

# SPIN

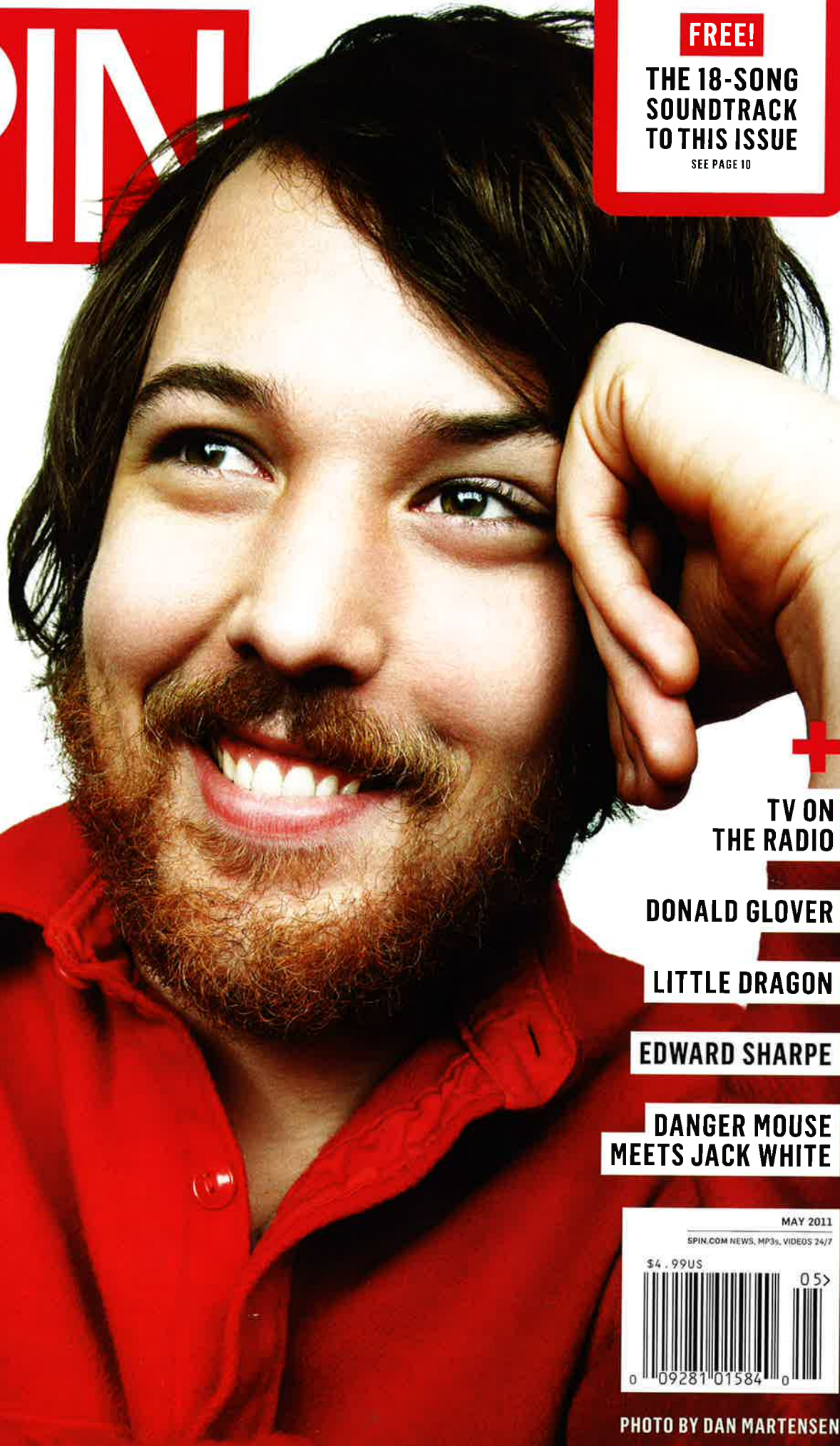
**FREE!**

**THE 18-SONG  
SOUNDTRACK  
TO THIS ISSUE**

SEE PAGE 10

**ROBIN PECKNOLD OF  
FLEET  
FOXES**  
**ON THE MAKING OF  
THE YEAR'S MOST  
BEAUTIFUL ALBUM**

BY DAVID PEISNER



**TV ON  
THE RADIO**

**DONALD GLOVER**

**LITTLE DRAGON**

**EDWARD SHARPE**

**DANGER MOUSE  
MEETS JACK WHITE**

**PENTAGRAM**

**THE HELLISH TALE OF METAL'S  
ANSUNG MADMAN**

**FOO FIGHTERS**

**DAVE GROHL  
GOES BACK IN TIME**

**EXPLOSIONS  
IN THE SKY**

**THE GREATEST ROCK  
INSTRUMENTALS**

MAY 2011

SPIN.COM NEWS, MP3s, VIDEOS 24/7

\$4.99US



PHOTO BY DAN MARTENSEN

# FANTASTIC MR. FOX



Christian Wargo, Josh Tillman, Morgan Henderson, Skyler Skjelset, Robin Pecknold, and Casey Wescott, shot for SPIN at Bear Creek Studios in Woodinville, Washington, April 4, 2011

*For Robin Pecknold, following up **FLEET FOXES'** beloved debut wasn't just a labor of love—it was an all-consuming head trip. David Peisner goes to Seattle and finds an artist who's still learning where his off switch is.*



**PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAN MARTENSEN**

**ROBIN PECKNOLD** stands outside a small triangle-shaped building in the Seattle neighborhood of Ballard, wearing a weathered green barn jacket over his slight frame and smoking an American Spirit. An unkempt mop of brown hair and a scraggly beard frame his longish face and tired eyes, and his shoulders are hunched a bit to protect himself from a cool, late February breeze blowing in off the Puget Sound, which lies a few blocks to the west.

The building behind him is a recording studio that has carried various names over the past three decades—Triangle, John and Stu's, the Hall of Justice—but is currently referred to by the name it carried in the late '80s and early '90s when it served as a vital grunge incubator: Reciprocal Recording. If the place had a Wall of Fame, Nirvana's *Bleach*, Soundgarden's *Screaming Life*, and Mudhoney's *Superfuzz Bigmuff* would line it.

But this building doesn't have a Wall of Fame. In fact, it's kind of a shithole. The windowless exterior was once painted brown, but the color has faded and flecked off. Cracked shingles curl up off the roof, and inside the studio, tattered walls and well-worn carpeting give it all the charm of an abandoned church basement. Pecknold speaks warily of a "potential rat problem" originating from the nearby wharfs.

