

By **Mark Binelli**

Jeff Tweedy's

Cure for Anxiety

A stint in rehab got the Wilco leader back on his feet, but what really helps is the guitar in his hands

IT'S ABOUT FOUR O'CLOCK ON A MONDAY AFTERNOON, and Jeff Tweedy of Wilco is getting ready to play an incredibly intimate one-off gig. Falling back onto a stool with his yellow Fender in his lap, he gazes out at the shabby performance space with the impassive stare of a rock veteran who's played worse dives. Still, this one's pretty bad. The stage lights appear to be nothing more than flashlights crudely duct-taped to a pole, and the floor is littered with . . . are those Legos?

Tweedy glances back at the drummer, a blond kid with several teeth missing.

"What do you wanna play?" he asks.

"Blabrrryakkkle!" the kid shouts. He's clearly mocking Tweedy. One wonders whether there's tension in this lineup. Over the years, Tweedy has developed the reputation of a guy who changes band members like undershirts. But he remains unruffled.

"I don't know that," he says patiently.

"You choose," the kid says, testing a cymbal.

And so Tweedy launches into a tight instrumental. The song is obviously indebted to the Ramones. The drummer, all the while, pounds out a backbeat with a primitive fury.

When they finish, I clap. I'm the only one in the audience. Tweedy says, "That was a song we wrote for the Blisters. It's called 'I Don't Wanna Go to School.'" I ask if it has lyrics, and Tweedy sings, "It's too early, too early, too early in the morning/But everybody, everybody, everybody has to do something they don't wanna do. . . ."

"Uh-uh," interrupts the drummer, who, we should note at this point, is Tweedy's eight-year-old son, Spencer. "That's where you're wrong."

The Blisters are Spencer's band. He's been taking drum lessons from Wilco's drummer, Glenn Kotche, who was teaching music at a high school when he joined Wilco. There are three other guys in the Blisters (Tweedy Sr. is not an official member), though of late Spencer has been trying to integrate his best friend, Jenny, into the group, as well. "He hooked her up with this sampler," Tweedy says. You may remember Spencer Tweedy from the Wilco documentary *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart*—specifically, from the sweet moment when Spencer slaps out the beat to "Heavy Metal Drummer" while sitting next to his dad, his hand-drumming eventually segueing into the recorded version of the song.

"That's how the song goes," Tweedy is protesting now.

"Everybody has to do something they don't wanna do."

"You got the lyrics right," Spencer retorts, "but they're not true." He smiles petulantly at this rhetorical victory.

A serious expression comes over Tweedy's face. "Well, actually, Spencer, I think that it pretty much is true," he says, his voice, as always, soft and a bit ragged. "If you're living in a world with other people, sometimes you have to do things you don't want to. Nobody can avoid that. It's impossible. You're sharing the world, physically, with these other people, so you have to compromise. Right?"

Spencer stares blankly at his dad. "Oh," he says.

It's late March, and we're in the basement of Tweedy's Chicago home, where he lives with his wife, Sue, and Spencer, and Spencer's younger brother, Sam. In a few weeks, Tweedy will check himself into a rehab clinic for an addiction to prescription pills. When we meet again, in May, Tweedy will tell me that he recalls almost nothing about our first conversation. At the moment, though, he seems extremely lucid, and happy enough, particularly when he's with his son or playing music. The only off note I notice comes whenever Tweedy steps out for a cigarette: His hands shake.

After hearing the rehab news, I naturally combed back

through my notes, looking for some other missed signs. This was my physical description of Tweedy on that afternoon: "Navy-blue button-down shirt w/ white tee underneath. Chunky gray digital watch w/ plastic band. Jeans. Messy graying hair (minor streaks). Stubble. Troubled face. He looks pained, often. Though he's in a good mood. And funny. But even when laughing, seems like he's got other stuff on his mind. Smoker's cough."

When we went outside, Tweedy was ranting about the Bush administration. Next to the part where I noted his shaking hands, I wrote, "Cold? Or fury?"

TIMING HAS ALWAYS been a weird thing with Wilco. Their 2002 album, *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*—considered by many to be their masterpiece—was famously rejected by the group's then-label, Reprise. Around the same time, Tweedy fired multi-instrumentalist Jay Bennett. All of this is documented in *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart*—including the happy ending: a label bidding war over the dropped album.

