

VOICES OF A GENERATION

Rapturous harmonies, bucolic wonder and 500,000 album sales in the UK alone made FLEET FOXES an overnight sensation. But what will ROBIN PECKNOLD and his bandmates do for a follow-up? *Uncut* travels to Seattle for the exclusive Fox news: “This album cost me my relationship,” says Pecknold. “It cost me my health. It took over my life...”

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Fleet Foxes, Seattle, February 19, 2011 (l-r): Josh Tillman, Morgan Henderson, Christian Wargo, Robin Pecknold, Casey Wescott, Skyler Skjelset

THE WIND THAT SEEMS to be everywhere at the moment was earlier coming down Seattle's First Avenue hard enough to knock you backwards. This morning people were walking into it, bent double, heads down, like supplicants approaching a shrine, something too holy to look at.

It seems to have blown itself out, though, by the time, mid-afternoon, that Robin Pecknold from Fleet Foxes turns up to meet *Uncut* outside the Inn On The Harbour Steps hotel, looking at first glance that in his combat jacket, khaki pants and boots he's not altogether better dressed than the many tattered homeless working passers-by with their mumbled requests for money, whatever you can spare, one of them standing outside the hotel holding a sign, a piece of cardboard with a message written on it in surprisingly articulate script that reads: "BANK ROBBER NEEDS MONEY FOR GUN. PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY."

You'd have to say that whatever money Robin's made from the worldwide success of his band's much-celebrated debut album, not much if it's been poured into the coffers of, let's say, the Armani empire, although the Salvation Army may have picked up a bob or two. The headphones he's taking off and stuffing into a canvas tote bag look pretty costly, though. He's just been listening to Radiohead's *The King Of Limbs*, downloaded that morning. What's it like? He's only heard it a couple of times, he says, so it's maybe too early to put together his thoughts. He then starts talking about it as we walk towards Pioneer Square, looking for a coffee house Robin knows but can't find. So we turn around and walk back the way we've just come, Robin still talking about Radiohead, and the place they had in his life, which from what he's saying I'd guess was big enough once to park a bus in.

And now we're at a table at the far end of a First Avenue bar. Robin sits with his back to a wall that's actually a mirror, in which, looking at him, I can see beyond my own reflection an otherwise empty room, a vacant distraction. We're talking about *Helplessness Blues*, the new Fleet Foxes album. It's released next month, after many apparent delays, nigh on three years after their debut, which at the time of writing has sold more than half a million copies in the UK alone. Robin is telling *Uncut*

about the year and more it took out of his life to make and what turns out to be the fraught road to its eventually triumphant completion.

"This record was just so hard to do and it wasn't always that much fun for me," he says quietly, as if he's been waiting for an opportunity to get what he goes on to say into the open. I have to lean across the table to hear him properly.

"It cost me my relationship," he goes on. "It cost me my health. It ended up taking over my life in a lot of ways, and because of that it ended up being about selfishness and creativity and how when you're so committed to something it can take over so many aspects of your life."



Things happened that wouldn't have been a problem for me if I hadn't been working on this record, which made it seem like a self-fulfilling prophecy in a way. The record wouldn't exist in the way it does if those problems hadn't been caused because of the time I was spending on it.

"It became a totally invasive experience. It had this incredible reach. It just consumed me and a lot of things around me. And when something like that happens, it can leave you with a lot of very hard decisions to make. And some of them are going to have incredibly painful consequences and people are going to be hurt. You're faced with all these questions."

"Am I going to continue to be so deeply involved in this work that I'm cutting myself off from people I love and love me? Who am I doing this for? Am I just being selfish? Am I going to carry on regardless of the impact it's having on me and certain people in my life? How can I possibly be that self-centred? What happened to the idea of giving something back in a relationship that's given me so much and that I don't seem to be giving anything to at all?"

The choice was presumably between your relationship and your work.

"Yes, and that was a totally horrible choice," he says. "Who'd want to make a choice like that? There was a lot of guilt. But I thought, 'I have to do this. I have to see it through.'"

And losing someone you loved was the price of the album?

"I'm afraid so. Wasn't that a bit steep?"

