

WILCO *A ghost is born*

Since their very beginning, Wilco have continually sought to explore fresh musical and emotional territory, relentlessly redefining themselves and their body of work. 2002's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*—along with its documentary film companion, Sam Jones' *I Am Trying To Break Your Heart*—saw the Chicago-based band reaping the greatest commercial and critical success of their nearly 10-year career. Now Wilco unveil the follow-up, *A ghost is born*.

The album, which was co-produced by the band and Jim O'Rourke, forgoes the electronic experimentation of its celebrated predecessor in favor of a naturalistic sonic template rooted in performance and minimalist production. As ever, the band enthusiastically veers through a panoply of musical idioms, morphing genre after genre into their own inimitable, idiosyncratic sound.

"I think that this is a more realized, more consistent record—at least in our approach—than any other record we've made," says Wilco's singer, songwriter and guitarist Jeff Tweedy. "We valued the idea of presenting ourselves and our music as humanly as possible in an artificial world, and I think we accomplished that."

In November 2003, Wilco—Tweedy, bassist John Stirratt, drummer Glenn Kotche, multi-instrumentalist Leroy Bach, and keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen—along with O'Rourke and engineer Chris Shaw (Bob Dylan, Weezer), took up residence at Sear Sound, New York City's oldest independent studio, famed for its old school vacuum tube technology and vintage microphone collection. The band's goal for the sessions—additional material was also recorded at Chicago's Soma E.M.S.—was to strip the recording process to its bare essentials in an effort to capture the raw power and beauty of musicians plying their craft in its most fundamental form.

"We wanted to generate as much of what the record was going to sound like on the front end of the performance," Tweedy explains. "There was an effort to simply use the building blocks of music—rehearsal, arrangements, and so forth—to say what we wanted to say without having to use technology to do any of the work.

"I wanted our focus to be on what we sounded like in a room," he continues. "Before we put a mic on it, before it ever got onto tape, did it sound like music? Did it sound balanced? Then we put mics around the room and on each instrument to reflect the sound as accurately as possible. It was more of a documentary style of recording."

The result is a remarkably vivid rock sound, rife with the band's trademark inventiveness and highlighted by Tweedy's vibrant electric guitar. Tracks like the album-opening "At Least That's What You Said" come to life as Tweedy unleashes winding, impassioned solos that bristle and crackle with what he unashamedly refers to as "inspired amateurism."

"I was much more confident," he says. "To be honest, I felt a lot freer. I was actually inhibited about my playing for many years, so I think there was some effort to let it all hang out. It took me a long time to realize that it's ok that I don't sound like Jimmy Page.

Wilco brought that same spirit of spontaneity to the songwriting process, improvising the initial material in what the band referred to as "whole reel sessions." Songs such as "Company In My

Back” and “Handshake Drugs” began as poems and lyrical fragments in Tweedy’s notebook, until he extemporaneously invented melodies and choruses in order to communicate them to his bandmates.

“We’d set up microphones, turn the tape machine on, and play through the full thirty minutes of the reel,” he says. “I’d play acoustic guitar, flip through my notebooks, and make up songs while everybody else just tried to follow me. Then we’d go back, listen to the tapes, and find ways that we could shape them into things that were a little bit more coherent.

“There’s obviously a big distinction between composition and improvisation,” Tweedy adds, “but to me, the differences are more minor to the overall effect than people would like to believe. Ultimately, you’ve got to try and turn everything off and let stuff come out of you. The greatest thing in the world is to make stuff up.”

While the overall recording was driven by spur-of-the-moment invention, Tweedy did go into the sessions with a clear vision of the record’s lyrical stance. From the start, he planned for *A ghost is born* to represent an investigation of identity, exploring ideas of how and where the individual fits into an increasingly complex post-millennial society.

“Sometimes it feels like the world is becoming an abysmal place,” Tweedy says. “Everything seems to be very undefined and scary right now. I’ve been obsessed with that, the question of ‘how do you define yourself anymore?’ That’s why there are lyrics like ‘*It’s ok for you to tell me what you want me to be*’ or ‘*His goal in life was to be an echo*’ or ‘*I’m a wheel.*’ Everything on this record is in the process of *becoming*, everything’s striving towards it. In the end, though, you come back to defining yourself through what you love, and more importantly, the people you love.”

“It’s not a theme that’s new to my songs,” he notes. “I think *Being There* was a very similar record, except it seemed to be more intent on contemplating rock music. This one just *is* a rock record.”

A ghost is born sees Wilco continuing its collaborative relationship with Jim O’Rourke, who assisted the band in shaping the intricately textured *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. The gifted producer/arranger/musician—who, in 2003, united with Tweedy and Kotche as the avant-folk collective Loose Fur—has in many ways become an essential component in Wilco’s music-making process, assisting the band as it distills, and ultimately satisfies, its complex musical goals.

“We wanted to focus our energy on the other side of the glass,” Tweedy says, “so it was great to have Jim in the control room being our ears. His role was really that of the classic producer, somebody you have a sympathetic musical vision with and that you can trust to help you implement that vision.”

Along with his duties behind the board, O’Rourke contributed performances on a variety of instruments, including guitars, bass, piano, organ, and synthesizer.

“Because we wanted to do things live,” Tweedy says, “it was great to have an extra set of hands around to play as a part of the initial performance. We didn’t have to say, ‘Ok, we can overdub that part later.’”

A ghost is born marks Wilco’s first release with contributions from keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen. The Chicago-based engineer/musician initially came aboard to perform real-time

sound manipulations on the *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* tour, sitting just off stage left, triggering the samples and sonic flourishes required to bring the *YHF* material to life. As the tour rolled on, Jorgensen gradually moved onto the stage itself, manning his laptop as well as taking on more and more keyboard duties.

“It became apparent that Mike was a very proficient piano player that could do a lot more than we were using him for,” Tweedy says. “At that point, he started becoming a full-fledged member of the band, contributing parts to the new songs and even handling more of the nuts and bolts architecture of the older songs.”

In addition to Jorgensen, Tweedy also credits a great deal of the band’s current creative strength to the exceptional rhythm combo of bassist John Stirratt and drummer Glenn Kotche.

“Glenn brings an enormous amount of energy and excitement and imagination to the proceedings,” he says, “on top of being easily the best musician in the band. He’s got a great approach to everything he tackles. And of course, I can’t say enough about John. He’s a great bass player, a great singer, and a great friend. It really wouldn’t be Wilco without him.”

Not long after the *A ghost is born* sessions wrapped, Leroy Bach revealed his intentions to depart Wilco. The band recently announced the addition of two new members to the roster: multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone (who has worked with such artists as Joseph Arthur and Josh Rouse, as well as serving as Stirratt’s compatriot in his extracurricular project, the Autumn Defense) and guitarist Nels Cline, renowned for his work with Mike Watt and The Geraldine Fibbers, along with his many avant-garde and jazz recordings.

“The nature of my musical interest is to be pretty curious and to shift,” Tweedy says, “and not everybody comes around to it. As a result, the line-up has changed to the point where there’s an argument to be made for calling it something else. But at the same time, I think it still holds true to the spirit of what Wilco has always been about.

“The overall idea for this record was to let it all hang out,” Tweedy says, “to let the music be what it is. That’s always been one of the strengths of this band—we set our sights on something, and then we’re willing to accept what it is once we’re done... even if we didn’t get to where we were intending to go in the first place.”—April 2004