Of course, happy endings always depend on where the storyteller chooses to end his story. In the case of Wilco, the story continued like this: *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* received effusive praise, and, when it came time for a follow-up, the group tapped Sonic Youth sideman and experimental-rock vet Jim O'Rourke, who had mixed *Yankee*, to co-produce. "I've personally been interested in noise for a long, long time," Tweedy says with a chuckle. "So much attention was paid to the sonics of the last record—with this one, we wanted it to sound like people in a room playing music together."

A Ghost Is Born is another great Wilco album, which, inevitably, will seem minor in the wake of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. It's a quiet album—songs such as "At Least That's What You Said" and "Hell Is Chrome" begin in near-whispers. If there's a theme, musically, it seems to be entropy, with many of the songs starting off soft and pretty and ending in feedback and distortion (in the case of "Less Than You Think," about twelve minutes of feedback and distortion). On "Spiders (Kidsmoke)," a hypnotic droning beat does battle with and is eventually overpowered by a furious guitar riff, and the

album's closer, "The Late Greats," would sound at home on rootsier early Wilco efforts such as *A.M.* or *Being There*. On the latter cut, Tweedy sings about a mythic "greatest lost track of all time," one that you can't hear on the radio. "The best band will never get signed," he sings. "So good you will never know/They never even played a show..."

While making the record, Tweedy—who has suffered for years from chronic migraines—began taking pills around the clock for his headaches. "I knew it was a problem, but I didn't want to let them get out of my system and find out if I even had a headache," he says. Tweedy has battled

depression and various addictions for most of his adult life. "I'd never got-

mounting sense that he was losing control. "Preparing for a record and a tour is stressful, but it would be normal job-related stress for a healthy person," he says. "But I couldn't cope with it, brain-chemistry-wise. That wasn't the only problem, but it was a determining factor."

"I knew he was having problems," says Wilco bassist John Stirratt, who's been playing with Tweedy for more than a decade. "Completely. But the nature of that sort of addiction—I mean, I knew he was self-diagnosing. He'd be taking one thing to alleviate the effect of something else he'd taken. Which is a bad thing. But you never know the severity."

Once the record was completed, Tweedy decided to clean up before the cycle of touring and promoting *A Ghost Is Born* got

smoking two packs of cigarettes.

During an especially severe panic attack, Tweedy became convinced that he was really having a heart attack, and his wife drove him to the emergency room. Doctors gave him some medication and told him he'd be fine. The next morning he had another attack. He returned to the hospital and begged to be admitted. "I wanted someone to knock me out," he says. "I didn't want to kill myself, but I just wanted to get it over with." The hospital sent him to a rehab clinic that also treats mental illness, where Tweedy spent the next twenty-six days.

"It was the most beautiful thing I've ever done in my life," he says. "It was also the most terrifying thing I've ever done in my life. I'm not at the end of anything. I learned it's stuff I have to manage, just like if I had diabetes."

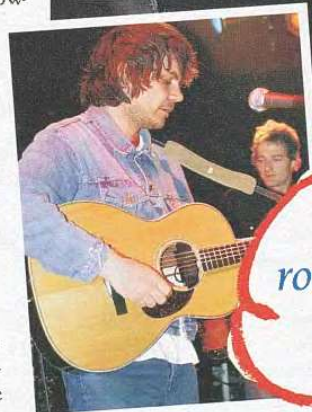
For Tweedy, who tries to write and play music every day, one of the most difficult things about rehab, at first, was his loss of guitar privileges. (Because of possible suicide attempts, the hospital didn't want strings around.) Eventually, he was allowed to play during art-therapy classes. "The doctors told me, 'Your panic goes away completely when you play guitar,'" Tweedy says. "I guess my color changes, everything. That's why we've never canceled shows, and why I struggled with these problems on my own for a long time. Because I always knew when I got onstage and played, I would feel better."

TWEEDY PLAYED HIS FIRST live show when he was fourteen, having talked his way into a band formed by Jay Farrar and his brothers (Jay Farrar and Tweedy would eventually co-found the beloved alt-country group Uncle Tupelo). "Jay's brother kept turning my amp down," Tweedy says. "Our first gig was either a party in a basement or a high school dance. Both had similar outcomes. Which was me not realizing my amp was turned down but still jumping around like a maniac."

