

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Wimpwave Music Hangs 10

Alyssa Noel · Thursday, August 4th, 2011

Rock ‘n’ roll was still in-demand with a prominent place in record collections everywhere, but in 2008 the world suddenly hungered for songs rich with lush harmonies and poetic lyrics about mountains and winter and love. Or so it seemed as Fleet Foxes, a bearded brood of Seattle boys, emerged from nowhere and promptly shot to fame with their self-titled debut.

Bon Iver, also bearded and outdoorsy, surfaced around the same time with his *For Emma, Forever Ago*. The back story behind the sparse, introspective album only added to its appeal. The tale: singer Justin Vernon packed up his bags, headed up to his father’s cabin in northern Wisconsin and spent the winter alone writing painfully frail songs of heartbreak. Media and music fans ate it up.

“Skinny Love,” especially, became ubiquitous in the following months. Moms loved it. Boyfriends loved it. Girls really loved it. Vernon’s layered falsetto is so thin and wavering you can’t help but want to take him in your arms and assure him that everything is going to be OK.

Call it the wimpification of rock, as a New York Daily News columnist [did](#), but the meek are indeed inheriting the music world. The examples of Wimpwave are plentiful: Grizzly Bear, The National, Bright Eyes have all made a viable living out of music that’s rife with emotion and easy on the ears. The appeal is obvious. Their songs are artful, thoughtful and delivered with enough variety and experimentation to earn indie rock cred.

Bon Iver’s latest album, a self-titled record released last month, has been lauded for exactly these reasons. Pitchfork, tastemakers of all things indie and famously picky, gave it a 9.5 in its [review](#). The release even shot to number two on the [Billboard](#) charts, selling 104,000 in its first week alone, a relatively unheard of accomplishment for an indie musicians.

Even people who wanted to hate it couldn’t help but be blown away by Vernon’s progress as a songwriter. Beautiful, subtle details abound. On “Wash.” an incessant piano refrain builds with help from a meandering violin. The echo-y chamber-pop vibe on “Calgary” gives way to darting synths and Vernon’s slow, steady voice. “You know that all the rope’s untied,” he declares. “I was only there to die beside.”

The record is infinitely fuller than *For Emma*, with help from a slew of talented musicians, including rising sax star Colin Stetson and pedal-steel guitarist Greg Leisz. It takes us to unexpected places, like the 80s thread in “Beth / Rest” and the country romp bubbling beneath the surface of “Towers.” The jewel on this musical crown, though, is “Holocene,” the second official single off the record. Buoyant, in places, with quiet rhythmic claps, it feels like emerging from a

heartache-induced fog. Suddenly, “I can see for miles, miles, miles.” While the view might come with the realization that “at once I knew I was not magnificent,” it’s a relief to know you can still feel at all.

At its core, that’s what this genre offers: a chance to sit alone with your headphones and feel something. Wimpy? Maybe. But it’s worth the unflattering label.

Photo by CJ Foeckler, [Bon Iver’s website](#).

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