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## Creating a Woody Guthrie soundtrack

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This week, Broadway Books is publishing Tribune music critic Greg Kot's "Wilco: Learning How To Die," which traces the Chicago-based rock band's history, including its record-company battles over the CD "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot."

This is the first of two excerpts from the book, examining the period when the band collaborated with Billy Bragg on two CDs using the lyrics of folk music legend Woody Guthrie.

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Billy Bragg first approached Jeff Tweedy and Jay Bennett about having Wilco collaborate with him on an album of Woody Guthrie's lyrics the fall of '96. Tweedy was noncommittal, but Bennett was eager. He idolized the Brit folkie, to the point of naming his old band Titanic Love Affair after a Bragg lyric. "I thought we would've been idiots not to do it," Bennett says.

Tweedy shrugged. "I didn't go into it a huge Billy Bragg fan. I didn't think Wilco in a million years would've backed up Billy Bragg on a record, shared a record with him even. I felt like our approaches to music wouldn't work together."

Bragg was used to having things his way, as well. But he loved Wilco's 1996 album, "Being There," for its varied musical attack. In his mind, elevated Wilco above the rest of the more one-dimensional alternative-country bands emerging in America. "With a lot of American 'roots' bands, it doesn't go back much beyond the 1950s," he says, "but Wilco gives you the feeling that they go back to the '30s and even into the last century."

He figured he could entice them by proposing Dublin as a neutral site between London and Chicago to record the album. But for Tweedy, the issue was less about geography and more about content: What lyrics would be molded into songs and who would choose them?

"It wasn't that appealing until it was made clear to me that we could go through the archives ourselves and pick out songs. I never would dismiss Woody Guthrie, because he's such a huge part of my musical life, but I definitely went into with the idea that the stereotype that had been projected on him was not that appealing to me anymore. The Left-leaning hobo stereotype of Woody stood in contrast to what I hoped would be true: that Woody never would have marginalized himself like that. He would have preferred reach a broad section of society than be pack-aged and sold to a tightly knit group of initiated people. I suspected there was this other Guthrie there, from stuff I'd read about him, but I didn't know for sure until I saw the archive."

There Tweedy and Bennett surprised even Guthrie's daughter Nora with some of the lyrics to which

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they gravitated. " 'California Stars' didn't strike me as one of my father's great songs," she says. "It's not a song I would have picked out. It didn't strike me until I heard the music with it, and that was a good lesson for me. Jeff has an incredible musical way of bringing out the meaning of a lyric. He went way beyond what I thought was possible."

"After seeing some of those songs, my take on him was that he's more alive than ever," Tweedy says. "And that it would be a disservice to him to keep hammering home certain aspects of his social concerns, or whatever politics he had, as opposed to affirming the idiosyncrasies that made him a major American artist. I'm not into Woody the icon. I'm into Woody the freak weirdo."

In contrast, Bragg embraced Guthrie's politics. He insisted that the pro-union "I Guess I Planted" and the Mussolini-bashing "All You Fascists" be recorded, while Tweedy rolled his eyes.

Despite the head-butting, the music flowed when Wilco and Bragg first convened Dec. 12-18, 1997, at King Size studio in Chicago, as a warm-up for the Dublin session in mid-January. These two sessions would yield most of the songs that would appear on "Mermaid Avenue" I and II, released in 1998 and 2000, respectively. The musicians huddled around copies of Guthrie's handwritten lyrics spread on the floor, instruments in their laps. "It was a bit like going to the dressing-up trunk as kids and seeing who we wanted to be that day," Bragg says.

Bennett banged out the three chords for "California Stars" in his girlfriend's kitchen so quickly he was sure he'd lifted them off Springsteen's "Nebraska" or some other cherished album. When Tweedy heard the demo, he did some tweaking; he accelerated the tempo and took the melody up an octave. In the studio, Wilco knocked out the finished version in two takes.

