt, especially when it comes to his own instincts. Sometimes his neuroses bubble up in funny ways, like his aversion to hot tubs ("I'm basically a never-nude") or his befuddlement toward the beach ("It's like, 'Here's my body! This is where my body is now!'"). But they can also be more insidious, such as when he says things to his bandmates like, "I'm the worst songwriter of all time," or rerecords entire songs at the very last minute (or five minutes after that) because he saw someone better on YouTube.

"He's his own worst critic," says Skjelset, who's been Pecknold's best friend since they were in junior high. "He's aware of it – he knows he does it to himself – but it sucks to watch. I'll be like, 'You're the man, dude!' and he'll be like" – he adopts an Eyore-ish sigh – "No, I'm not."



The irony is, like Jon Favreau in *Swingers*, Pecknold is money and he doesn't even know it. Fleet Foxes are one of the most beloved bands to appear in years: Their first album earned raves across the board, and fans flock to hear their sweet harmonies led by his beatific croon. And yet here he is, in the middle of dinner eight hours later, hitting "refresh" on his phone again, just in case. "Still pretty good," he says slightly disbelievingly, taking another bite of coconut-soy spring roll. "But all it takes is that one. . . ."

DO YOU MIND IF I SMOKE?" On a drizzly March afternoon, Pecknold is cruising through Seattle in his white Subaru Outback, its floor carpeted with cough-drop wrappers and empty cigarette packs, a krautrock comp burbling on the stereo. He's been trying to quit lately, but between finishing the record and prepping for a tour, it's just too stressful right now. He lights an American Spirit and rolls down the window.

Technically, the car belongs to his mom. His parents — who met on a flight to Alaska in the Seventies, where they were both going to work at a fish cannery — live just a few minutes from here, not too far from where Pecknold was raised, in Kirkland. He hangs out with them a lot. A former boat-builder and amateur luthier, his dad has even been custom-fashioning him some guitars. In fact, when it comes to Fleet Foxes, the whole family pitches in: Pecknold's sister, Aja, is the band's manager, and his artist brother, Sean, directs its videos.

FLEETS DON'T FAIL

Pecknold, Tillman, Wescott, Skjelset, Wargo and Henderson (from left). "Robin's his own worst critic," says Skjelset. "He knows he does it to himself — but it sucks to watch. I'll be like, 'You're the man, dude!' and he'll be like, '[Sigh] No, I'm not.'"

Right now Pecknold is on his way to Jive Time, one of his favorite used-record stores. Records are basically the only thing he spends money on these days: On a trip to London in February, he dropped \$3,000. We pass the group's old studio, the same place Nirvana recorded *Bleach*. Pecknold mostly missed the whole grunge thing — he was five when *Nevermind* came out. His earliest musical memory is dressing up like a cowboy and rocking out to the *Oklahoma!* soundtrack. (A friend of his brother's nicknamed him "Showtunes.") The first album he bought was Stone Temple Pilots' *Purple*, and he grew up obsessing over Radiohead and the Strokes. He also loved "miserable bastards" like Nick Drake and Elliott Smith, though sometimes he wonders if maybe they fucked him up a little. "It's such a crappy message to send to a kid," he says wryly. "Smoking, manic-depressive cranks: Those are my idols."

By the time he was 14, Pecknold had basically withdrawn from school to do music full-time. (He finished his diploma through a community-college program.) He and Skjelset started playing together, and one by one the rest of the dudes came into the fold. Fleet Foxes released their first album in 2008, a collection of honeyed tunes about mountains and trees that surprised everyone by selling 200,000 copies. During the whirlwind that followed, Wargo remembers "mind-blowing" stuff

like dinners at Neil Young's house and private time with Brian Wilson's piano.

But Pecknold kind of resisted. "For me," he says, "coming from the perspective that the more something has sold, the worse it is — one of those snobby indie asshole guys — I was like, 'Why is this happening? Does that mean our music is bad?'" He eventually grew more OK with success, but he still shuns attention, and he is the last person to trumpet his band's accomplishments. Asked if he's heard of any famous fans, the best he can come up with is Lance Armstrong, Zach Galifianakis and "the guy in Rush. Oh, and David Crosby said he'd heard of us. I actually really wish we could use that for the album sticker: 'David Crosby: I've heard of them.'"

After the record store, Pecknold ducks into a coffee shop for an espresso. We're in Fremont, a self-consciously quirky neighborhood full of artisanal bike shops and giant statues of Lenin and trolls. Places like this get on Pecknold's nerves. He has low tolerance for whimsy, and "lifestyle branding" irks him. He doesn't like going to shows because it's too much standing. He doesn't have hobbies ("I have trouble with recreation") and thinks the Space Needle kind of sucks. At one point during our walk, we come across some Canada geese waddling along. "Water rats," he says. "People round them up and shoot them."

This is a side of him you don't find in their music: a cranky, funny one. His inspired coinages — "Slaughterhalia" (a.k.a. Thanksgiving — he's vegan); "merriweather," his candidate to replace "hipster" ("Look at merriweather over there"); "tote-bag" (an annoyingly liberal version of a

douchebag – think NPR pledge drives) – belong in a dictionary.

The subtextual punch line, of course, is that Pecknold is kind of a totebag himself. One of his first jobs was at a food co-op, and you can catch him streaming NPR podcasts while reading *The New Yorker* on his iPad. But he's nothing if not self-aware. He jokes about his band's rep as "limp-dick bearded" and calls their genre "fauxlk." At the same time, he says, the whole hippie-bro-longhaired-beardo caricature can sometimes get out of hand. "It is a little annoying," he says. "You can be an *intellectual* longhaired beardo, you know – that exists. Or a *winking* longhaired beardo."