"I think it's unhealthy, if nothing else," he says. "But I don't think it has to be that way. I think I made a situation for myself and paid the price for it. I don't think it has to be the case with every record. It's not something you should have to put yourself through. There were problems I was having that were exacerbated by my working on this record, the amount of time I was spending on it. How consumed I was by it. The way things turned out, the two things eventually overlapped. There was a conflict between the work and my life outside the work and choosing one over the other meant one had to suffer."

Do people sometimes find you too driven to feel comfortable around?

"Yes, I think they do. I admit I have trouble just letting go, enjoying myself. I think going to see a movie is like wasting two hours that I could be spending working on music or trying to write a song. It's not the most sociable outlook or attitude. It's pretty selfish, I guess, to be so relentlessly involved in what you do to the

wrapped up in themselves. It asks the question, 'How long are you going to live just for yourself? And how long can you do that and expect to be happy?' It's more explicit than anything I wrote for the first album."

"When I first heard 'Montezuma', I was blown away," Fleet Foxes guitarist Skyer Skjelset, who grew up with Robin in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland, tells *Uncut* in a separate interview, a day later, at the Institution, the rehearsal studios on Seattle's Western Avenue, a dank space filled with instruments and memorabilia, weird puppet heads on one wall, where the band first convened and some of them lived for a time.

"I'd never heard a song of his that sounded like that," Skye continues. "I really felt for him, as a friend, listening to that song. There's so much loneliness in it. Some of the lyrics are just heart-wrenching. It really is a lonely-sounding song and psychologically it must have been a wrench for him to write. When I heard that song, it seemed real different to anything he'd ever written"

"MAKING THIS RECORD CONSUMED ME AND A LOT OF THINGS AROUND ME"
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exclusion of the people around you. I need to curb that a little bit. I think I can. I have to, really. As I say, it's not healthy. It can't be good for you in the end."

What songs on the album specifically address these feelings?

"The first track, 'Montezuma', very specifically is about someone who's totally

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HELPLESSNESS BLUES

Fleet Foxes introduce their new album...

1 | MONTEZUMA

A song about self-absorption, loneliness and selfish notions of immortality that starts the album with a question the following tracks attempt to answer – when they're not asking questions of their own. It opens with Robin's voice set against trembling guitar, prefacing the band's full entry, their voices, those familiar stunning harmonies, pouring like light into a darkened room.

2 | BEDOUIN DRESS

"It's about the idea of taking and not giving anything back that's at the heart of a number of songs on the album," says Robin. Extensively reworked from the original album sessions, it was almost scrapped. "There was something Robin didn't like about the first version," says Skyler. "And it blew my mind when he said we'd have to re-do it or lose it completely. That was really hard for me to feel OK with because I was so familiar with the old version, but I trust Robin's judgement, and he was right."

3 | SIMSALA BIM

Written by Robin on a trip to Big Sur on the California coast where Robin met an old sea dog who runs the Henry Miller Library there and lives with his wife in isolated contentment. You can hear the influence of Roy Harper, loudly, in the hammering strum of the 12-string guitar that recalls Harper classics like "McGoohan's Blues" and "The Same Old Rock".

4 | BATTERY KINZIE

A band favourite, perhaps because as Christian tellingly points out, "it was the last thing we did and it was done quickly." Robin: "I wrote this a couple of years ago and always thought of it as more of a solo song. It had a simple Dylanesque melody and I couldn't think of a good band arrangement for it. But when we did the first mix of the album, there seemed there was a hole that needed filling and it came back into my head and we worked it up real fast."

5 | PLAINS/BITTER DANCER

Described by Robin as a "Smile-type studio experiment", this brilliant symphonic epic starts with a simple guitar figure and grows into something ornate and menacing, with densely layered vocals. Apparently inspired by "Katy Cruel", a traditional song covered by both Kathy Dalton and Bert Jansch, it'll also make you think of *High Plains Drifter* and avenging angels. Robin calls it: "My Grim Reaper song."

6 | HELPLESSNESS BLUES

Paul Simon is one of Robin's favourite songwriters and his influence on Fleet Foxes has never been so clear as it is on



this glorious track. Extensively overhauled during the final sessions, with the now-soaring second half completely re-recorded. "The original ending sounded more like Fleetwood Mac's 'Albatross', much more mellow," according to Skyler.

