

# Time Out

## Chicago

THE WHERE-TO-GO WHAT-TO-DO WEEKLY  
MAY 10-16, 2007 ISSUE NO. 115  
\$2.50 TIMEOUTCHICAGO.COM

bonus  
PULLOUT  
SUMMER  
FESTIVAL  
GUIDE

# Happy days

With a new album and new outlook, Jeff Tweedy and the rest of **Wilco** have something to *(sort of)* smile about

**PICKING ORDER**  
The best booths at your farmers' market

**TICKET MASTERS**  
TOC critics pick the best flicks of the season

**BLUE, MEN, GROUP** With the release of *Sky Blue Sky*, Wilco forecasts smooth sailing ahead. Guitarist Nels Cline, top left, clockwise; keyboardist Mikael Jorgensen; multi-instrumentalist Pat Sansone; bassist John Stirratt; drummer Glenn Kotche; singer-guitarist Jeff Tweedy, center.



# Sky's

## the limit?

The latest album by Jeff Tweedy and Wilco finds the band in a surprisingly sunny mood. But a cleaned-up and contented frontman has fans wondering if the band has lost its edge. By **Joel Reese** Photographs by **Calbee Booth**

Jeff Tweedy has a problem: No one believes he's not miserable.

"I was in Spain, doing an interview for this TV show, and this woman kept saying, 'Jeff, your songs are so sad—why are your songs so sad?' " he recalls. "And I was like, 'Well no, actually, on the new album....' " But she just wasn't believing it. And after the interview was over, she said, 'It's okay, Jeff, I know you're sad. And I like that!' " he says with a chuckle.

But Tweedy isn't sad these days. In fact, it seems he might be, well, almost...happy. His band Wilco is about to release the first studio album with its latest lineup, including widely acclaimed improvisational-jazz guitarist Nels Cline. Tweedy, married with two sons, is out of rehab for a painkiller addiction, and he's discovered a regimen that's ended the debilitating migraines and anxiety attacks that plagued him for years.

"I think that my life is better than it's ever been—I'm really healthy and in shape, and I don't even smoke anymore," he says.

The album, titled *Sky Blue Sky*, reflects that newfound fulfillment. The first song, "Either Way," begins with a gently plucked guitar and the lyrics, "Maybe the sun will shine today/

The clouds will blow away..." Soon, violins and keyboards kick in as Tweedy sings, "I will try to understand/ Everything has its plan, either way."

"I think there's an idea of acceptance on the record, and being content with the way things are, good or bad," Tweedy says.

Which is wonderful. No one wants to be miserable, and Tweedy certainly has paid his dues. After the band began streaming *Sky Blue Sky* on its website ([wilcworld.net](http://wilcworld.net)) in March, some fans gave the album the adoration typically heaped on Wilco releases: "Impossible Germany" is one of the best songs Wilco has ever made," reads one post at [MetaFilter.com](http://MetaFilter.com). "That's how you make an album—thank you, Wilco," another listener posted at [Stereogum.com](http://Stereogum.com).

And yet, to other ardent Wilco fans, *Sky Blue Sky* is too soft and lacks the tension that's made Wilco one of the most acclaimed American bands. In addition to the praise, the album also has received some surprisingly venomous reviews: "Dentist Office Radio is gonna have to make room between the Wallflowers and Yanni," one writer posted on the [SoundOpinions.net](http://SoundOpinions.net) message board. Other

postings include: "I feel like I'm driving down Roosevelt Road between Oak Park and Lombard on your typical Chicago dreary winter grey day when I hear these songs" and "Where did this band's fire go?"

Tweedy knows *Sky Blue Sky* is going to turn off some fans. And he's used to that.

"I feel like we're not making Wilco records if people's expectations aren't dashed in some way," he says in the band's massive Albany Park loft, which has an old-school jukebox, dozens of guitars and a surprisingly clean kitchen. "At any given moment in Wilco's history, you could find evidence that we're the fucking most horrible, bloated, pretentious band in the world, or you could find evidence that we're the most gifted, messianic thing ever to exist."

In that sense, *Sky Blue Sky* fits Wilco's pattern of zigging when everyone thinks it's going to zag. After the band's first two albums, *A.M.* and *Being There*, everyone thought Wilco was set to be the torchbearer for the alt-country movement. Then the band released *Summerteeth*, a multilayered pop masterpiece that was as likely to contain the throwback sounds of a Farfisa organ as it was a jangly



guitar. Even more notable was Tweedy's leap as a lyricist—his songs married accessible rock with the troubling sentiments of songs like "Via Chicago," which begins with the line, "I dreamed about killing you again last night/ And it felt alright to me."