There's plenty of stuff he's excited about. He likes hiking, train travel, road trips. Someday he'd like to go back to school to study music or modern art. ("There's only so much you can do with Wikipedia.") Most of all he'd like to find some cheap land somewhere, a few dozen acres in New Mexico or Arizona, and build himself a lit-

another place in rural Washington, three studios around Seattle. Once, in search of some epic reverb, they ventured to the bottom of a massive underground water tank on a decommissioned Army base and sang in pitch darkness. ("We had to wear headlamps," Pecknold says. "It was rad.")

As late as December 2009, he was insisting there was "no way" the record wouldn't be out the next year. But pretty soon deadlines started falling by the wayside. First they were supposed to finish last spring. Then it was September. All the while his Twitter account chronicled their frustration:

September 1: "This record has been almost done for six months!"

September 29: "Veering into 'Chinese Democracy' territory."

October 3: "Officially making a Troubled Album."

The lowest point came last September, when Pecknold and producer Phil Ek flew to New York for mixing, only to de-

exactly the kind of struggle Pecknold had been going through: trying to become a better person while being your own worst enemy. There are darkly personal songs, like the eight-minute breakup epic, "The Shrine/An Argument," and existential zoom-out moments like "Blue Spotted Tail," inspired by a Carl Sagan book about Earth's insignificance. (Pecknold, an agnostic, is a big Sagan fan.) There aren't many answers, but lots of big questions; it's a quarter-life crisis record, minus the *Garden State* self-pity that implies.

One of the album's few optimistic spots is the last song, "Grown Ocean," where Pecknold sings of a beautiful dream in which he stops second-guessing himself and learns to accept life and love as it comes. It might even come true. In the months since the record was finished, he and Olivia have been trying to patch things up. She heard the record recently. What did she think? He pauses a second. "I might get a little choked up," he says. "But she said, 'If this is why... then it was all worth it.'"

Later that night, Pecknold is back in the car, talking about the future. The band is scattering. Tillman is renting a house in L.A.'s Laurel Canyon; Skjelset is thinking of following his girlfriend to New York. And in less than a week, Pecknold is packing everything up and heading to Portland, Oregon. He signed a lease on a house down there, and even though it's not that big a move – just three hours in the Subaru – it's the first time in his life he's lived anywhere else. "It's honestly more symbolic than anything," he says. "Not like I'm moving on from the band – but the band's been a big part of why I stayed."

Will he miss Seattle? "I can't tell yet," he says. "Portland's a lot flatter, which is good for bike riding. And they have one flight to Europe and it's to Amsterdam, which is cool because then I can take a train to other places." At this point he's just cruising, making laps around downtown. Between moving and the record and his personal life, there's a lot of transitions going on. I ask him if he's happy, and again, he's quiet.

"I think happiness includes a lot of emotions," he says. "It's darkness and sadness, as well as moments of elation. So if you think happiness means feeling just one way, then no. But if it's feeling at peace with whatever's going on, feeling like you can cope – then I'm getting there."

I'm reminded of a moment from the other day at the record store. He was talking with one of the guys who run the place about some long-lost folk balladeer from the Sixties. When he went back to browsing the stacks, he seemed a little wistful. "I'm actually going to miss a lot of these places," he said, almost like he was realizing it for the first time.

Then he caught himself: "But Portland has good record stores too." 2

"HAPPINESS INCLUDES A LOT OF EMOTIONS," says Pecknold. "It's darkness, sadness, moments of elation. If you think it means feeling one way, no."

tle house. Nothing fancy ("no home theater"), with lots of natural light. "It'd be cool to do it sustainably," he says. "Not to be too up my own ass."

Pecknold sometimes worries that he's not cut out for the music business. So far he and the band have been staunchly opposed to licensing their songs for commercials or TV, turning down American Express and *Grey's Anatomy*. Recently they were approached about doing an ad for the Nissan Leaf, the first 100 percent electric car: "If ever there was a guilt-free commercial," he says, "that would be it. But I'm still sort of like, 'Mehhhhhh.' Ads are just always kind of dumb – like people driving RAV4s and kayaking." They did sell out once, however: "We did a World Wildlife Fund ad in Australia. We got, like, \$500." Talk about totebaggy! Pecknold laughs. "Totally."

RECORDING FOR THE BAND'S new album took a symbolic nine months – and it was a difficult delivery. Pecknold rented a farmhouse on the Olympic Peninsula, where he "thought we'd Big Pink it," but it turned out to be "kind of a meth-y part of town," so they split. They tried upstate New York,

cide they hated what they heard. "I wasted 60 grand of my own money on that trip," Pecknold says. "I came home completely fucking depressed. We'd spent a shitload of money, the record's not done, and I don't know how we're going to fix it." At that point, says Wescott, "There was even a possibility of it not coming out."

Meanwhile, Pecknold's personal life was suffering. He'd been dating his girlfriend, Olivia, for the better part of five years. But between the stresses of recording and his Sisyphean workload, he was becoming increasingly distant.

"I was just hard to be around," he says over bourbon and coffee one night. "I was fucking up in terms of being present. She'd say, 'What are you thinking about?' and I'd be like, 'The third lyric of... I was self-obsessed, and it didn't leave a lot of mental space for her.'"

Soon after the New York debacle, she told him it was over. He was shattered – but strangely energized: "It was weird. From then on, I needed the record to be perfect. I was like, 'If this is going to have affected all these other things in a crappy way, it needs to be fucking awesome.'"

As it turns out, it is. *Helplessness Blues* is a sweeping, ambitious exploration of