Sam Fender's *People Watching*: "I don't wear the shoes I used to walk in"

Thomas Scripps
4 March 2025

British singer-songwriter Sam Fender's new album *People Watching* (released February 21, 2025) has had the biggest opening week in the UK since Harry Style's *Harry's House* in 2022. It shows a young musician reflecting critically on the fame the now three-time Brit Award winner has won since his debut single "Play God" was released in 2017.

That track, with its compulsive guitar riff and brooding, resonant vocals, spoke to rising popular disquiet with political leaders of all stripes and a sense of a society under attack by an unaccountable few: "Am I mistaken, or are we breakin' / Under weight from the long time / That he played God?" The impact of Donald Trump's first presidency is evident, as are the revelations of Edward Snowden and WikiLeaks in the third verse and its theme of omnipresent surveillance.

The lyrics put questions in front of the listener more than they rush to answer them and Fender has continued in this style since, while summoning up social experiences widely ignored in contemporary culture. His debut EP, *Dead Boys* (2018), opens with the plaintive song of the same name, earning him praise for addressing the subject of male mental health and suicide. Its chorus laments, but also accuses, "Nobody ever could explain / All the dead boys in our hometown."

Fender, 30, grew up in North Shields on the outskirts of Newcastle in England's North East, a region blighted by de-industrialisation and its after-effects, suffering the worst rates of drug and alcohol related deaths and some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the country. He has spoken about losing friends to suicide.

"Leave Fast", the EP's closing track, addresses these wider social conditions: the "Dark grey vistas" of "Boarded up windows on the promenade / The shells of old nightclubs", home to neighbours "Forgotten by our government / A selfish little baby with no responsibility / Watching people die in the cold." An old man "told me to leave fast or stay forever."

In several songs on the new album, Fender asks what it means to have done so, observing in "Crumbling Empire" of his home town and places like it, "I don't wear the shoes I used to walk in / But I can't help thinking where they'd take me / In this crumbling empire." In "Chin Up", he is "Twenty-eight, still sucking my thumb" while "My friends at home are in pain / Chucky debt, God, I hate cocaine." The title track sets the scene: "I people watch on the way back home… Gives me a moment out of the ego."

This is an artist conscious of the challenges posed to his work by the success he has gained precisely because he has spoken so well to the experiences of the "unsuccessful". Challenges which are especially severe in an industry about whose treatment of figures like him he has no illusions.

"TV Dinner", with its threatening synths and goosebump vocals, is a savage takedown of those who "fetishise their struggling while all the while, they're suffering." It's "The market before anything… Like [Amy] Winehouse, she was just a bairn / They love her now but bled her then." Fender asks repeatedly and hauntingly as the song ends, "Am I up to this?"

Awareness of these pressures has not led to navel gazing; they are interwoven with the storytelling which has earned him such a large following.

"Chin Up", for example, also paints the picture: "Our Jackie navigates through the penury / He lost his job again in January / At night, she's hearing him cry /Getting stains out his shirt and tie / The cold permeates the neonatal baby / Can't heat the place for fucking love nor money."

The song showcases Fender's frequent juxtaposition of soaring melodies with sombre, painful lyrics to bring across a sense of the resilience which exists these situations.

"People Watching" addresses Fender's "fear for this crippled island and the turmoil of the times" through the story of the death of his "late friend and mentor" Annie Orwin in a rundown care home. "The place was fallin' to bits / Understaffed and overruled by callous hands / The poor nurse was around the clock."

The landscapes evoked are ones in which you feel real people actually live, bringing to mind the best of Bruce Springsteen's music—an influence Fender has readily acknowledged. The verses in "Crumbling Empire" rhythmically recall "The Ghost of Tom Joad", taken in a synth-pop direction. It was inspired by a trip to Detroit, whose fate he connects with his own hometown.

Another highlight is "Wild Long Lie", featuring saxophone solos from Johnny "Bluehat" Davis: a mellow, introspective song whose lyrics blur the line between the "synthetic hope" (as he sings on "Crumbling Empire") offered by drugs and the lies told to ourselves and others about unsatisfactory lives.

The album carries on the close narration of his youth from his previous *Hypersonic Missiles* (2019) and *Seventeen Going Under* (2021) and their stories of overwork ("Saturday"), stilted father-son relationships ("Spit of You"), nights out and one-night stands ("Will We Talk"), mental health ("Dying Light"), drug addiction ("Spice"), family breakdown and violence ("The Borders"). Bringing these themes together, the coming-of-age song "Seventeen Going Under" achieved youth anthem status over 2021-2.

People Watching's shift, a subtle one, is towards a reflection on the relationship between these concerns and contemporary culture. Fender's wider project remains the same, however: a striving to express honestly the experiences of a generation daily confronting conditions of enormous social, economic and emotional hardship—which he does with impressive sensitivity for a young man, and real musical skill.

He told the *Times* in an interview published last week: "The music industry is 80 percent, 90 percent kids who are privately educated. A kid from where I'm from can't afford to tour, so there are probably thousands writing songs that are ten times better than mine, poignant lyrics about the country, but they will not be seen because it's rigged."