Reciprocal has been something of a second home for Pecknold and his band, Fleet Foxes, during the past year as they've been writing and recording their second full-length album, *Helplessness Blues*. They've had the place to themselves since January 2010, but today is moving day. Much of the band's gear has already been relocated to bassist Christian Wargo's rehearsal space, and three men from a local moving company are tasked with shuttling much of the rest of it into a storage facility across the street.

Pecknold stubs out his cigarette and walks back inside the studio to give the movers some instructions. There are boxes of recording equipment, mic stands, a beat-up couch, a harp, a dulcimer, a zither, and an old piano that's missing some of its outer paneling. In the corner, near the harp, is a neatly rolled blue sleeping bag. When I point to it, Pecknold nods.

"Yeah, I slept here a few nights," he says drily.

The storage space across the street is only temporary. In early April, Pecknold plans to pack all his stuff into a truck and relocate to Portland. The move is just three hours south on I-5, but for a guy who has grown up and spent all his 25 years in and around Seattle, it seems significant.

"The album and the band have really been all my life has been about for a long time," he says. "It just feels like time to try something else. This is a chance to live a little."

As Pecknold watches the contents of the studio being loaded into a truck, it certainly feels like the closing of a chapter and a symbolic end

to the more than two-year period he and the band—which, along with Wargo, includes guitarist Skyler Skjelsset, drummer Josh Tillman, keyboardist Casey Wescott, and multi-instrumentalist Morgan Henderson—spent laboring over the new album's ambitious, emotional indie-folk epics. That the end result doesn't just deliver on the promise of its acclaimed predecessor but eclipses it is of some comfort.

"It feels really good to have the second one done," Pecknold says. "I really had trouble letting go of the record. Spending so much time on this album, being this really focused, self-involved guy isn't healthy in the other aspects of my life. At a certain point you've got to shut the outside world out and let things go to hell while you're trying to do what you feel you've got to do. But that's just something I'm growing less and less comfortable with."