7 | THE CASCADES

A resplendent instrumental and a reminder of Robin's love for movie soundtracks and composers like Ennio Morricone. Listening to it unravel, a dozen movies will run through your mind.

8 | LORELAI

One of the album's most deeply affecting songs, whose melodic lilt is reminiscent of Dylan's "Fourth Time Around" (and therefore, also, "Norwegian Wood"). Robin: "I wrote this a couple of years ago. It's about friendship, how allegiances change over time. I

was thinking of Skye and the summer we were 17. We've known each other a long time."

9 | SOMEONE YOU'D ADMIRE

One of the newer songs, mostly featuring just Robin's voice and solo guitar and set to one of the album's most heartbreaking melodies. Robin: "There's always two people in you, the devil and the angel, which one will you turn out to be?"

10 | THE SHRINE/AN ARGUMENT

The album's emotional epicentre, eight minutes of sweeping genius, by turns tender, mournful, tempestuous and resigned. Robin: "It describes four stages of a break up – contemplation, anger, frustration and solitude." On an album not short of great singing, Robin's first section vocals are astonishingly powerful and the closing free-form psychedelic freak-out is a gas.

11 | BLUE SPOTTED TAIL

Robin at his most vulnerable and introspective on a song of almost cosmic loneliness. "That's one

of the songs on the album that deals with a universal feeling," he says. "To me, there's no reason we're here. But that doesn't make it any less incredible and creativity is at least an expression of our humanity. In the face of any thoughts about what we're actually here for, then our ability to create is the only answer that will do for me."

12 | GROWN OCEANS

Originally written by Robin as a mellow reflection, but transformed by Christian's vocal arrangement into something more exuberantly transcendent, underpinned by tympanic percussion, flute and guitar. Robin: "It's like a dream of where you'd like to end up after going through all the turmoil. Somewhere there's peace and peace of mind, something you'd like to find at the end of a long journey."



Fleet Foxes win the inaugural Uncut Music Award, 2008

before. It seemed such a great song to me. It doesn't sound like a Dylan song, but it sounds like a standard, you know, like 'Blowin' In The Wind'. To me, it's a classic song. I can only guess at what he went through to write it. It seemed to take his songwriting to places he hadn't been before in a song, although I think that's true of a lot of the songs on the album. So it was beautiful to hear him sing it for the first time, but kind of scary, too."

WHEN ROBIN SPOKE to *Uncut* last December for our 2011 Album preview, we thought the new

album was after long months of evident toil finally finished. It wasn't. In fact, the band was back in the studio, reworking tracks he was unhappy with, three of them completely re-recorded. You wondered if it would ever be finished, the further delay in its release evidence maybe of an unchecked creative ego whose relentless perfectionism might keep them in the studio forever, if not longer.

"What happened was that when we did the first mix of the album, it was like, 'This is where we're at, not where we want to be,'" Robin says. "I felt there were things that could be improved. I wasn't being precious about it. I wanted the album finished and out as much as anyone. But as soon as we started re-tooling one or two tracks, that opened the floodgates."

"It just sounded weird, not what we wanted," recalls bassist Christian Wargo. "We just thought we could do a better job. That's what we all thought. It wasn't just Robin not wanting to let go of the thing."

"There was no problem for any of us going back in the studio to do the work we did," says Morgan Henderson, the multi-instrumentalist who joined the band permanently a year ago, alongside Robin, Skyler, Christian, drummer Josh Tillman and keyboardist Casey Wescott. "I'm not saying it wasn't hard for everyone and at different points everyone wanted this record just to be done, finished. But we were all willing to stick with it as long as it took. Even on the last day of mixing, when we went out to a bar and it was meant to be a celebration – you know, 'Hey, it's done!' But there was this really reserved feeling that it may not be over yet so there wasn't this huge celebration."

"Just as well," says Skjelset. "I found out later Robin actually went back and did even more work on a couple of tracks."

