

Fleet Foxes' *Shore*: Swimming in the right direction

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Shore is the fourth full-length album from the folk-rock band Fleet Foxes. It was released six months into the global pandemic and was one of the stronger popular music albums of 2020. The album is an attempt to deal with emotions and turmoil generated by the global crisis that has now killed over three million people and caused unimaginable suffering.

A video installation was released with the album, which attempts to mirror the overall aesthetic tone of the music as well.

Fleet Foxes consists primarily of band members Robin Pecknold, Skyler Skjelset, Casey Wescott, Christian Wargo and Morgan Henderson. All are multi-instrumentalists and vocalists. The band originally formed in Seattle in 2006. Pecknold is the principal artistic engine of the group and the lead songwriter, guitarist and singer. The band members generally perform together as a live act, and a wide assortment of guest players appear in the studio productions.

Fleet Foxes' musical instincts have been a strength. They perform in the increasingly timid genre of "indie" folk rock, which can be in thrall of minimal "bedroom"-style production and tends toward ennui and misanthropy. Fleet Foxes has not been immune from this, but they have generally bucked this approach, most sharply in their musicality.

The band employs layered and sophisticated harmonies, buoyed by bright and interweaving guitar, mandolin and string arrangements. There are not-so-hidden influences of early Beach Boys harmonies and the musical experimentation of lesser-known figures like musician and composer Arthur Russell. One song on *Shore* called "Cradling Mother, Cradling Woman" even contains a very brief sample of an a cappella version of Brian Wilson's "Don't Talk (Put Your Head on My Shoulder)."

Their first self-titled album in 2008, and an

accompanying EP called *Sun Giant* was a breath of fresh air. Dominated by vibrant harmonizing and expansive melodies, songs such as Mykonos and White Winter Hymnal stood out in contrast to the dour and cloudy moods of some of their more popular music peers.

The harmonies and engaging song structures were still present to some extent on the subsequent albums *Helplessness Blues* (2011) and *Crack-Up* (2017). But, as the titles indicate, pessimistic moods entered more openly into the songs. Pecknold's songwriting, while generally sincere, also tended to lean too heavy on abstract and almost fantasy-like imagery. Songs could catch but never quite stick with a lasting impact.

Shore represents an advance in Pecknold's songwriting and the band's overall direction. The songs feel grounded in the world itself, and the musicianship is confident and supportive. Whereas previous songs defaulted too often toward pastoral and bucolic feelings, hovering at times between self-pity and nostalgia, the current tracks move more assuredly outward, seeking to connect with the struggles and lives of others in the present.

From the onset one is struck by the immediacy of the tone of the album. After a brief meditative opening with guest singer Uwade Akhere ("Wading in Waist-High Water"), the tempo and sentiment turn sharply upward in "Sunblind," perhaps the strongest track on the album.

Pecknold exuberantly sings in praise of talented and sensitive artists who have left the scene too soon. Nearly every line is a direct or indirect ode to talented musicians who have died either from COVID-19, drug addiction/alcoholism or suicide.

The opening line sets the tone: "For Richard Swift / for John [Prine] and Bill [Withers] / For every gift lifted far before its will...". And later he concludes "I'm overmatched / I'm half as wise / If this is flat brother I apologize / No one alone / Can leave the cave / And all you've loaned won't be kept inside a grave...". Ultimately

“Sunblind” is a celebratory song, holding up the memory and contributions of such figures against the difficult conditions of their external or internal lives.

Consciously or not, Pecknold’s sentiments on “Sunblind” inevitably stand in opposition to a ruling elite currently laying waste to the most vulnerable layers of society, including many artists. The forward-charging harmonic arrangements and Pecknold’s vocal urgency undoubtedly speak to the concerns of broad masses of the population who know all too well that many have been taken “far before their will.”

Other songs on *Shore* also make an impression. “Can I Believe You” is interestingly crafted around a choral refrain edited together from nearly 500 Instagram vocal samples, sent in to Pecknold from fans at the singer’s request. There is a grand and dramatic feeling to the song, which grapples with widespread loneliness, and a desire to reconnect with others.

The energetic song “Jara”—named for the Chilean Communist Party folk singer Victor Jara who was murdered by the Pinochet dictatorship in 1973—was inspired by the mass protests that emerged after the police murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Pecknold took part in the demonstrations in New York City and felt compelled to write about the courage and spirit of the protestors involved.

“Maestranza” is also an invigorating song, with a propulsive guitar and string section intended to envelop and propel as it builds. Certain phrases of Pecknold stand out, invoking protest imagery and political “con-men”, but finally driven by an optimism of a shared sense of purpose (“Sunday end / Ache for the sight of friends / Though I’ve been safe in the thought / The line we walk / Is the same one”).

The musical arrangements of Pecknold and mixer/engineer Beatriz Artola help to enhance some of the warmer emotions, aided at times by a sharp horn quartet known as The Westerlies. One moving example of this confluence is on the dream-like song “Going-to-the Sun Road.” With a gentle baroque quality, the “travel” song unexpectedly leads to a sweet crescendo sung in Portuguese by Brazilian artist Tim Bernades (a portion roughly translated: “...And the clouds that now move away / Showing a path that is always there / And that is wherever we want to go”).

The songs that strengthen the album tend to move within more intricate musical arrangements, fortified by the group’s thoughtful harmonies, up-tempo rhythms and Pecknold’s canyon-like singing style. The songs that tend

to miss the mark generally lack these elements. For instance, the more stripped-down tracks like “Quiet Air/Goia,” “Thymia” and “For A Week or Two” pass by a little too quietly.

The exception to this is the song “I’m Not My Season.” This is one of the gentler songs that manages to quickly catch one’s ear, and perhaps best captures the spirit of the album with its moving open lines: “Blood of my blood / Skin of my skin / You’re in roundelay water again / I want to face the condition you’re in / The old wrenches hardly turn me.”

The imagery in “I’m Not My Season” is painful but of the moment. Pecknold’s singing is moving. The desire to protect others who are suffering—now intensely heightened by the pandemic—is undoubtedly a burning feeling and lived experience known to vast numbers. At present, it can only find a partial realization, held back by the murderous, official “herd immunity” policies. But the seriousness and warmth exhibited by Pecknold and his bandmates through such sentiments is to their credit.

According to interviews, Pecknold had most of the songs in place prior to the pandemic but was struggling with the lyrical content for nearly a year. After the implications and early events of the pandemic became clear, he scrapped nearly everything he wrote prior and shifted to focus on the moods and concerns emerging around him.

In a comment to *Rolling Stone*, Pecknold noted that his previous two albums were heavily focused on his “personal situation” and the most recent album was initially structured that way too. But the pandemic dramatically altered that focus. “The whole experience gave me so much additional perspective on what community means, what death means, what gratitude means, what privilege is. This is my least personal album. I wanted it to be mostly about how I felt about other people.”

As noted, this is a healthy and encouraging artistic instinct, and the music has certainly benefited from it.



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