"Hoodoo Voodoo" -- a nonsensical children's song that sounds like it could've been a precursor for both Dr. Seuss' "The Cat in the Hat" and Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" -- was transformed when bassist John Stirratt and drummer Ken Coomer began exaggerating the groove, goofing on its herky-jerky possibilities. Tweedy jumped on the microphone while Bennett rocked the organ and Bragg joined in on electric guitar, and a song that had been dead in the water suddenly sailed.

The crowning moment -- not just of the Guthrie sessions at King Size, but of this incarnation of Wilco -- arrived on the final day, after Bragg had already flown back to London for the holidays. "One by One" emerged like a mirage, Bob Egan's pedal-steel purring alongside Bennett's piano, while Stirratt's bass danced slowly with Coomer's mesmerizing drums. Subdued and jazzy, Coomer evoked the great Tennessee session drummer Kenney Buttrey, who played with Bob Dylan on "Nashville Skyline." Tweedy sounded like he was singing with his chin on Guthrie's stooped shoulder, his tone unhurried and confiding as night closed in. The song didn't build. Instead it receded like a wave retreating from the shore, until two-thirds of the way in, it was just barely a whisper of foam: "One by one the days are slipping up behind you." Guthrie's lyric is from the perspective of a man much older than his 27 years at the time. Tweedy was only a few months past his 30th birthday when he stepped to the microphone on that December evening.

"I tried to match Jeff's vocal, to really listen to it as I was playing," Bob Egan says. "I thought it was an original, that it was autobiographical, because Jeff sang it with such conviction. Afterward, I'm saying, 'Dude, I'm sorry, I didn't know that was going on in your life.' And he says, 'That was written by Woody Guthrie in 1939.'"

It was to be the final Wilco song Egan would play on. He had dropped into the Chicago sessions on the last day, invited as an afterthought, not even aware that the band was working on an album of Guthrie songs. On tour, his over-amplified pedal-steel playing had become an irritant to the other band members; it got so bad that roadie Jonathan Parker was instructed to sabotage Egan's volume knob, so that he couldn't crank it up. Tweedy would occasionally introduce him on stage with zingers that were less than good-natured: "This is Bob Egan. He used to be in Wilco." The other band members were rankled that Egan was making \$1,350 a week to their \$800; he'd negotiated a

higher salary because he had left his Chicago music store behind. When the tour ended, hints were dropped that his services were no longer required, but no one bothered to come out and say it directly. Then Wilco manager Tony Margherita bought him a plane ticket to Dublin in January. There he was greeted by Wilco's leader at the door of the condo where the band was staying.

Egan was crestfallen by his greeting, such as it was. "The first thing he says to me is, 'I don't know why you're here. There is nothing for you to play on. The record's done.' I was like, 'Oh, thanks. How are ya?' So I hung out in the studio with my game face on, and I think Billy felt sorry for me and asked me to play on a couple of his things. The whole experience was one of the harder things I've ever had to do musically."

Ironically, Egan ended up in Bragg's touring band that summer, playing many of the "Mermaid Avenue" songs that Wilco had performed in the studio. He also served at least one other role in Dublin: as a drinking buddy for Wilco's bass player. Stirratt and Bennett had been inseparable during the "Being There" tour, egging each other on to greater heights of inebriation and onstage frivolity. But Bennett had three root-canal procedures and had his wisdom teeth pulled while in Chicago, and was forced to swear off the booze. He didn't pick up another drink for four years. "I'm so glad Bob came over because I had someone to drink with," Stirratt says with a laugh. "Everyone else was into prescription drugs." As Bennett adjusted to alcohol-free life, Tweedy's migraines were becoming a daily impediment to emotional clarity. A daily diet of pain killers, anti-depressants and homesickness clouded Dublin.

"I look back on that now and I'm really surprised I hung with it all," Stirratt says. "Jeff looked exhausted and Jay wasn't much better off; they had their arms around each other on the plane over to Dublin. They were bonding over their misery. That was the start of the real weirdness in the band, a breaking point."

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Wednesday: A sublime collaboration ends in trans-Atlantic screaming matches.

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