The group specialized in Fifties-rockabilly tunes by artists such as Gene Vincent and Eddie Cochran. "Those songs are hard to fuck up," Tweedy points out. That band eventually morphed into another group that played psychedelic and garage covers from the Sixties. "Funnily," Tweedy says, "we sounded a lot like the rock bands that are popular today." When it is suggested that the group was ahead of its time, he smiles wryly and says, "We were twenty years too late and fifteen years too early."

Even today, as deftly as Tweedy incorporates avant-garde guitar histrionics into the catchiest of pop songs, he admits, "It takes a lot for me to get excited by new

The current lineup: Jorgensen, Stirratt, Tweedy and Kotche (from left). Not shown: Cline and Sansone.



"I wasn't pursuing oblivion in a rock & roll way," says Tweedy. "I was just trying to cope and feel better."

ten help for the addiction side of things," Tweedy says. "I have been treated for depression and severe panic disorder."

"Even that treatment was always sporadic," he continues. "I'd always resisted getting help because I thought it was something different for me: I wasn't pursuing oblivion. I wasn't fucking myself up in a rock & roll way. I was just trying to cope and feel better." Structure is extremely important to Tweedy for that reason. He says he'd abuse drugs less while on tour, because touring mandates a fairly rigid schedule: He knew he'd have to be at sound check at four, for example, so he couldn't get too annihilated.

Still, the pressure of following up a major album and all of the attendant promotional work that goes with it did not help Tweedy's

under way. He stopped taking migraine pills in February and says he felt great for about a week. But then taking any pill began to induce panic. He was seeing a dubious therapist at the time, who told him it would be fine to stop taking his antidepressants and meditate instead. Tweedy also stopped taking the pills that controlled his panic attacks (stopping cold-turkey can sometimes cause seizures).

"I've detoxed on my own with harder things to detox from," Tweedy says—but after about five weeks, he acknowledges, "the mental side of things was beginning to deteriorate." He began having panic attacks that lasted twenty-four hours. At times, he couldn't read or focus on anything, and he would take ten-mile walks around the park,

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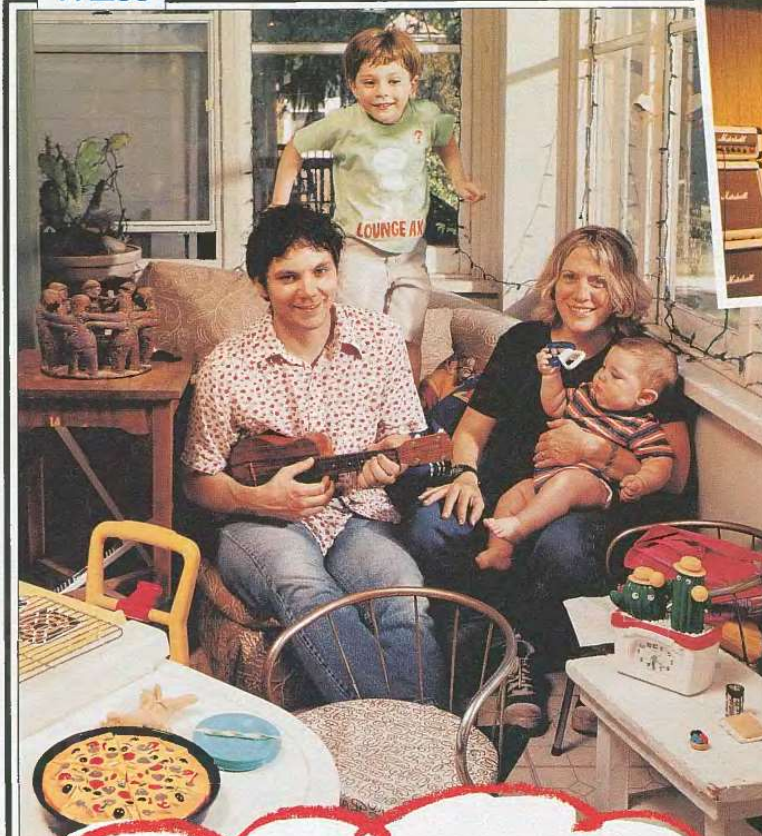
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"What's missing in most bands I hear today is a belief that what they're doing matters."