**P**ECKNOLD AND SKJELSET, also 25, have been playing guitar together since they were teens. An early incarnation of the band was gigging around Seattle by 2006. That same year, they recorded a demo with producer Phil Ek (the Shins, Modest Mouse) that was posted online as a self-titled EP. In retrospect, that record—with its hazy psych-pop melodies and prominent electric guitars—feels like an outlier next to the largely acoustic output that would follow.

Wescott, 30, who'd been playing in Wargo's stylish indie-pop band, Crystal Skulls, joined Fleet Foxes shortly after the EP was finished. "It was an interesting period because Robin was trying to go in a different direction," he says. "We were really pushing ourselves to have new material for each show and really develop it."

Pecknold was listening to a lot of Beach Boys back then, as well as the Zombies and Crosby, Stills & Nash. He fell in love with the vocal harmonies that all three groups are famous for and soon was working them into Fleet Foxes material.

Sub Pop signed the band in 2007, and after an introductory EP, *Sun Giant*, it released Fleet Foxes' self-titled full-length the following year. Warm, ethereal three- and four-part harmonies adorn nearly every song on *Fleet Foxes*, weaving between finger-picked acoustic guitar melodies and homey percussion. Imagistic lyrics about red squirrels, white snow, yellow moons, and

the Blue Ridge Mountains gave the impression that the band members were back-to-the-land hippies, an impression only reinforced by their shaggy locks and prodigious beards.

"It's easy to think of yourself as this complicated individual," Pecknold says. "But when your 11-song album and your press photo is all people have to make an opinion about you, then obviously it's going to be somewhat reductive."

Wargo, 34, who had come of age in Christian rock's indie wing playing with the bands Pedro the Lion and the Danielson Famile and had lived for several years on the Jesus People USA commune in Chicago, joined the band as they were finishing the first album, in time to play on the *Sun Giant* EP (which was recorded after the full-length but released before it). Several months later, Tillman, 30, who'd released several low-key singer-songwriter albums as J. Tillman, replaced original drummer Nicholas Peterson. Henderson, 32, formerly of the Seattle art-punk freaks the Blood Brothers, came aboard in 2010.

The reaction to *Fleet Foxes* was glowing. While some critics lumped the band in with the freak-folk movement that artists like Joanna Newsom, Devendra Banhart, and Animal Collective have been (often unwillingly) attached to, Pecknold's affection for classic songsmiths such as Brian Wilson, Neil Young, and Van Morrison rendered *Fleet Foxes* more immediately accessible.

"Not many people making music right now affect me the way Fleet Foxes do," says Newsom, who invited Pecknold to open shows for her in 2010. "I love the instrumentation and the harmonies, but what stands out first and foremost is the songwriting. Getting to hear Robin play solo on those shows we did last spring really underscored all the amazing stuff that's going on at the core of it."

Heavy online buzz, consistent love from influential noncommercial radio outlets like Los Angeles' KCRW, Seattle's KEXP, and especially NPR, combined with heavy touring helped the charming, pastoral indie-folk song cycle sell way more than charming, pastoral indie-folk song cycles are supposed to—nearly 400,000 copies in the U.S. alone.

"Our first album did ten times the sales that I'm even comfortable with," Pecknold says. "I have zero aspirations beyond anything we've already accomplished."





That's where he may be alone. The industry has shifted dramatically in the last five years, but the pillars of Fleet Foxes' commercial success—touring, music blogs, NPR, Starbucks, and the fact that their fan base consists largely of people old enough to be in the habit of paying for music—have not. It's a formula that has helped Mumford & Sons sell more than a million albums in both the U.S. and the U.K., and Iron & Wine debut at No. 2 on the Billboard album chart earlier this year. So it's not surprising that Sub Pop founder Jonathan Poneman thinks this is as big a release as any in the label's history. "There is more interest and greater expectations," he says. "As a musical accomplishment, it's hard for me to think of a record that we've put out that surpasses this record. Even if they were to stop now, this is a career-defining work."

The band have tried not to let outside expectations influence them, but, as Wargo puts it, "That's easier said than done."

**S**EVERAL HOURS AFTER the studio move is complete, Pecknold is sitting in the kitchen of his parents' house, picking absentmindedly at an acoustic guitar while his sister Aja stands in front of the Viking range stirring a pot of meatless meatballs, and we wait for his brother Sean to arrive. Pecknold has been a vegan since 15, but chalks up his continued

dedication more to habit than dogma. "When I was a teenager, I had friends reading [the anti-consumerism journal] *Adbusters* and things like that," he says. "I became a vegan because of that stuff. Most of them have dropped off, but I've kept it up. I'm just the kind of person who sticks with something."

