

On Wilco and *Being There*

Mike Lindgren

February 16, 1997 was a cold, gray day in Boston, and Fenway Park was shrouded and dark. Across the street from the famous left-field wall was a dank, shabby nightclub called the Avalon Ballroom, which despite its rundown interior was the Boston stop of choice for mid-level bands touring the East Coast. The Chicago alt-country band Wilco would have arrived sometime in the afternoon, loaded in their gear, done a perfunctory soundcheck, gotten something to eat. Their show that night would be the seventeenth they had played in the last nineteen days; they were halfway through a bruising tour that had taken them as far south as Atlanta and as far west as Kansas. Their singer and guitarist Jeff Tweedy, guitarist and keyboardist Jay Bennett, bassist John Stirratt, and drummer Ken Coomer were touring in support of their album *Being There*, an ambitious double record that had been out since October.

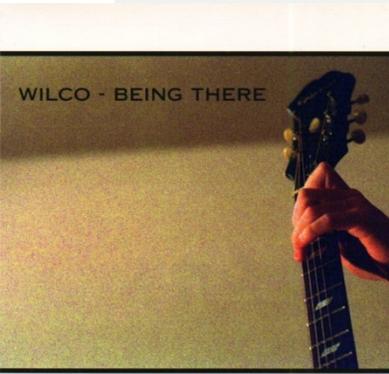
A bare four blocks away, I was drinking vodka and beer in my apartment on Queensberry Street, chewing tobacco, getting ready for the show. It was a Sunday, so I was off work; it was the day before President's Day, so I had no need to even try to keep in check the drinking that was already beginning to devour my life. I had planned on inviting a pretty girl I was sort-of dating to come with me, but she had abruptly ended our nascent relationship, so I would be going to the concert alone. I put on the CD player, hit play, take a shot of vodka, a slug of beer. A drumbeat, martial and ominous, fading in, increasing in volume, a call to arms, a march. The tick of the piano and bass, repeating the two notes that will thrum through the song, all sprawling, devastating, 6:28 of it. The sound backs off a bit, calms, and then Jeff Tweedy begins to sing:

Back in your old neighborhood
Cigarettes taste so good...

His voice, recorded with very little echo, half-observed by thick swirls of flanger, sounds lost, drugged-out, utterly weary. It is the sound of a man at the end of his rope who is yet taking his first step down a long road. It's a journey we will take together, Jeff Tweedy and I, and it will take us both to places that I hope neither of us will see again. Meanwhile, in the shabby apartment on Queensberry Street, I take another shot, sing along:

You know you're just a mama's boy
You're positively unemployed
You're so misunderstood
You're so misunderstood...

The evening lengthens. Tweedy and Co. are backstage, strumming unplugged electric guitars; Ken Coomer, shaggy, dreadlocked, beats a tattoo on the cinderblock walls of Avalon's spartan greenroom. More time passes. Avalon's club manager sticks his head in the door, nods to the band. Down the street I take a last shot of vodka, throw on my leather jacket, head out into the night. On Landsdowne Street I give the other ticket, the one that was supposed to be for Margaret, to a sketchy-looking white guy. Inside Wilco go through the door, up a flight of concrete stairs, through another door, and walk out onto the stage. Jeff Tweedy goes last. Cheers, clapping, shouts. The lights are in his eyes. He fires up a cigarette, scrunches up his face, steps up to the mic. For a split-second, the sound dies out completely.



Wilco

Being There

10/1996

Reprise Records

"Hi-ho," he says, and they're off.

Before there was Wilco, before there was *Being There*, there was Uncle Tupelo, of course. Tupelo was the band Tweedy formed in Belleville, Illinois, in 1990, with his friend Jay Farrar. It has been famously said that only a thousand people bought the first Velvet Underground record, but that all thousand of those people went on to form bands; a similar dynamic obtains with Uncle Tupelo, whose recorded oeuvre lasted for only six years and four albums, but who likewise had an influence all out of proportion to their sales. Essentially, Tupelo founded the genre known as alternative country, whose basic idea was the fusion of punk attitude with traditionalist music: a simple idea, but a radical one.

Uncle Tupelo was Farrar's band: he set the agenda, wrote the songs, chose the covers. Jay Farrar was a talented, forceful presence, a rough, stinging guitarist with a potent foghorn of a voice, and he cast an intimidating shadow over his quieter, more introspective partner. The breakup of Uncle Tupelo, in May of 1994, has received in some circles slightly less analysis than the assassination of John F. Kennedy; what emerges from the still-disputed events is the mixture of freedom and pain that Jeff Tweedy felt upon the band's dissolution. Four days after their last concert, on May 1, 1994, Tweedy gathered Tupelo alumni Stirratt, Coomer, and multi-instrumentalist Max Johnston in Belleville, where they began jamming and writing. Tweedy decided to call the new outfit Wilco, after a bit of trucker-CB slang.