Three years later, for *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, Wilco brought in producer Jim O'Rourke, who helmed a moody, swirling album that was more Radiohead than Ryan Adams. The next release, 2004's *A Ghost Is Born*, was even less accessible, with two tracks lasting more than ten minutes—the second, "Less Than You Think," found Tweedy trying to aurally express his migraines via a dizzying eight-plus-minute cacophony of feedback and electronic loops. Wilco's subsequent release was 2005's live *Kicking Television* (its first with guitarist Cline), which finds the band in peak form over four nights at the Vic. Cline's slashing solos and drummer Glenn Kotche's sinewy percussion expose the melodies beneath the dense production that dampened such *Ghost* tunes as "Handshake Drugs" and "Muzzle of Bees."

Which brings us to *Sky Blue Sky*. Musically, the album is more straightforward than past releases—there's a lot less studio trickery. There's also guitarist Cline, who's played with Thurston Moore, Mike Watt, Willie Nelson and Jon Brion, in addition to releasing several solo albums. Cline has a quick response when asked why he joined the band: He was nearly broke.

"I guess it was kind of mercenary at first—I definitely had my back up against the wall when Jeff Tweedy called," Cline says. "I was working constantly, but really not doing well [financially]. Jeff caught me at a moment of peril in my life. I can't say I was sitting around, dreaming of being in Wilco—I'd love to say that, but I wasn't."

Cline's contribution on the album is invaluable: At its best, there's a six-string interplay that almost recalls Television's epochal *Marquee Moon*. One example is the languid, nearly six-minute tune "Impossible Germany," which starts with a delicately reverbed riff and slowly evolves into Cline's fret-melting solo. The ballads feature top-notch musicianship, too: "Leave Me (Like You Found Me)" seems like a fairly tame number at first, but the beauty is in the nuances, as a shimmering fingerpicked riff subtly plays against a haunting slide guitar.

At the same time, one can't help but wish the band would cut loose a little more. Kotche, a brilliant drummer, plays a disappointingly reserved role here, keeping the tunes earthbound. Given the stellar band Tweedy has assembled, it occasionally feels like he's behind the wheel of a new Porsche but won't take it above 25 miles per hour.

Bassist John Stirratt, who joined Tweedy's previous band, Uncle Tupelo, in 1993, notes this is the first Wilco album in which all of the band

members had a hand in its sound. "It was really kind of the only example of whatever lineup all sitting down together and hammering out arrangements," Stirratt says. "It was amazing, a really civilized sort of process."

Tweedy agrees that the group's consensus has produced an album that has a consistent, subdued feel to it, similar to R.E.M.'s *Automatic for the People*. But he bristles when the album is called "mellow." "I don't get that," he says. "I honestly don't get it sounding 'mellow.' I guess there's quiet material on the record, and I don't know—I just don't hear it as being a mellow record, but whatever."

What word would he use instead? Tweedy pauses, then says, "I describe it as 'beautiful.' 'Beautiful' isn't mellow to me. I think we wanted to make a beautiful record, and people have this idea that beauty is somehow muted or somehow not as vibrant or not as intense. I find it very emotional."

Tweedy also acknowledges the album has a vintage sound: "I chalk it up to us being a band, as a whole, that has a little bit older median age than maybe some other bands."

Wilco wasn't always so restrained. Back in the day, former guitarist and multi-instrumentalist Jay Bennett occasionally took the stage in a dress. Other times, former production manager Jonathan Parker ended shows by bounding onstage to lead the band in a gonzo version of Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song." Now, the group performs at venues like the staid Auditorium Theatre, and there's an air of propriety surrounding things.

"But for every 'Immigrant Song' and for every great, loose, triumphant moment, there would be a hideous gig," Stirratt says. "You just kind of get better. And I hate to say this, but there's more expectation. It's a lot more expensive to see Wilco now, and people expect to not see a train wreck. We're not 25 anymore, either."

**"I feel like we're not making Wilco records if people's expectations aren't dashed in some way."**

No one can begrudge Tweedy for his new outlook on life. At his lowest point, he considered giving up music altogether if it meant he could be rid of his migraines and anxiety attacks. "That was the bargain I was making," he says. "I thought, I will be happy, and healthy in my life, and I don't give a shit if I ever write another song because it's not worth it. I just want to feel good. And I meant that."