Pecknold's parents live in a spacious house that sits high on a hill overlooking the water on the north side of Seattle. The Pecknold kids didn't grow up here, but in recent years, it's become a kind of home base. Aja, who is Fleet Foxes' manager, lives in New York but usually stays here when she's in town. Sean, an animator and filmmaker who has made several videos for the band (as well as for Grizzly Bear, Beach House, and others), bunks down here frequently too.

When Sean turns up, we all sit down at the dining room table for dinner. Pecknold's parents are in Hawaii at the moment but signs of them abound. Aja points out a photo on the wall of their mother playing the mandolin and nods to a few guitars in the den that were handmade by their father, who wrote songs and played in bands around Seattle in the '60s and early '70s. Pecknold's parents were hippies but gave up many of the superficial counterculture trappings to raise a family. His father mostly quit playing music and went to work in video production and editing, and his mother became a schoolteacher.

"It was very much 'of the time' for them," says Aja, pushing the spaghetti around her plate with a fork. "I think they lived in a teepee. We had, like, two wooden blocks to play with, no TV, no sugar."

Robin is seven years younger than Aja and five years younger than Sean, so by the time he came along, the rules around the house had mellowed considerably.

"Robin ate whatever he wanted from the age of four," Aja says. "We didn't have a gaming system growing up, but Robin had probably every gaming system ever made."

Robin sighs loudly. "Oh, not really!" he protests. "I had, like, Super Nintendo."

Sean shakes his head. "You had everything. We'd been bugging her for so long that by the time Robin came around, Mom couldn't say no."

Music was always on. Videos and soundtracks of classic musicals like *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma* were in constant rotation. "We'd learn those songs then run around the house and sing," says Sean. "We'd also perform at the grandparents' house—like, New Kids on the Block—to impress the cousins."

Aja laughs and points to Robin. "He was always the tiny performer," she says. "Cutest kid ever."

Pecknold became a bit of a musical theater geek, appearing in productions of *Annie* and *Fame*, as well as a musical adaptation of *The*



**“ROBIN IS A PERSON FOR WHOM NOTHING IS EVER GOOD ENOUGH. HE’S ALWAYS TRYING TO PUSH HIMSELF. THAT’S THE PROCESS.”**

—Skylar Skjelset

*Hobbit*. (“It was horrible,” he laughs. “It was written locally. The songs were like, ‘Off to kill the dragon!’”) Aja knew Robin had real talent after seeing him, at 14, sing Bob Dylan’s “Boots of Spanish Leather” while accompanying himself on guitar in her college apartment.

“It was a jaw-dropping, eye-opening moment,” she says. “From there, it was a pretty rapid progression of writing his own songs.”

Aja was writing for the *Seattle Weekly* when Fleet Foxes began gigging around town, but had already worked with Pearl Jam manager Kelly Curtis and booked and managed a local club, so becoming the band’s manager was natural. “I really love being supportive in that way,” says Aja. “It’s very much a protection instinct. Because it’s a weird industry, you have a lot of dangers out there and—”

“Aja and I have had to learn how to differentiate business stuff from brother-sister stuff,” Robin interrupts. “This is the only way I can be comfortable with it.”

But with Robin as the band’s frontman, Aja as manager, and Sean doing a lot of their video work, there’s the obvious danger of the rest of the band feeling like sidemen for the Pecknold Family Players.

“Potentially, that’s a thing,” Robin admits. “But as a band, we’re very much on the same page. There’s never something I want that no one else would want.”

**A**S TOURING BEHIND the first album wound down, the initial plan was to crank out a follow-up in pretty short order. In January 2009, Pecknold rented a house in Port Townsend, a bohemian enclave 50 miles north of Seattle, with the intention of writing and recording the album there. Almost immediately things started going wrong.

“We rented the house because it was a good deal and looked pretty cool,” says Pecknold. “It was all wood, which is cool in theory, but the wood is expanding and contracting all day. Falling asleep there the first day was the worst feeling—the shutters are popping and the whole house is just super loud. There was no way we could record anything there.”

