

JAKE XERXES FUSSELL



WHAT IN THE NATURAL WORLD

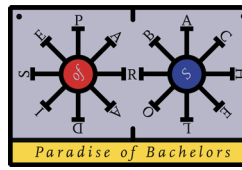
JAKE XERXES FUSSELL WHAT IN THE NATURAL WORLD

- + **label:** Paradise of Bachelors
- + **catalog number:** PoB-031
- + **formats:** LP / CD / digital (vinyl not returnable)
- + **release date:** March 31, 2017
- + **UPC-LP / UPC-CD:** 616892415046 / 616892415145
- + **genre(s):** Folk / Alternative
- + **territory restrictions:** N/A
- + **LP / CD box lots:** 25 / 30

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|---|-------------------------------|
| A1. "Jump for Joy" 4:15 | B1. "Billy Button" 4:45 |
| A2. "Have You Ever Seen Peaches Growing on a Sweet Potato Vine?" 6:10 | B2. "Canyoneers" 4:34 |
| A3. "Pinnacle Mountain Silver Mine" 4:18 | B3. "St. Brendan's Isle" 3:53 |
| A4. "Furniture Man" 4:40 | B4. "Lowe Bonnie" 6:44 |
| A5. "Bells of Rhythney" 4:02 | |

- + Available on 150g virgin vinyl as an LP, with heavy-duty 24pt matte jacket, color labels, and high-res DL code. CD edition features heavy-duty matte gatefold jacket and LP replica artwork.
- + Look for upcoming tour dates with **Wilco**, **Daniel Bachman**, and more.
- + Artwork features two paintings by iconic Chicago Imagist artist **Roger Brown** (1941-1997).
- + R1YL: **Michael Hurley**, **Bob Dylan**, **John Prine**, **Dave Van Ronk**, **Jim Dickinson**, **Raccoon Records**, **Joan Shelley**, **Nathan Bowles**, **Nathan Salsburg**, **William Tyler**, **Daniel Bachman**, **Wilco**.
- + For more information and album trailer: <http://www.paradiseofbachelors.com/pob-031>
- + PoB artist page and tour dates: <http://www.paradiseofbachelors.com/jake-xerxes-fussell>

- + "The professor you always wished you had, the human jukebox, the guitar player and singer who makes any band that he's in better. He's a southern scholar and gentleman in the tradition of Jim Dickinson, George Mitchell, & Les Blank. He's a Dave Van Ronk for SEC country." - William Tyler
- + "A singular combination of pedigree, experience, education, and talent." - The Oxford American
- + "Beautifully loose arrangements of playful, resilient songs." - Uncut
- + "Music that takes us to a deep place in the American spirit." - Art Rosenbaum



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Entrancing guitarist and singer **Jake Xerxes Fussell** follows his celebrated debut (produced by **William Tyler**) with a moving new album of *Natural Questions* in the form of transmogrified folk/blues koans. This time these radiant ancient tunes tone several shades darker while amplifying their absurdist humor, illuminating our national, and psychic, predicaments. Featuring art by iconic painter **Roger Brown** and contributions from three notable Nathans—**Nathan Bowles** (**Steve Gunn**), **Nathan Salsburg** (**Alan Lomax Archive**), and **Nathan Golub** (**Mountain Goats**)—as well as **Joan Shelley** and **Casey Toll** (**Mt. Moriah**).

"Thus is nature: beyond all things is the ocean, beyond the ocean nothing." - **Lucius Annaeus Seneca**, *Natural Questions*, c. 65 AD

Roger Brown, whose preternaturally vivid paintings grace **Durham, North Carolina** guitarist and singer **Jake Xerxes Fussell's** second album *What in the Natural World*, is usually associated with the loose confederacy of artists known as the **Chicago Imagists**, but at heart he was fundamentally a Southern boy whose Alabama origins root his work. (He grew up in Opelika, about thirty miles northwest of Fussell's childhood home in **Columbus, Georgia**, and counted **Elvis Presley** as a distant cousin.) Influenced both by comics and the folk and self-taught art he collected, Brown's distinctive landscapes—which oscillate between architectural and natural, urban and bucolic, busy and barren, depicting the incursion of culture on our environment—are meticulously rendered in a stylized idiom of alien symmetries: recursive, patterned terrains as saturated with vibratory color as with psychological and political subtexts.

Both Brown and Fussell approach their art as a consequence of their practices as collectors and scholars of Southern vernacular culture—material culture and music, respectively—imbuing their own inventive work with the clarity and vigor of folk traditions, while reframing their durable, multivalent strangeness for our own times. Fussell has become a masterful interpreter and mutative performer of American folk and popular music, always allowing the songs he selects to breathe and swell with oceanic ambiguity, never closing them off to contemporary contexts and sonics. It's the result of a lifetime dedicated to apprenticeships with master storytellers, from Piedmont blueswomen **Precious Bryant** and **Etta Baker** to documentary artists **Les Blank** and **Art Rosenbaum**.

So if *What in the Natural World* feels both several shades darker, and unsettlingly funnier, than Jake's self-titled 2015 debut (produced by brother-in-arms **William Tyler**), you need only look around at our national predicament in 2017 for clues. Since then **Jake** has played around the country, opening for **Wilco**, dueting with **Tyler**, and touring with **Mt. Moriah**, **Nathan Bowles**, and **Daniel Bachman**... and the territory he's traversed, for many of our fellow citizens, doesn't brook much hope.

