

## "Being Wilco"

### Band plays tribute to its punk-country influences

By ANN STACK  
Music Critic

COLUMBIA, Mo. — Sometimes a band comes along that gives you a reason to believe in rock 'n' roll again. Even if it is a country(ish) band. Wilco, the countrified pop-rock darlings of the press as of late, played to a packed house at the Blue Note in Columbia, Mo., last Friday night and gave the crowd its hope in the future of music — and an orgasmic near-religious experience to boot.

By now, you probably already know the story (and the chords are just the same.) You probably know about Uncle Tupelo and the four albums those young country-punksters from Belleville, Ill., put out in the early 1990s. You may know about the nasty "breakup" and the resulting two bands — the Jay Farrar-led Son Volt and Jeff Tweedy's Wilco. You're probably even aware that both Wilco and Son Volt released albums in 1995, "A.M." and "Trace," respectively.

You also probably know that last October Wilco released "Being There," the critically-acclaimed follow-up to "A.M." "Being There" is, at base level, 19 songs spanned over 77 minutes and two CDs. Those are the facts — but then there's the music.

#### Being Influenced

Maybe it's got something to do with the name of the album, but listening to "Being There" is like Jeff Tweedy thumbing through his childhood record collection with you. The album contains nods to his influences — he even quotes directly from Pere Ubu guitarist Peter Laughner's song, "Amphetamine," on "Misunderstood."

There are obvious comparisons that can be made: The Rolling Stones,

the Beach Boys, Gram Parsons and the Replacements come immediately to mind. Wilco bassist John Stirratt said there was something to that, although it wasn't a conscious effort to re-create a certain sound.

"We probably only really referenced one tune, 'Outta Mind (Outta Sight),' " he said. (Not to be confused with disc one's "Outtasite (Outta Mind)" the band's first single.)

"We tried to do the Phil Spector kind of thing. That's the only one where we went in and consciously tried to build a wall of sound ... albeit a very thin wall," he said.

"We didn't consciously say, 'Let's try to sound like the Kinks on this one,'" he said. "Everything on this record was made in such a scattered fashion. I didn't really see a theme to it until we got home."

#### Being Tweedy

"Being There" acts as kind of a guidepost, road music through a time in the life of a songwriter. In particular, a songwriter named Jeff Tweedy. The album starts off with "Misunderstood," an eclectic 6½-minute Angstballad that's alternately dissonant and plaintive, with a light piano track overlaid on top of some mean guitar chords. At the end of the song, Tweedy spits out, "I'd like to thank you all for nothing at all."

There's the poppy, radio-friendly "Outtasite" and "I Got You (At The End of the Century)," as well as the jubilant, horn-infused tribute to rock-jealousy "Monday." And as a cowboy-hat tip to some of the music that inspired them, there's the twangy "Forget The Flowers." And that's just the first disc.

The second disc kicks off with "Sunken Treasure," where Tweedy croons in his raspy tenor, "Music is my savior/I was maimed by rock 'n'

roll/I was tamed by rock 'n' roll/I got my name from rock 'n' roll."

That verse neatly captures the theme of the album — a man trying to make a break from his rock 'n' roll heritage, his whole adult life. He tries to sever the bonds and make music less important in his life. But he finds out, in the end, he's still enmeshed in it.

"Someone Else's Song," a brooding, acoustic track, could be a metaphor for the music industry as a whole — the pointlessness of saying what's been said before. The raucous "Kingpin" follows. Then there's the sexy, loungey "Was I In Your Dreams," where a laid-back Tweedy purrs right into the listener's ear.

The ending note on the album is a live in-studio cut, a loose, jam-style rocker called "Dreamer in My Dreams." He's come to terms with his music and is in a place where there's no depression.

#### Being a Band

On "Being There," Stirratt played the violin and piano as well as the bass. Although he wrote and sang a track on "A.M." (the hauntingly beautiful "It's Just That Simple,") Tweedy wrote all the material for this one.

"The band is pretty much Jeff's deal all the way," he said. "It's not very much of a democracy when it comes to songwriting, which I think we all knew going into it. But I think on this record he had a fanatic type of idea of exactly how he wanted it to be."

Stirratt played on Uncle Tupelo's final album, 1994's "Anodyne," along with Tupelo veteran and Wilco drummer Ken Coomer. Keyboardist and guitarist Jay Bennett joined Wilco during the "A.M." tour, and pedal-steel guitarist Bob Egan rounds out the band, having replaced multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston.

#### Being Country

Wilco has become the poster band for the recent insurgent-country movement, a hybrid that dances along the borders between rock and country and includes such groups as Whiskeytown, the Jayhawks, Old 97s and Blue Mountain (fronted, incidentally, by Stirratt's twin sister, Laurie.) "Being There" may still have one boot in the banjo, so to speak, but the live show is a straight-on rock spectacle.

"I haven't had this feeling of wanting to just prove we're a country band," Stirratt said. "I mean, our influences are pretty obvious — the pop influence is a big deal. I think maybe we didn't play as much pop on the last tour as we did this time around and that maybe we had something to prove in that respect."

#### Being Successful

Besides having a video on MTV and VH-1, Wilco was scheduled to appear on "120 Minutes" last Sunday. The interview has been taped but hasn't aired yet. And on April 17, the band will be on "The Late Show With David Letterman."

Wilco (which is radio-speak for "will comply") will tour Europe during the rest of March and most of April and will do a string of West Coast dates when it returns.

Wilco is a band that makes no apologies for its influences and leaves interpretations of "Being There" up to the listener. The songs are short vignettes of life that everyone can relate to, packed in with strong musician-ship and none of the pretentious rock-ego. Wilco didn't make the same record twice; it simply covered all its bases by laying out its influences for the world to see.

And even though Uncle Tupelo is no longer, fans can take heart — they got a few wonderful bands from the ashes.

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John Stirratt  
Bassist

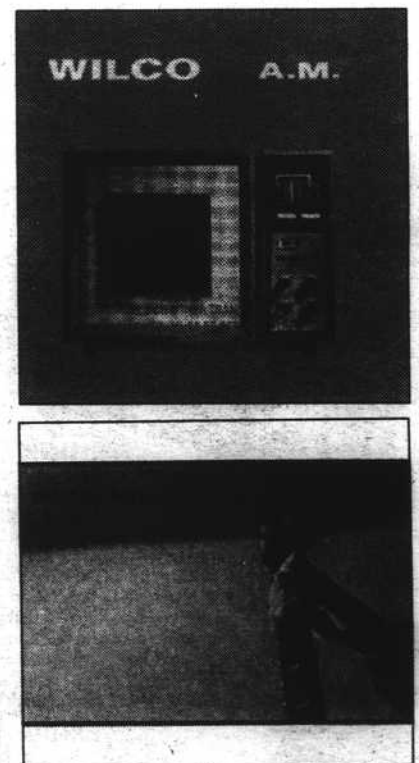


PHOTO COURTESY OF REPRIS RECORDS  
Left: WILCO is (from left to right) John Stirratt, Ken Coomer, Jeff Tweedy and Jay Bennett.  
Above: TWO ALBUMS have been released by Wilco, 1995's "A.M." (top) and 1996's double-disc set, "Being There."