"The album not coming out any earlier had nothing to do with us struggling with anyone's expectations," Robin wants to make clear. "That was never an issue. The only expectations we took into account were our

own. Mine particularly, I guess. The idea of putting out something I was unhappy with after what I'd been through to make this record, that didn't seem like an alternative at all. And once my relationship had fallen apart, on top of everything else, there was absolutely no chance I was going to ever put out something that I wasn't totally convinced was as good as it could possibly be. I didn't care how many times we had to go back into the studio or how many times we had to re-record stuff. I thought, 'If this is what it's cost me to make, I'll never be happy if we put it out and I'm not sure it's good or better than good.' That would have put me in the worst possible place."

THIS IS SOMETHING else Robin told *Uncut* last year, that the songs on

Helplessness Blues, when we heard them, would be more personal; autobiographical in ways the songs he wrote for the band's first album weren't. This turns out to be the fact of the thing. The signature sound of Fleet Foxes – the thrilling harmonies, majestic melodies – remain present on *Helplessness Blues*, startlingly so. It's a record of similar glory to their fêted debut, but it feels also like a record of greater emotional heft and consequence that takes them somewhere new.

In many respects, their first album inhabited an imagined world, evoked a time of idyll, unspecified on any calendar, looked back on a past in some instances that may in fact not have existed outside Robin's imagination. His songs seemed often to describe a prelapsarian

world, as if they spoke to us from a time of greater innocence, somewhere edenic and in all senses wonderful.

His new songs grapple more with doubt, big questions about life and death, the relationship between life and art, dig into the cracks between the two. I misunderstood Robin, however, when in our Album Preview he referred to the songs as autobiographical, taking him rather too literally. He had grown up in the unassuming Seattle suburb of Kirkland, where he met Skyler and they formed

months when I was a teenager, I'd avoid going out at all. I was inside a lot with just music for company. I'd just stay in and play my guitar, listen to music, read. I was in my own world a lot. That's really the point when music became real important, when I started to play. Music was a big escape for me and still is. I listened to Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell. *Freewheelin'*, *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme* and *Blue*, those were the three albums I listened to all the time when I was 14. With Dylan and Paul Simon, there was so much

traditional English, Irish and Scottish stuff on those early albums, songs based on traditional songs they heard when they were in London and picked up from people like Martin Carthy. There were a lot of melodies on those records that were traditional and they inspired me as much as they had those guys and I wanted to find out more about where they'd come from.

"It was probably listening to those records that took me down a path where I discovered Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span and Richard Thompson, who is more awesome to me than a lot of American bands. The Incredible String Band were another group I loved. Later, a friend of mine, Zach, got me into Roy Harper, particularly *Stormcock*, which is an amazing record. I really like *Flat*, *Baroque And Berserk* and *Folkjokeopus*, too. He has a bunch of awesome records. You can hear his influence on *Helplessness Blues*, for sure, like the layered vocals at the start of 'Plains/Bitter Dancer'. Harper was the inspiration for that.

"Those records were like a big **CONTINUES OVER** ▶

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their first band and I wondered if the songs he'd written revisited that particular past.

By most accounts, including his own, his childhood and adolescence passed without tragedy or trauma. The only blemish on the otherwise unremarkable years of his growing up were the two, three, maybe more successive summers he was afflicted with undiagnosed allergies, which made him an exile of sorts from the active hum of the world around him and helped shape who he would become.

"It used to get really bad and there were certain times I'd just have to avoid the outdoors," he says. "I couldn't go out. Certain

gateway, and they took me into another world. That's what music does, at its best. All music is a gateway, a portal. It's the same with The Beach Boys. Their music takes you somewhere in the same way. It's evocative of a different time, a different place. All great music creates its own world and invites you into it. That's what's so incredible about music, even the Black Eyed Peas. It can transport you to places you'd never go to otherwise. So not being able to go out was no big tragedy. I wasn't unhappy on my own. To a certain extent, I enjoyed it. I'm not sure I would have even wanted to go out."

What were you like, growing up?

"Pretty solitary, in the way some teenagers like to be. A certain kind of teenager just enjoys their own company more than joining in, being part of a crowd or a gang. You create your own world and it's more comfortable sometimes than the world you really live in."

Did those periods of isolation define you to any extent as a person?