Modesty aside, Fender is a special talent. He is right, though, to indicate that he is so unusual because he is pushing against the stream—not of

popular feeling, but the forces which suppress and distort it.

These are political as well as economic pressures—and of the "left" more than the right. The same interview saw Fender explain, "We are very good at talking about privileges—white, male or straight privilege. We rarely talk about class, though. And that's a lot of the reason that all the young lads are seduced by demagogues and psychos like Andrew Tate.

"They're being shamed all the time and made to feel like they're a problem. It's this narrative being told to white boys from nowhere towns. People preach to some kid in a pit town in Durham who's got fuck all and tell him he's privileged? Then Tate tells him he's worth something? It's seductive."

This is a more critical and insightful take than when he has addressed the issue previously, in the 2019 track "White Privilege". It's a concept Fender subscribes to, along with "the patriarchy" also mentioned in the song, which concludes with the poor, "My ancestry is evil, and their evil is still not gone"—blunt enough to suggest irony or satire but apparently not the case.

The use of these terms comes from a very different place in a white, working-class man from the North East, however—a real care for racial and gender equality—than it does from the affluent middle-class milieu which developed them. A culture with which Fender expresses an almost bitter dissatisfaction in the same track, singing, "Everybody's offended, the joke that just keeps on giving / I'm not entirely sure the nitpicking can count as progression" and "Smug liberal arrogance, working class don't fuck with it / It's all just ammunition for the right-wing press."

He told *Dork* the same year: "there's also this real contempt for people who have a different opinion, some real condescending bastards out there on the left too… Stuff like that is naturally pushing working-class people to the right."

There are similar contradictions throughout his more directly political songs. Choosing to title his debut studio album *Hypersonic Missiles* demonstrated a sharp political awareness in 2019, running counter to the manufactured complacency of the media and much of contemporary culture, most of whom would have scoffed at the observations in the title song "All the silver tongued suits… Are saying it's a high time for hypersonic missiles" and "The tensions of the world are rising higher / We're probably due another war with all this ire."

The rest of the track is frustrating, however, or allows itself to be overcome by frustration and ultimately ends in a kind of cynical escapism. One can't imagine him writing the lines "I am so blissfully unaware of everything / Kids in Gaza are bombed and I'm just out of it" today, after the mass movement in this country against the genocide.

Other examples might be cited. But the point is that Fender is to some extent bound to run up against these problems. His capacity to sum up the experiences of a generation also encompasses its political confusions.

This is a section of society which has grown up after the collapse of the Soviet Union, amid a prolonged suppression of the class struggle and a rotten "left" culture of barely disguised liberalism, actively hostile to class politics and to Marxism, concerned with the micro-policing of language and the selfish advancement of rival "identities", leaving millions of progressive young people politically at sea.

Fender is inevitably partially shaped by that. He's also wise enough, or been around the block enough, to see its dangerous consequences. As he told the *Guardian* in 2021, "'Leftie' is now a slur in working-class towns—what happened there?"

His songs, frequently adopting different voices, are left with a conflicted quality. The honesty with which Fender approaches his work and the probing character of his writing means they wear their contradictions on their sleeves and are valuable for it. They are a testament to the difficulties faced by young people in finding a politics which makes sense of the upheaval around them.

The track perhaps most expressive of this is 2021's thumping "Aye", described by Fender as a "rant about my disdain for the greedy tax dodging billionaires of the world." The "very few" who "never had time for me and you", who "watched the atom bomb reduce two cities to dust / And paint the whole narrative as totally just / They fly drones above our head / They paint the ground black and red."

At the same time, "Aye" gives voice to Fender's dissatisfaction with the politics available to him to make sense of and confront this reality. In the outro, his inability to define himself except as what he is not—not a "patriot", "liberal", "anything"—the lack of anything with which to identify himself, sees the lyrics collapse in on themselves to a close: "I'm not a fucking anything— / I'm not a fucking— / I'm not a— / I'm not— / Aye." It's a powerful rendering of the sense of political impasse felt by many young people.

Asked by the *Times* whether his songs have a theme, he replied, "They are not a call to arms—more a call to put your arms around your mates."

Previously he's told the *Illinois Entertainer*: "I know I'm not politically eloquent enough to affect any real change in the world, and I can't say anything that hasn't already been said. So I try my best to voice how I was feeling growing up where I did. I mean, I'm not here to start a revolution—I'm more into what Bob Dylan was doing, just making a commentary on what he saw and not trying to start a revolution in the process."

The two are not as separate as he thinks. Fender is a gifted commentator. He has found success because a great many people see their own situation in his songs. That fact has political implications. Because what he sings of is intolerable: a social crisis which, beyond being recognised and reflected artistically, cries out to be resolved.

Under the blows of wars, austerity and the turn to dictatorship and the far-right, the working class will launch efforts, leading to revolutionary efforts, to do so: making new experiences and radically overhauling the left-wing politics to which Fender is committed. It will be interesting to hear how his sensitive social radar responds.