Back onstage at the Avalon Ballroom, Tweedy pulls another of a seemingly endless stream of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, lights it, and turns back to the crowd. I'm at one of the club's many bars, buying a shot of Jim Beam and a draft. In my drunkenness the bartendress seems outrageously, tragically beautiful, mind-bendingly so; I give her a massive tip and smile at her. I turn around in time to hear Tweedy sing "All my daydreams are disasters...", the opening line to Uncle Tupelo's "New Madrid," an aching country lament that still carries the blurry reverberations of special meaning. "They all come from New York City," I shout along, annoying the people on either side of me. "And they woke me up at dawn..." I clutch my plastic cup of beer and sway. The song clatters to a halt. Jay Bennett comes out from behind the keyboard and plucks up a guitar from the stands behind him, a cherry-finish Gibson SG. He says something to Tweedy, who laughs, off-mic. Coomer clicks his sticks together and with a squeal of feedback Bennett launches into the thumping riff that kicks off *A.M.*'s anthemic "I Must be High." They race through it, sounding tight and hard. Then Tweedy plucks out an arpeggio figure on his Fender Telecaster, and the crowd gives its only unqualified cheer of the night: "Passenger Side," Tweedy's sardonic ode to driving under the influence. I love this song, of course; like all alcoholics, I seek validation in the words and actions of others. Years later, I come across an old interview with Paul Westerberg, leader of the unregenerately dipsomaniacal Replacements. "Half our audience," he said, speaking ruefully of the band's salad days, "were serious alcoholics who were thinking, *'they're falling-down drunk, it's okay for me to be falling-down drunk.'*" Paul Westerberg quit drinking, cold turkey, in 1990; his bandmate Bob Stinson died of a heroin overdose on February 18, 1995.

A. M. came out on March 28, 1995, and the reaction to the album was a giveaway that most observers had their metaphorical money on Jay Farrar and Son Volt. Farrar was the visionary, Tweedy the journeyman, went the thinking, and the perception seemed to color *A. M.*'s reception. Most reviewers considered it not much more than above-average bar-band rock, reserving their hosannas for *Trace*, which dropped on September 19. I have always been puzzled by this. *A. M.* seems to me, with its muscular arrangements and countrified yearning, its mixture of bluesy swagger and twangy balladry, to be an

ideal pop-rock recording, whereas Farrar's records feel overthought and labored in comparison. Nonetheless, there is no question that Farrar was perceived to have won round one; *Trace* was greeted with effusive praise and even spawned a minor hit in "Drown."

Being There blew the doors off all this; it was one of those rare musical moments when a band transcends its possibilities, surprising even itself. The idea that an amiable stoner like Jeff Tweedy would be the one to produce a two-disc set of staggering reach and stylistic range was a thunderbolt from a clear blue sky. Not since the Clash unfurled the epic adventure that is *London Calling* had such an authoritative musical statement come from such an unlikely source. The band that hit the road behind *Being There*, revitalized by Jay Bennett's virtuosity and drive, was a different animal than the sometimes tentative outfit that had toured *A. M.* to half-empty clubs. The old songs sounded tougher and wilder with the revamped lineup; the new material was a revelation. In the years to come the songs on *Being There* would end up forming the backbone of Wilco's live catalogue; the sonic experimentation that peeks through "Misunderstood" and "Sunken Treasure" would bloom into full, glorious weirdness on the celebrated *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*.

Only Tweedy and John Stirratt remain from the lineup I saw at the Avalon Ballroom; the Wilco that tours the world to sold-out crowds now is a tighter, poppier, more professional unit. Today Jeff Tweedy and I are both sober. On that cold night in February of 1997, though, all of this was to come. All I knew at the time was that something was badly wrong with my life, and that I was lonely and unhappy most of the time, and that I had no idea what to do about it; but for those few hours I didn't care. As I drank and watched and listened and sang along, as Tweedy and his band ripped through the uproarious hard rocker "Monday" and the menacing swamp-thump of "Kingpin," as Tweedy sang his kiss-off to Farrar ("Box Full of Letters") and his best offering from his Tupelo days ("The Long Cut"), as he raged through "Gun" and "Casino Queen" and finally a long, shaggy, crazily spiraling "Dreamer in My Dreams," I just felt like I was coming home, at last, even if I didn't know what that even meant any more, and wouldn't yet, for years.