"I don't know, but I think about it," he says. "I'm still pretty solitary. I don't really spend a lot of time with anyone else. I mean, it's not like I don't have friends. But I enjoy a certain amount of solitude, just listening to music, writing. If I'm sitting in a bar and there's music playing and there's like one per cent chance that a Fleet Foxes song will come on, I'll start to panic and begin to regret being there until something else comes on and I'll have maybe four minutes of absolute relief before the next record comes on and I start to worry again that it might be one of my songs. So there are a lot of things,

really, that keep me indoors or kind of remove me from a lot of social situations."

What if someone came up to us now because they recognised you?

"I'd be cool with it," he says, looking over my shoulder, as if to make sure my question hasn't been prompted by the actual arrival of some smitten fan. "I mean, I wouldn't freak out or anything," he adds, although you suspect it might be a close thing. "Anyway," he says, relieved that we haven't in fact been interrupted. "I don't often get that happen to me, if ever, around here."

My own brooding teens are a somewhat distant memory to me now, but the bouts of solitary musing, otherwise known as sulking, that I do remember were mostly self-imposed. Did it make a difference that his confinement was the result of illness rather than choice?

"I don't know," he says. "All I can say is that I was happy being by myself, whatever the circumstances that made it that way. It didn't feel traumatic."

You nevertheless think of a certain kind of isolated teenager, adolescents with issues, simmering behind curtains drawn across every window, a life in shadow. In certain grim circumstances lonely absorption in the outlandish end of the fantastical leads to an obsession with tattoos and automatic weapons, insane online jottings, rants and dire threats. The next thing you know, such solitary types have made alliance with other such solitary types and not long after that they're calling themselves things like The Trenchcoat

Mafia and strafing high schools with hostile gunfire, bringing down baffled tearful victims, classrooms running with blood.

"That whole Columbine thing," he says, perhaps a little disturbed by where I'm taking this, "that's something way beyond my understanding. There were kids at my school, like computer programmer guys or metal heads, who were real strange to me. But they weren't psychopaths. They just had different interests, different things they were into. I'm not sure it made them antisocial or they ended up with some grudge against the world, so angry they could only express themselves through violence."

Have you ever felt angry enough with the world that you could understand a kid taking a carbine to it?

"Personally, no," he says. "But that doesn't mean I don't share some of that pessimism. There's not a whole lot to be optimistic about, I guess. I think every generation grapples with things that make it unhappy and respond in different ways. Some people want to make the world a better place, by writing a book or making a piece of music or a painting. Others don't, for whatever reason, and their reaction can be more extreme, terribly so sometimes. We all grapple with change. My grandmother talks about when they got a TV and it seemed to her like the end of the world she'd known. It's like the TV was more than a window on the world. You had a TV and in those days it was like an invitation to the rest of the world into your home. So it was to some people, who'd never

"ALL MUSIC IS A GATEWAY, A PORTAL. ALL GREAT MUSIC CREATES ITS OWN WORLD AND INVITES YOU INTO IT" ROBIN PECKNOLD

imagined anything like that, pretty frightening as a proposition. She thought it was terrifying, television, how it was going to change their lives. She thought there was something really depressing about television and the changes that came with it.

"But every generation grapples with change and new technology and the way the world consequently changes and there's always a huge momentum of change from one generation to the next. It's amazing how much the world can change between generations."

Would you have felt more at home in another time, another place?

"I think every generation feels the same way. 'What is all this new stuff?' 'What's this new stuff that's ruining everything?' 'Why can't things be the way they were?' I've noticed a lot of nostalgia for the 1990s in a lot of indie rock that's going around right now. That makes sense to me if you were born in the 1980s because that's what you grew up with, and the music is evoking stuff you heard when you were still fairly innocent.

"This current generation, there are a lot of scary new things they've got to handle. I think that's what parts of the new record are about, what the world's worth and what's at stake. Things are more complicated now than they've ever been. You think about how it's all going to end up and it can take you to some pretty scary conclusions. It's pretty frightening when you think about it. There was a *Time* magazine cover story recently on The Singularity, did you see that?"

By chance, I did. Briefly, The Singularity is a technological philosophy that anticipates a not-too-distant moment when computers become more intelligent and generally capable than humans, who they will in the most epochal predictions replace. True believers in The Singularity believe its advent is not only inevitable, but imminent, the end of human civilisation as we know it not that much further down the track.