But with the proper regimen of therapy and medication, Tweedy is better. Everyone sees the difference: "He's happier than I've seen him in a long time," Stirratt says. "And I think the record reflects his healthy well-being right now."

Tweedy says this album certainly is a lot easier for his wife, former Lounge Ax owner



Sue Miller, to listen to than past records: “Almost every song on the record seems like a very open kind of conversation, or a way to relate with someone you love,” he says. “I think a lot of songs I just feel like I’m singing to my wife, or something. They’re kind of love songs, in some ways.”

Tweedy’s “love songs” are obviously the result of a new mindset for him, and he’s very pleased with the new album. But whether he’s produced a lasting piece of art remains to be seen. Could it be that the band’s music was better when he was suffering emotionally?

**“I’d hate to think you’ve got to be in rehab, or going through a divorce, or having migraines to do your best work.”**

Former Wilco member Bennett, who says he remembers his tenure in the band “fondly,” isn’t quite sure. “Man, I’d hate to think you’ve got to be in rehab, or on drugs, or going through a divorce, or having migraines—it would be a horrible thought to think you’d have to do that to do your best work,” he says.

But then Bennett notes that, like Tweedy, he has cleaned up his act—he barely smokes,

doesn’t drink and only sips the occasional half-cup of coffee. And how’s that going for him? “I’m working on a new album, and I’m not feeling it,” he admits. (Bennett’s fourth solo album comes out on Rykodisc later this year.)

Bennett also reminisces on a night when he and Tweedy were holed up in the loft, working on a song for *Fox Trot*. It was near the end of his time with Wilco, and the tension between them was fog-thick. “That’s when we came up with ‘Jesus, Etc.’,” he says of the gorgeous, melancholy song, which features a gentle wash of strings as Tweedy sings, “You were right about the stars/ Each one is a setting sun.”

“We weren’t on really good terms, but somehow, we sat there—he was playing drums, I was playing a Wurlitzer,” Bennett continues. “There was all this conflict that was unspoken. But somehow, that created that song. There’s an example of conflict giving rise to something.”

But Tweedy doesn’t buy the notion that suffering is necessary for great art, calling that idea “a myth.” “I think the creative side of any person who is striving to make art is going to be there whether the friction is there or not,” he says. He theorizes that the ever-popular tortured-artist effect might just be a defense mechanism that keeps people from really pushing themselves.

He says American culture emphasizes the belief that “if you really believe in yourself and make some art and stick your neck out, you’re gonna fuckin’ pay a heavy price,” he says.

“You’re gonna end up in the ditch and you’re gonna get screwed up and you’re gonna do drugs, and I think it’s a myth to kind of keep people from trying. Maybe it’s a good thing to tell yourself at the end of the day when you’re in the checkout line at the grocery store, going through the drudgery of another fuckin’ day, you buy one of those magazines and go, ‘Well at least I don’t have to do that. It’s probably better, because it would have been a bloodbath if I had gotten famous.’”

But Tweedy is famous, and while it hasn’t been a bloodbath, it hasn’t been easy. And if the new album reveals some degree of happiness, Tweedy refuses to acknowledge it.

“Happy is always a really weird thing for me,” he says. He struggles to come up with a different word—“contentment,” then “fulfillment.” Then he goes to the album’s cover—a photo of a falcon chasing a flock of starlings—to describe where he is. Instead of focusing on the birds, Tweedy says the point of that image is what’s behind them.

“There’s a lot of violence in that picture, there’s a lot of kinetic energy,” he says. “But I think the ultimate point of that picture is the blue sky. And it’s always there, literally. I don’t think it’s corny at all to say it’s something that probably benefits us to stay focused on, and at least be reminded of occasionally.”

Funnily, the photo illustrating this blue sky is black and white. Then again, it wouldn’t be Tweedy if there wasn’t some contradiction.

Sky Blue Sky flies into stores Tuesday 15.

**WILCO'S FAMILY TREE**  
 Want to see how the band connects to Beth Orton, Sonic Youth, the Replacements and others? Download our exclusive Wilco family tree at [timeoutchicago.com/features](http://timeoutchicago.com/features).

ILLUSTRATION: LAUREN VIERA AND MIKE NOVAK