



N

NONESUCH

Wilco (the album) **June 2009**

“I have to say, this was the most fun I've ever had making a record,” says Jeff Tweedy. “We worked really hard, but it was pretty joyous work, and it came together quicker than any record I can remember.”

That sense of confidence and purpose is immediately evident on *Wilco (the album)*, the tenth release from one of the world’s most acclaimed and respected bands. The project represents the full range of Wilco’s musical palette—from the driving opener “Wilco (the song)” to the delicate “You and I” (a duet with Feist), from the tense, menacing “Bull Black Nova” to the breezy “You Never Know.” The eleven songs on *Wilco (the album)* reveal a group fifteen years into its career and at the peak of its game.

This album is the follow-up to 2007’s *Sky Blue Sky*, which was the first Wilco recording with the band’s current line-up: Tweedy (guitar and vocals); John Stirratt (bass); Nels Cline (guitar); Glenn Kotche (drums); Pat Sansone (multiple instruments); and Mikael Jorgenson (keyboards). *Sky Blue Sky* was the group’s highest-charting release ever, and was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rock Album. Its stripped-down sound was the result of a new, very deliberate recording strategy by this ever-changing collective.

“*Sky Blue Sky* had a bit of a purity complex,” says Tweedy. “We were trying to keep the overdubs to a minimum, and we proved we could do it. I felt liberated by that, so this time we thought, let's reincorporate the other ways we know how to use a studio.”

“After *Sky Blue Sky*, there was a concerted effort to explore what our current line-up could do with more studio craft,” says Stirratt. “We were very conscious that we wanted to introduce a

more dense soundscape.”

In addition to knowing that they wanted to revisit the possibilities of studio recording, the members of Wilco were also energized by a series of shows they performed in Chicago in February of 2008, during which they played through their full catalogue, over the course of five nights. “Those residency shows gave the band more sense of ownership, especially for the members who weren't on the earlier records,” says Tweedy. “I felt that this band actually did a better job of representing those songs than we were able to do when the records came out. What the band has always aspired to be is closer now than it has been at any other time.”

Armed with that sense of Wilco's history, they began sketching out songs—until an invitation arrived that added another spin to the new project. Crowded House/Split Enz singer/songwriter Neil Finn asked Tweedy, Stirratt, Kotche, and Sansone to join him, Johnny Marr, members of Radiohead, and others in New Zealand, for an album he was recording to benefit Oxfam International.

“Before New Zealand, the songs were pretty well rehearsed, the shapes were pretty well set, and about 90% of the lyrics were written—and I don't think I've ever had 50% done at that point,” says Tweedy. “So when we finished that other project, we opted to stay in the Southern Hemisphere, in warm weather, rather than going back to Chicago in the middle of winter.”

“We had sketched everything out beforehand,” says Stirratt. “Then when the four of us were in New Zealand, we had the bedrock, and we got the basic takes on analog.”

Tweedy says that the setting and the weather were inspiring, but that there were also practical reasons that the foursome's stay in New Zealand was so productive. “Any time your home life is based in the city where you're recording, it will insinuate itself and you'll get distracted by everyday life,” he says. “Being responsible only for a small bag of clothes, and for feeding yourself, it facilitates a higher level of focus.”

The basic tracks from New Zealand were then taken back and fleshed out at the Loft, Wilco's

home base in Chicago. It was at this stage that the more elaborate arrangements and overdubs were added—the sonic elements that give *Wilco (the album)* its variety and breadth. “When you talk about using the studio for layering, people imagine some ornate pop record, but you can also use it in a lot of subtle ways as well,” says Tweedy.

Both Tweedy and Stirratt pointed to the same song as a breakthrough in the sessions. “The demo of ‘Deeper Down’ had the feeling of a cool template that we could work from,” says the bassist. “We had talked for a long time about constructing a record on ProTools and then going back and playing it organically, and that’s kind of what we did.”

Stirratt also singles out the closing track, “Everlasting Everything,” as both a personal favorite and a central piece of the album. “That’s a successful example of taking a very basic song and slowly crafting it into something that went beyond a simple little tune,” he says. “That one is a high point for me.”

The smoothness of the recording process, however, doesn’t mean that Tweedy has lost the edge in his words. *Wilco (the album)* is largely a meditation on survival, persistence, and mortality—sometimes defiant (“Wilco (the song)”), sometimes despairing (“Country Disappeared”), sometimes bemused (“You Never Know”).

“As a lyricist, and as a person who is trying to navigate the world as best I can, I’m certainly confronted with a fear of the other shoe falling, of the ambiguity and randomness we face,” says Tweedy. “These are existential crises I’ve been obsessing about for the twenty years I’ve been writing songs.

“I do think these songs reflect a higher tolerance for that ambiguity, a better ability to cope with not knowing. That doesn’t erase the anxiety of a song like ‘Bull Black Nova’—if anything, it makes it more palpable. But people will probably think the balance is tilted toward a more optimistic side—and I hope so. Isn’t that what we would all prefer?”