"It wouldn't be so bad if it was just science fiction or something," he says. "But it looks like we could really all end up one day in *The Matrix* and it'll be for real. You've got to ask, where's technology going to end up? Where's it going to take us? Oh, great. We're all going to end up like floating brains in a machine.

"Concepts like that are certainly more prevalent in the public consciousness than they used to be. And it sounds really depressing to me. So if that's the future, thanks a lot. You think about where things are heading and it's hard to be optimistic about the future. It can in those circumstances be very hard to remain optimistic, to think that things are going to get better, that there's a better world ahead of us, or even a world that's better than the one we're leaving behind or in most cases have left behind, that's already gone. We've lost so much already, how much more can we afford to lose? It's not a great time in that respect, that's for sure," he adds dryly.

As Dylan sang on the aptly-titled *Oh Mercy*, "everything is broken".

"It sure is," he laughs, but with not much

humour. "And maybe it's better that not everything works the way some people would have it work. The experience of living in a so-called perfect world to me is like indistinguishable from death. Knowing everything and having everything is actually like knowing nothing and having nothing. We're just wired into something that's not part of life. What's precious about life is the drama of the view, what you can see and feel and discover, the drama of your own vision."

ROBIN IS THINKING, because I've just asked him, about what he'd do, maybe even who he'd be, if the music didn't loom so large in his life, as a way of giving voice to his personal turmoil, his place in the world.

"I don't know, is the only answer I have," he says. "I love writing and playing with the band. This is what I've always wanted to do and I'm thankful for the opportunity to do it. And I'm not honestly sure I'd be able to give it up even if it spared me some of the things I've been through over the last year or so. I guess this is what I have to do. And if there's a cost to doing it, to carry on being creative, then it's one I've got to be prepared to pay."

Art, as someone said, is a savage god to serve. "I totally agree," he says. "And it's frightening when you serve that god, because that god is so demanding. It's like, if you're an artist, you're living the life you wanted. But it can become the only life you have. Right now, my life is totally determined by my music and dominates it to an extent that **CONTINUES OVER** ▶"

"THIS ALBUM HAS TAKEN ROBIN'S SONGWRITING TO PLACES HE HADN'T BEEN BEFORE..." SKYLER SKJELSET



PIETER M VAN HATTEW



Robin with Graham Nash, June 2010

But I couldn't imagine myself singing about workers' rights. So the song's about me being in a position where I don't have a cause and asks the question, 'What am I going to do with the fact that I don't have a cause?' Maybe it would be different if I was a gay man. Then the right to gay marriage would be my cause. I'd fight for that, or gay rights in general. But I'm not part of a subjugated group or minority that's discriminated against. So what am I doing? That's one thing the song addresses. If I already have everything that everyone else is fighting for, what am I doing here?"

Do you see the song as a kind of clarion call? "No, it's more personal than that. If you mean, is it indicative of how I think a lot of people feel then I'd have to say that wasn't the intention. I don't seek to speak for other people. I think all you can do is speak your own thoughts. The reason I thought *Helplessness Blues* worked as an album title was just that I feel the concept of helplessness is expressed in a lot of areas of the record, in a lot of different ways. Are you helpless in the face of your creative impulses? Are you in control of your own life and how helpless are you if you're not? Are you helpless in being unable to change who you are?"

IT'S NOT DARK yet, but it's getting there. The bar, which was empty when we came in about four hours ago, is full now. There's a bustling early Friday night crowd filling the place with raucous conversation, much laughter, the occasional hooting of people who are hitting the cocktails hard already.

The louder they get, the quieter Robin has been getting, in somewhat uncomfortable response. This doesn't seem the kind of place you'd ever usually find him in, Bad Company on the in-house sound system, a bludgeoning noise, reminiscent of builders knocking out walls in a house a couple of doors down from where you live, a dense thud. I think he's ready to leave, would probably already preferred to have gone by now.

We're still talking about this and that, and I ask him if there's one record by someone else that he'd like to have made, as if this might offer a clue to where he might go next.

"Joni Mitchell's *Blue*," he says without much hesitation. "No," he says then, just as quickly correcting himself. "Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*. That taps into something so beyond music it's a cosmic experience. That album's about something so much more than lyrics and chords and melodies."