This time round Fussell has sourced his repertoire from beyond his primary Southeastern foraging grounds, including songs from the Southwest ("**Canyoneers**") and even Wales ("**Bells of Rhythney**"). He encounters monsters, literal and figurative, everywhere in this landscape of loss and longing—from the hellhounds of "**Jump for Joy**" to cruel Mr. Brown in "**Furniture Man**" ("a devil born without horns"); from the oppressive mine owners ("they have fangs, they have teeth") of "**Bells of Rhythney**" to the demons and dragons on "**St. Brendan's Isle**." Unlike his debut, the majority of these songs are not nominally traditional; they don't hail from what Jake calls "the weird void of folk anonymity and the dark, fertile past." Five of nine are attributed to specific artists, both canonical (**Duke Ellington**) and obscure (**Helen Cockram**), and all are recast in vibrant, assured recordings that elide genres and dissolve the false binaries of tradition and innovation, folk and modern, old and new.

What in the Natural World was recorded by **Jason Meagher** (**Steve Gunn**, **Michael Chapman**) in Orange Co., NY, and by **Nick Petersen** (**Horseback**, **Mt. Moriah**) in Orange Co., NC, and features contributions from three notable Nathans—**Nathan Bowles** (drums, banjo, piano, melodica; **Steve Gunn**), **Nathan Salsburg** (guitar, "**Pinnacle Mountain**"; **Alan Lomax Archive**), and **Nathan Golub** (steel guitar; **Mountain Goats**)—as well as **Joan Shelley** (vocal, "**Lowe Bonnie**") and **Casey Toll** (bass; **Mt. Moriah**).

Throughout, Fussell poses *Natural Questions* in the form of transmogrified folk/blues koans. These nine elliptical riddles, spare but sturdy, driven by Jake's limpid guitar and understated singing, both absorb and reflect the conditions of their listeners, refusing to offer easy answers. Though the album title lacks a question mark—it can be read as exclamatory or interrogative—all of these songs contain axial, and anxious, questions about the *Natural World* and our tenuous position within it.

"All the hounds, I do believe, have been killed/Ain't you thrilled?" The minimally arranged "**Jump for Joy**" (from **Duke Ellington's** eponymous 1941 "Sun-Tanned Revu-sical") and "**Billy Button**" (an odd relic of nonsense verse with likely roots in medicine shows and minstrelsy) anchor Sides A and B with mutual echoes. Fussell's nimbly fingerpicked chord progressions, buttressed by **Bowles'** piano and melodica, hew an achingly bittersweet mood of yearning from rough doggerel about "groovy pastures" and "hog meat"—transforming their absurdist lyrics into affecting statements about mortality and the distant promise of paradise. What to do when we finally "stomp up to heaven and meet old St. Pete," when we arrive in "the happy land of Canaan"? "It's a long way to travel, and the money for to spend."

"Have you ever seen peaches growing on a sweet potato vine?" Can nature yield further fruits? Instead of a response to the titular paradox we get sleepily affectionate flirtation: "Wake up, woman, take your big leg off of mine." ("She's a married woman, but I love her just the same.") **Bowles** shuffles winningly.

"What kind of business has the poor man got/dealing with the Furniture Man?" "**Furniture Man**," a desperate tale of poverty, dispossession, and imminent homelessness—its cascading guitar refrain descending into a quiet pit of resignation—is as relevant and heartrending now as it was when first recorded in the 1920s.

"What's in a man to make him thirst/for the kind of life he knows is cursed?" "**Pinnacle Mountain Silver Mine**" (by Appalachian Virginia singer **Helen Cockram**) and "**Canyoneers**" (by Arizona producer and **Lee Hazelwood** associate **Loy Clingman**) explore the rugged topography of risk and impossibly remote rewards. **Pinnacle Mountain** holds a "secret I may never know" (intimated by **Salsburg's** charming, filigreed guitar), but the "lonely river rats" of "**Canyoneers**" seemingly toil for purely existential reasons. "Have you ever wondered what you'd do when all the chips were down?"

"Is there hope for the future?/Say the brown bells of Merthyr." The arcane coal miner's lament "**Bells of Rhythney**" shares its text, by Welsh poet **Idris Davies**, with the song popularized by **Pete Seeger** and the **Byrds**, complete with personified, protesting bells, but here **Jake** supplies his own gospel-tinged musical setting. "**St. Brendan's Isle**" offers a faux-Celtic companion piece by **Arkansas Jimmy Driftwood**, wherein monstrous mine owners are replaced by actual brimstone and scaly "monsters that be."

"How can I live, how can I live?/You wounded me so deep." The hero of "**Lowe Bonnie**," a chilling Alabama variant of the Child murder ballad "**Young Hunting**" (aka "**Henry Lee**"), is slain by his jilted lover (voiced here by **Joan Shelley**) in a deathly embrace, as he watches her "pen knife" spill his "own heart's blood" onto his feet. **Jake's** guitar shivers.

In his first-century scientific and philosophical treatise *Natural Questions*, **Seneca** interrogates his environment for answers, venturing some, but warning that "a single lifetime, even though entirely devoted to the sky, would not be enough for the investigation of so vast a subject." Maybe the meaning of a thing reveals itself only through tradition, through time, through iterative summoning and study. You get the sense, listening to Fussell's music, and looking at Brown's paintings, that they would agree.



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