Still, Pecknold stayed there for about nine months, writing. “I ended up living there full-time just because me and my girlfriend were breaking up.”

The split was a direct product of his increasingly single-minded focus on the album. “My relationships and experiences were all colored with this voice in the back of my head saying, ‘You should be working on songs right now.’”

The band eventually reconvened at Reciprocal in January 2010. Things didn’t necessarily get any easier there. “He’s a person for whom nothing is ever good enough,” says Skjelset. “He’s always trying to do better, trying to push

himself. That’s part of the process for him.”

The rest of the band plugged away diligently and several times thought they were nearly finished, only to find Pecknold wanted to make major overhauls. “I remember we finished the record, and then I went to New York,” says Skjelset. “When I came back, he’d booked more time in the studio by himself and changed this whole section of ‘Bedouin Dress.’ I was like, ‘Why?’ It threw me for such a loop.”

The band members tried at several points to convince Pecknold the album was done, but as Wargo puts it, “There’s really no taking it away from him. I’ve even sent an e-mail like, ‘We need to save this album from Robin!’”

Skjelset says that as frustrating as the process was for the band, it was clearly taking even more out of Pecknold himself. “He and I would go for lunch and it was the only thing he could think about,” he says. “He’d be like, ‘What do you think about this? Really? You sure?’ I’ve had this same conversation with him so many times through the process: ‘Calm down. It’s good. Go for it.’ When he got stressed out, I’d just see him close his eyes and watch his eyes just scatter like this”—he flutters his fingers over his eyelids.

Pecknold’s way of dealing with this pressure was to burrow in deeper. As he puts it, “Making music can be this really self-involved, toxic process. I’ve ended up letting it define me and take over my life in a lot of ways.”

*Helplessness Blues* reflects these issues. In sharp contrast to the florid, evocative, and often metaphorical lyrics on the debut, the new songs are raw and direct. To judge by them, Pecknold is a guy undergoing an existential crisis. At times he's beating himself up over his own self-absorption: "What do I see in your eyes / Besides my reflection hanging high?" he asks on the moody "Sim Sala Bim." At other times, like on the mournful "Someone You'd Admire," he's lamenting his inability to fix himself: "After all is said and done I feel the same / All that I hoped would change within me stayed."

"It's like the record and making music in general is what's causing these problems that are being expressed on the record," he says. "My problem isn't drugs or anything like that. My problem is music."

Ultimately, the questions Pecknold asks are both specific and universal: Is it worth neglecting people you care about to follow your muse? Is suffering for your art noble or just selfish and immature? The closest thing he offers to an answer comes in the opening lines of the title track: "I was raised up believing I was somehow unique / Like a snowflake, distinct among snowflakes, unique in each way you'd conceive / And now after some thinking I'd say I'd rather be / A functioning cog in some great machinery serving something beyond me." The song, with its forcefully strummed guitars and Pecknold's commanding voice, feels declarative as he extols the good of the community over the desires of the individual, but in real life Pecknold is still groping for answers.

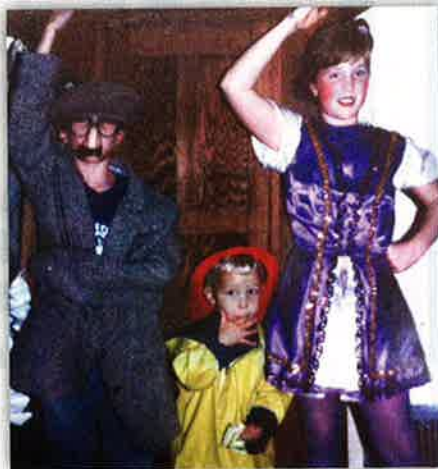
"I want to leave something behind that's valuable," he says of his music. "But it's not that valuable. I look at my dad and he has regrets about his career and choices he made. But I'm like, 'You have this great family. You have three awesome kids that love each other.' That is such a more valuable legacy than 'I had three records on the Heatseekers Chart!'"

*Helplessness Blues* sounds no less sweet than its predecessor, but birds and trees have been replaced with flesh and blood. In letting listeners into his personal drama, Pecknold has given them a chance to connect with the songs on a more gut level. That said, he admits if it was entirely up to him, he may never have even released *Helplessness Blues*. "It was getting to the point where either we were going to finish these few things that needed to be finished or we were going to scrap the whole thing, and I think I was the only person with the energy to scrap the whole thing," Pecknold says with a laugh. "But if everyone in the band is like, 'This is great,' I need to learn to trust that they're telling me the truth."

