

The Best Songs, The Best Life

Terry Barr

It was the late 1990s, and my wife, my daughters, and I were visiting friends in Raleigh. While their friendship was enticing enough, they lured us (OK, me) to this visit with special musical bait:

An amphitheater full of acts including Bela Fleck, Joan Baez, Dar Williams.

While Dar Williams appealed to me mainly because I wanted to meet her, get her autograph for my older daughter because she loved "The Babysitter Song" (I did get that autograph and had never seen a nine-year old so stunned), my afternoon/evening of music almost stopped after the opening act.

Wilco.

Wilco's *Being There* and *Summer Teeth* were already on the market, and the band would soon release *Mermaid Avenue*, their collaboration with Billy Bragg, recording songs Woody Guthrie had committed only to paper. For southern crowds and record buyers, however, this band had yet to hit, and so the promoters thought, "Better get them on and over before the drinking and shouting truly begins." Or, given the rest of the night's entertainment, before the bluegrass hippies took over.

I had barely heard the band; I knew that singer/frontman Jeff Tweedy used to form half of Uncle Tupelo with Jay Farrar (who then founded Son Volt), and that my local record store honcho, Russ, preferred the rockier SV to the more country-twanged W/C. I don't know what I thought when I sat down on that Friday afternoon to take in this "No Depression" group, but an hour later—especially after their rendition of Guthrie's "California Stars"—I was so mellow and high—not artificially of course—that I knew that while I'd enjoy the rest of the evening, I had found a home in Wilco.

In Wilco I trust.

I have seen the band several times live with old friends and by myself. I've seen Tweedy, Jeff and his son, in an old theater in Louisville, too. But I'm no longer as enthusiastic about the band as I once was. In fact, when I play *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* or *A Ghost is Born*, or especially *Kicking Television (Live)*, my wife, my sister-in-law, and her husband, usually beg me to stop. Just a bit discordant, they say (I choose not to say here what they really say). So I stop my I-Pod and find something mellower for their tastes, maybe Margo Price, though sometimes I toss in The Legendary Shack Shakers just to keep everyone honest.

But even if I never buy another Wilco record or get to play for company their old songs, one song will be enough: their true anthem, and like any song worthy of that moniker, a tune that covers a mere 2:31 in time, or if you play, as I most often do, its live version, an extra ten seconds that will leave you ready to dig a new garden, walk your beloved and very excitable Carolina Wild Dog, or start the rock and roll band of your own California Star dreams.

"The Late Greats."

Wilco = a ghost is born

Wilco

"The Late Greats"

A Ghost is Born

06/2004

Nonesuch

The greatest lost track of all time/the Late Greats' 'Turpentine,'/Can't hear it on the radio/Can't hear it anywhere you go.

I haven't looked into this song, the truth or history of its story, and I don't really care to, because I have my own.

First, I prefer the live version of the song, not because of the extra ten seconds, which is mainly ten seconds of audience erupted ecstasy after the last chord, but because of the way the guitarists staccato-end each of those final chords, punctuating the lyrics of lost time. It's the way I heard it happen live, and I love the way they want to make the song tighter while at the same time trying to make it last.

I have played the song so many times and have included it on so many playlists that I'm expecting royalties one day. I have to stand when I hear it; I sing along even though I still haven't memorized the lyrics entirely or in order, and I really don't care if I ever do. I just want it to be my Sumatra roast early in the morning, my Four Roses (Small Batch) at night.

"The Late Greats'" true power, though, brings me back to my Dar Williams-loving daughter. She just celebrated her 28th birthday, making me feel joyous and old (her too). She prefers her music from the Y2 Country end of Sirius-XM, though she has always loved her daddy's favorite old music: Johnny Cash, Fleetwood Mac, The Beatles.

Wilco.

So when she's home and when I sneak Wilco onto the playing loop, she begs me to play that one song, "The Late Greats." I don't know why she loves it, and I don't bother asking either.

"It's such a good song, Daddy!"

This is the daughter that forced her Neil Young-loving, Alabama-born father into listening to and finally confessing that "Sweet Home Alabama" was playlist worthy (It helped that we're strident Bama football fans). This is the daughter who selected The Beatles' cover of "Baby, It's You" for the father-daughter dance at her wedding.

And this is the daughter who used to love her babysitter and the song that immortalized "her."

Though she's never exactly explained why "The Late Greats" moves her so, sometimes I think explanations just get in the way, just force us to try to account for things we simply feel—that move us beyond the words or any words. Call it "spiritual," if you will.

An anthem.

All I know is that when Tweedy sings it, my daughter and I are there with him. I think she gets the words right, but we don't care, really, or hold each other accountable for accuracy. We just get loud and then maybe fill our glasses with more of that old time elixir from the bottles we hold dear.

We never even played a show, did we sweetie?

The greatest singer in rock and roll/would have to be Romeo/His vocal chords were made of gold/He just looks a little too old..

We're all a little too old now, which means we mainly look back at ourselves and appreciate the music that made us dance together, that brought us together, that holds us together.

I get it now, just listen to the interlude, and then:

*The best songs never get sung/The best life never leaves you lost.
You'll never hear it on the radio...*

We *are* the Late Greats.