



FLEET FOXES

Helplessness Blues

SUB POP

93%

In the wake of their self-titled debut, Fleet Foxes crossed over from college radio to adult contemporary and became one of the few bands that parents, high-school teachers and most Starbucks customers could appreciate along with the hip kids. Carpools became a bit easier for a while. The band's prolific use of vocal harmonies and acoustic arrangements garnered deserved comparisons to Crosby, Stills & Nash as well as other easy-listening stars of the '60s and '70s—Jackson Browne's early records wouldn't be a stretch. And the lack of rough edges to their sound is no reason to presume a lack of depth.

Stepping away from the sun-dappled sheen of their first full-length, *Helplessness Blues* is a stunning work revealing a band that has staked out a larger claim on their own style of symphonic folk, but still maintains a debt to masters like Paul Simon and Brian Wilson.

Singer Robin Pecknold's melodicisms, while lacking the overt catchiness of Simon's, contain a similar effortless poignancy. His voice achieves a reedy, horn-like purity. It doesn't float over the music so much as it marks an apex under which the accompaniment hovers and expands like clouds ringing a mountain peak.

On the 6/8 waltz "Someone You'd Admire," Pecknold's voice is at its most unadorned and plaintive. When he hits a melisma, the tonality recalls the trills of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Lyrically, he straddles the existential and the emotional, questioning the duality of love and hate in a relationship, "One of them wants only to be someone you'd admire/ One would as soon just throw you on the fire/After all is said, and after all is done/God only knows which of them I'll become."

With "The Shrine/An Argument," Pecknold utilizes a vocal strain that departs from his generally pure tone, allowing for a touch of natural distortion from his throat before a time change provides a contrasting perspective. He sings, "I'm not one to ever pray for mercy/Or to wish on pennies in the fountain or the shrine/But that day you know I left my money/And I thought of you only all that copper glowing fine/And I wonder what became of you." The second half of the song shifts to an extended instrumental section where strings alternate between two chords while horns color the harmonies with an Ornette Coleman-like graffiti of sound. It is the most unique moment on the album, and one of the more rewarding.

"The Plains/Bitter Dancer" is remarkable more for its achievement in composition than hum-ability. There are major shifts in time, feel and approach that would be jarring in lesser hands, but are grandiose and eloquent here, functioning like classical movements. The harmonic chorale that introduces the song recalls The Beach Boys at their orchestral best. This segues into a verse of lushly harmonized and subdued '60s folk before an a cappella



moment leads into a jauntier bit of baroque pop.

The title track is equally striking in its earnest grandeur. A stark vocal over acoustic guitar gives way to a sea-shanty-like romanticism before the rhythm drops to a half-time feel and a delay-soaked hammer dulcimer ushers in the second movement where the singing surfs over swells of timpani and harpsichords.

Mortality and life are heavy subjects, and risky ones to take on lyrically, but Pecknold doesn't drape his metaphysical pondering in elaborate gauze. On "Montezuma" he poses direct questions of himself such as, "Now I am older/Than my mother and father/ When they had their daughter/Now what does that say about me?/ Oh how could I dream of/Such a selfless and true love/Could I wash my hands of/Just lookin' out for me?"

Conceptually, this is an existential album, but—as opposed to the general fatalism associated with the genre—there is no shortage of hope here. On the album closer, "Grown Ocean," Pecknold acknowledges that he is on a journey that he trusts will lead to enlightenment, with the lines, "I know someday the smoke will all burn off/All these voices I'll someday have turned off/I will see you someday when I've woken/I'll be so happy just to have spoken/I'll have so much to tell you about it/In that dream I could hardly contain it/All my life I will wait to attain it."

Despite the abundance of gorgeous music, each repeated listen is often like a first. The melodies become familiar, but without sing-along choruses or lines easily recalled in specifics, they are closer to landscapes rather than portraits, forests rather than trees, where one can wander amongst this mossy wood of music. It is not a common occurrence to hear an album this beautiful, well composed and consistent in a pop format. No matter who appreciates or appropriates this music, who likes it or where you discover it, it is a testament to its power more than its populism. KEVIN FRIEDMAN