**A** COLD DRIZZLE HAS begun to fall outside Fastback Studios, a modern facility built above a church preschool in North Seattle. Wargo is working on his own songs here this afternoon. The album is almost done, though the project doesn't yet have a name—

## "MY PROBLEM ISN'T DRUGS OR ANYTHING LIKE THAT. MY PROBLEM IS MUSIC."

—Robin Pecknold



FAMILY CIRCUS Sean, Robin, and Aja Pecknold, 1989

he jokes about calling it Fleet Foxes Jr., though Poor Moon seems a more serious contender. The songs, all written by Wargo, sound much different from his last band, Crystal Skulls.

"Let's just say you can tell I'm in Fleet Foxes now," he says with a smile, as he stands by the front door. The music he plays for me does share some traits—acoustic guitars, ringing harmonies—with Fleet Foxes, but it's got a more insistent pop feel.

Wescott has already played on several songs, and Tillman is here today laying down percussion. Pecknold just showed up too, ostensibly to listen, but not long after he arrives Wargo persuades him to add some vocals. Pecknold spends about 20 minutes on the couch in the lounge listening to one song on headphones, trying to work out a place for his voice. When he gets in the live room, he sticks his hand in his pocket, slouches in front of the mic, and runs through about a dozen takes in a high falsetto, making slight adjustments each time.

"How was that?" Pecknold asks, looking toward the control room after one take. "That didn't sound too wimpy, did it?"

Tillman flashes a thumbs-up: "Nope. Just wimpy enough."

Pecknold looks relaxed, and if it's up to him, this recording session may be a blueprint of sorts for the third Fleet Foxes album. "[*Helpless-*

*ness Blues*] felt like pretty unfinished business as far as how I wanted to improve on the first album," he says. "I wanted one more crack at an album of my songs. Now I think it'd be good for me to take it less seriously. Part of that would be utilizing more of the talent around me."

It's not a grand leap to imagine some of the songs Wargo plays for me today or the haunting singer-songwriter fare of Tillman's seven solo albums reconfigured as Fleet Foxes songs. But neither of them—nor anyone else in the band—is wildly enthusiastic about this idea. When I bring it up to Tillman as he's taking a smoke break on the patio outside Fastback, he pauses before responding. "I don't know," he says. "The band, as an abstraction, I view as being Robin's jams. I guess it would be a matter of seeing what kind of material started coming out. I'm just a big fan of singular vision in a band."

Wargo is even less circumspect. "I don't want to," he says. "We've all been to a concert where the bass player does his song, and it's like, 'Come on, dude.' Robin brought these same things up to me like, 'Maybe for the next record, you could do three songs, Josh could do three, and I could do three or six or whatever.' Robin just might be frustrated and tired after having gone through this record. But he is Fleet Foxes."

Pecknold admits that, at the moment, he's pretty exhausted creatively and hoping his move to Portland rejuvenates him. He may well change his mind about the next Fleet Foxes album, but he definitely wants to avoid the kind of stress he endured this time around. "I'd like to do something with no past reference points," he says twisting a lock of his hair between his thumb and forefinger. "No harmonies would be cool. It ended up feeling like there were boundaries on *Helplessness Blues*. I mean, both records are fairly in line with stuff I get excited about. It's not like, 'Oh God, I've got to pick up an acoustic guitar again for my crappy folk band. I just want those folk bucks.' I'd just like to do something without it needing to be a certain thing." He took a step in that direction in March, releasing three solo songs he'd recently recorded in Los Angeles, including one with Grizzly Bear's Ed Droste, as a download on his Twitter feed.

The following night, as I sit with Pecknold and Wescott at a Thai restaurant in the city's University District, the singer makes it clear that despite the trials of making *Helplessness Blues*, he's grateful for the experience. "I've learned a shitload," he says. "I feel like I know better than ever what I want out of music and life."

Which is what?

"I take music really seriously and could probably have a lot more fun with it if I didn't," he says. "I'd like to be able to let go of some creative ambition to allow for real life."

So that's the goal? To care a little bit less?

Pecknold lowers his fork for a moment and breaks into a smile.

"Yeah." ☛