We're on the street now, shaking hands, going our separate ways when we're done with that.

"I think something like *Astral Weeks* would be something to aspire to, making something that connected to whatever's beyond what we know. Something higher and beyond who we are. That's a goal, for sure." ☪

makes me wonder if that's such a great thing. Because it's caused unhappiness and pain and hurt and you get in a situation where you let these things happen, because subconsciously maybe, you're thinking that it's good for you creatively. You feel like however bad something is that you're going through, you can at least write a song about it and that weirdly is going to make you feel better, or better about yourself as an artist, if not necessarily a person. The two are not the same.

"So however hard things get, if you can turn it into a song or a piece of music, you're going to come out of it with something that makes the suffering or whatever somehow worthwhile. Out of it all, you're going to get a great song, a great piece of music. Sometimes you have to settle for less, a great guitar part maybe. But you know, if that's all that's on offer, I'll take it. But at some point, you know, you definitely start to think, 'This isn't worth it. It can't be. How can it be? Look what it's costing me.' It's hard.

"And there's an element in live performance, where people almost want to see you sacrifice yourself. They want to see the public evidence of your suffering. They want to see you ravaging yourself. They want a sacrifice, basically. That's what they come to see. I think of someone like Elliott Smith. I'm so glad he made the music he did, but I can't be happy that he had to be in the place he was to make it. So what's more valuable? The great work he did at such personal cost or the better life he may have had if he hadn't been compelled to write those songs and the circumstances he appeared to need to write them in. That's the dilemma.

"You think of Kurt Cobain, too. He clearly

wasn't a happy guy, was troubled or whatever. Eddie Vedder, on the other hand, never seemed as consumed by himself as Kurt Cobain. I think that was a crucial difference between them and may explain why one's still here and the other's long gone. But what it comes down to is often this. What kind of music do you want to listen to? Music made by someone who's at peace with themselves, level-headed, has a sensible approach to life, keeps everything in perspective and who's really together?"

"I think most of the stuff I connect to, there's been some drama in the creation of it, or the life of the person who created inevitably includes some degree of unhappiness. I never really

awesome," he says. "And I think great music is always in one way or another reflective of the general state of mind of young people. Music doesn't change the world. I think people change the world. But what music can do is reflect the views of those people, their ideals, frustrations, whatever. In the '60s, Dylan was reflective of the times, and that's how he ended up defining the time, that era. He first of all reflected a general mood of discontent, the need for change, and by reflecting the feelings of so many young people he came to embody those feelings. All great music is a reflection of the time and the place and environment it's coming out of. In certain times, music has a broader social message. But it's always the same message in that it tells you, 'This is where people are at right now.' That's what great songs and great songwriters tell you. That's their message, even when it's expressed in different ways. Sometimes it's, 'Hey! Let's save the world.' Sometimes it's, 'Fuck the world, I don't care.' Those are both equally representative of broader concerns."

There seems to be a desperate passivity about "Helplessness Blues", as if you're waiting to be told what to do.

"I think that's so," he says. "What that song is in part about is that I don't know what my cause is. I think there are a lot of important problems and things that are happening that you have no control of and things aren't as cut and dried as they were in previous times."

So the song's about looking for a cause? "I think that would be fair to say. I mean, when I was writing the album I was listening a lot to Pete Seeger, certain kinds of protest music, about uniting the workers or whatever.

"IF I ALREADY HAVE EVERYTHING EVERYONE ELSE IS FIGHTING FOR, WHAT AM I DOING HERE?"
ROBIN PECKNOLD

responded to the nihilism of that Gen-X Nirvana stuff. I was eight when Cobain died. I wasn't part of that generation, so the songs didn't speak to me as powerfully as they did to a lot of people who were obviously totally affected by them. I think for kids now, everybody has all this energy but they're not really sure how to use it, where to take it."