records. I think there's a lot of great stuff being made. But what's missing in most of what I hear or see today is a naive belief—well, not naive, but a belief that what they're doing matters. I don't like the whole irony thing, in other words. There's something so intoxicating in music from the mid-Sixties until, say, '74—if you want to include some punk, maybe '78. There's an environment of belief, a faith that they could be great, that they could make great works of art. Not that they could make a great record for an indie label that 20,000 people at Tufts could hear. Those bands wanted to be huge. And I know I run the risk of sounding . . . I mean, I find it distasteful hearing people say what I'm saying to you. I don't discredit the fact that there's tons of great things happening now."

Still, when Tweedy leads me over to his boombox and asks—sounding as genuinely excited as a kid who has just heard the Sex Pistols or Bob Dylan for the first time—"Can I play you the coolest thing I've ever heard in my life?" he does not play me Wolf Eyes or Deerhoof or one of the other contemporary fringe bands he's been raving about. It's an old recording of a yodeling sister act. It is sort of mind-blowingly great. "Listen," Tweedy says.

"Her voice sounds like a trumpet here.

"I guess as somebody who makes music now, I'm trapped in a context," he says later. "I can't change that. You hear my music now. But maybe I get excited listening to stuff out of context. Like, Abba records sound amazing now. And the Who doesn't really hold up. But I don't know. Maybe it's just the fucking fact that I only want to think of music in very simple terms: as human beings making sounds. And it's so much easier to do that with older records, because that's all they are. It's not an image, or something being squeezed through the cracks of the Internet."

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CHICAGO and Dekalb, Illinois, Tweedy started to panic. He was driving to Dekalb to play at a 650-capacity club called Otto's. All of the change was freaking him out—it was his first time out of Chicago after his release, his first time away from his kids and, perhaps most intimidatingly, the band's first live show. Only Stirratt and Kotche remain from Wilco's *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* recording lineup; the latest version of the band includes multi-instrumentalists Mikael Jorgensen and Pat Sansone, and the blistering guitar



Left: The Tweedy family. Above: Eight-year-old Spencer pounds the skins for his band the Blasters.

work of Nels Cline. Tweedy's fear lasted throughout most of the afternoon. He made it through sound check, hung out with Sue—and then, suddenly, a couple of hours before showtime, the panic stopped. "I was more comfortable and relaxed than I've ever been before a show," Tweedy says. "It was amazing. I kept checking myself, like, 'When am I gonna start panicking?'"

In the show that followed, the band—performing beneath an unlit neon BOOGIE sign—delivered revelatory versions of most of the tracks from *A Ghost Is Born* and *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, Tweedy at one point slipping out of his jacket to reveal a white Doctors Without Borders T-shirt. The back of the shirt featured the nonprofit group's Web address and a map of the world highlighting poor countries in need of medication. The front of the T-shirt was taken up primarily by a drawing of an enormous capsule, along with the words GOT PILLS? MILLIONS DON'T.

"I feel more prepared than ever before," Stirratt tells me before the show, though he adds, "The rehab thing really highlighted the fact that what we have here hinges a lot on one person. But if it were to end tomorrow, we'd be OK. Having a historical perspective on rock, as we all do, we know there's generally a four- to five-year period where a band can hit its stride. So ten years—that's extraordinary."

"I think it's one of the best shows we've ever done," Tweedy says the next day. When I mention his reputation for jettisoning band members, he shrugs. "Ideally, I'd want more continuity from record to record, especially over the last few years," he admits. "But I don't think it's resulted in anything less than better and better records. And, you know, I could argue the other side of it—to take it in the negative, I think some records could have been much worse if the lineup hadn't changed."

"It's so prevalent in a lot of people's lives—this idea that it's so hard to let go of anything, to the point where people just die," he continues. "Neither person is doing anyone else a favor by staying together. It's justifiable in the context of a marriage and children. But in a rock band—it's just a fucking band. There's no reason whatsoever to keep it together if it's not fun. That's the point of a band." Tweedy does not smile, but he seems cheered by this notion. "You should be happy."

Contributing editor MARK BINELLI wrote the cover story on *OutKast* in *RS* 944.

MARK HETHCOFF (TWEEDY FAMILY); LAUREN CASTADY (BLASTERS)