Is this the point of "Helplessness Blues"? "Yes, totally," he says, and I recall the interview Robin did for *Uncut* with Graham Nash, when they talked about the purpose of music and its potential as a force for social change or as a voice for better things. "That idea of music as a force for change is

FREE CD! **SUN IT RISES**
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ROBIN PECKNOLD
"Here's a small collection of some favourite jams that we were listening to while making *Helplessness Blues*. Some old favourites are here, from Nic Jones to Roy Harper to John Jacob Niles, as well as some contemporaries like William Tyler, The Luyas, and Frank Fairfield, people who seem like kindred spirits with us, hopefully. If we could've included books and movies on this CD, you'd be hearing from Alan Moore, Carl Sagan, Haruki Murakami, Paul Auster, Yuriy Norshteyn, and any other whose appraisal of the tangible world is guided by their reckoning with the unknown. Hope that comes across. Please enjoy."

1 | GIRLS HEARTBREAKER
Elegant jangle-pop with a dark, velvety twist from Christopher Owens and his San Fran band.

2 | DUNGEN FREDAG
Thrillingly taut 21st century psych-rock shredding and the ghost of Zappa haunt this epic instrumental by the Swedish experimentalists.

3 | NIC JONES COURTING IS A PLEASURE
Jones' career was ended by horrific injuries in a car crash in '82, two years after the release of his acclaimed *Penguin Eggs* album, from which this track comes. Those inspired by Jones include Bob Dylan, who covered his arrangement of the traditional "Canadee-I-O" from the same album.

4 | THE LUYAS CATS IN A BAG
From the Canadian quartet's 2007 debut, this moves from beguiling lo-fi to full-on sonic screech, via French horn and the spooked sound of the 'moodswinger', played by singer Jesse Stein.

5 | WILLIAM TYLER THE GREEN PASTURES
Tyler is a stalwart of Kurt Wagner's Lambchop, and this track from his solo debut reveals him as a brilliant finger-

picking guitarist in the John Fahey school, but with his own luminous glaze on the genre.

6 | MOUNTAIN MAN BATHTUB
These three women met at college in Vermont and combine their voices to create a haunting Appalachian folk. "Bathtub" was previously only available as an iTunes exclusive.

7 | THE CLIENTELE SINCE I GOT OVER ME
Alasdair MacLean has never



Sandy Denny & The Strawbs



written a better song than this dreamy, reverb-laden homage to '60s retro-pop glory, from 2005's *Strange Geometry*.

8 | PG SIX OLD MAN ON THE MOUNTAIN
Few American performers owe as much to the British folk tradition as PG Six - aka New York's Pat Gubler. The influence of Incredible String Band, Bert Jansch *et al* loom large on this piece of timeless folk dread from 2005's *The Well of Memory*.

9 | SANDY DENNY & THE STRAWBS NOTHING ELSE WILL DO BABE
In her pre-Fairport days, Denny recorded with The Strawbs, including this 1967 track on which Dave Cousins takes lead vocal. It was released in '73, by which time the backing singer had earned top billing.

10 | JOHN JACOB NILES THE BALLAD OF BARBERRY ELLEN
Niles collected this traditional ballad on a field trip to the Appalachians in the 1920s and recorded it in 1938. The origins of the song are believed to date back to the 17th Century.

11 | ALIFARKA TOURE & TOUMANI DIABATE SABU YERKOY
Africa's finest guitarist and the world's greatest kora player recorded this piece of Malian string magic in 2005, a year before Ali's death.

12 | PEARLY GATE MUSIC GOSSAMER HAIR
Fleet Foxes drummer Josh Tillman helps out here - no surprise, given that PGM is a vehicle for the songs and voice of his younger brother, Zach.

13 | FRANK FAIRFIELD THE DYING COWBOY
Sounding as ancient as an Alan Lomax recording, it's a shock to learn that Fairfield is a Californian in his twenties. His inspired

take on traditional hillbilly laments such as this earned him a support slot on Fleet Foxes' last US tour.

14 | LOWER DENS TEALIGHTS
Former Devendra Banhart protégée Jana Hunter lent compelling songs and voice to Baltimore-based Lower Dens' acclaimed debut last year, with this a standout.

15 | ROY HARPER ONE FOR ALL
A classic from '69's *Folkjokeopus*, written by Harper for saxophonist Albert Ayler, who committed suicide by jumping of the Statue of Liberty ferry. "He was often in Copenhagen when I lived there," Harper recalls. "I was playing on the streets and he was playing in the Montmartre Jazz Club. He used to call me tough guy. It was fucking cold on the streets."

PIETER M VAN HATTEM