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## Who's the boss?

### When Tweedy, Bragg fought to control Guthrie soundtrack

Greg Kot, Tribune music critic

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The arrival of Woody Guthrie's daughter Nora during the third week of the "Mermaid Avenue" sessions brightened Dublin for everyone, and was the catalyst for one last moment of spontaneous beauty. She had brought additional songs from her late father's archive, including one called "Another Man's Done Gone." It consists of 11 lines, every one precious. They're the words of a dying man clinging to his last hope for immortality: "I don't know, I may go down or up or anywhere/But I feel like this scribbling might stay."

Billy Bragg shaped three chords on guitar, and showed them to Jay Bennett, who was tinkering on a grand piano. When Bennett went to work in earnest on the 88's, the chords expanded, and the skeleton of a song emerged. Jeff Tweedy was napping on a couch behind a drawn curtain, and arose bleary eyed but curious. Standing at the piano, he briefly studied the lyrics and began singing. Out of his lips came a sound as forlorn as Richard Manuel's ghost, a distant echo of the Band's "Unfaithful Servant." In 90 seconds the song drifted into the room and then vanished, with only silence and tears to mark its passage. Nora Guthrie's eyes glimmered as Jeff Tweedy sang her father's words through her headphones. Engineer Jerry Boys, a veteran of recording sessions since the Beatles, dropped his head. Bragg felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"Tweedy sang it," Jonathan Parker says, "and brought grown men to tears."

Billy Bragg felt it too. "It was a moment, and then it was done. A true collaboration. Nora found the lyrics, I had written the music, Jay played it, and Jeff sang it in a way that was beyond personal. It's a song of despair, a man facing death wondering if anyone will remember him if he's gone. And that performance was the four of us sending a clear message out to Woody that his scribbling was immortal."

But for Bennett, the performance brings back sour memories. "Billy had the chords to James Taylor's 'Fire and Rain.' Real simple chords. I said, 'Hey, Bill, this might be cooler with something other than D, G, C. So I threw some Burt Bacharach five-note, compound chords in there, B-minor 7 with F-sharp on the bottom. Made it prettier, basically. The song was getting too high for him to sing comfortably. So Jeff came out and sang it. Billy got us about one-third of the way there, I wrote the chords, and Jeff came up with the vocal melody. But when the album came out, it was credited only to Billy."

Even more significant differences developed over how Bragg and Wilco wanted the album mixed.

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"I enjoyed working with Billy," Tweedy insists. "He had a good sense of humor, the ability to laugh at himself. And at the same time, I was always suspect of him, as being somewhat full of [expletive]. I never did understand why we were recording songs about brown-shirted fascists clobbering people in the streets of Italy during the '30s. He could get really angry if we pushed the wrong buttons, and Wilco as a whole was pretty adept at pushing those buttons. For Jay, it was an atrocity that some of Billy's mixes would make the record. Instead of balancing instruments and allowing it to be an environment where it sounds like a singer and a band, his was very much a vocal solo mix, with a very far way, easily palatable band. So squishy and soft and perfect. To me, the recordings we did for Volume 1 were very raw, almost crappy sounding. Whereas his didn't sound crappy, they sounded chintzy. This faux glitz was on them, and to us that was antithetical to the idea behind the record."

Bennett insisted that Wilco have a crack at mixing Bragg's songs. Tweedy placed a trans-Atlantic call to London. Bragg heard Tweedy out, and then offered a succinct response: "You make your record, and I'll make mine, [expletive]."

"That's the point, Billy. It's not your record," Tweedy said. "It's not our record. It's Woody Guthrie's record. All I'm saying is if we had a different set of ears on the record it would sound more coherent."

Bragg backed down, and sent copies of his masters to Chicago. Bennett remixed them, but Bragg decided to stick with his mixes instead.

"I like to be there for the mixing and everything else," Bragg says. "I don't want to hand it off to someone else. I hate that. I think neither one of us were used to working in a situation where we surrendered any control. So it did lead to a bit of sulking, trans-Atlantic sulking on everyone's part, but not to the extent where we fell out completely. They could have easily said, 'Let's just leave it at that, because we can't start working with you anymore you big-nose bastard, you're so rotten to us.' They would have been quite within their rights to say something along those lines, but instead they agreed to do another album."

"Mermaid Avenue" would go on to sell 277,000 copies -- outselling all of Bragg's previous albums combined in North America, and nearly equaling Wilco's sales for its acclaimed 1996 album, "Being There." It also earned a Grammy nomination for best contemporary folk album, losing out to Lucinda Williams' "Car Wheels on a Gravel Road." (The band was quickly reminded it didn't belong at the glitzy Los Angeles ceremony for the Grammys when Tweedy stood in the aisle with a handful of programs while he waited for his bandmates, and Sean "Puffy" Combs mistook him for an usher.) The reviews were the best of either artist's career. Even longtime Uncle Tupelo and Wilco skeptics were won over: "This time you got it right," Greil Marcus raved in a four-star Rolling Stone review. "While the words are wonderful and unexpected ... it's the music, especially Wilco's music, that transfigures the enterprise," Robert Christgau declared in the Village Voice, where the self-appointed dean of American rock critics handed out a rare "A."

But Wilco and Bragg could never agree on a tour, and their joint success was short-lived. Quarrels ensued over everything from paying union fees for guest musicians to festival concert commitments, or the lack thereof. Because the two camps couldn't agree on doing anything together to support the album, conflicts cropped up over tour and promotional expenses, since these would count against future royalties that Bragg and Wilco were to share. Bragg's manager, Peter Jenner, and Wilco's, Tony Margherita, tussled daily in trans-Atlantic screaming matches.

"There were three or four months there that every day Tony was throwing his phone," Wilco roadie Jonathan Parker says, "and I thought he was going to have a heart attack. I thought he was going to lose it."

Jeff Tweedy has no regrets about the "Mermaid Avenue" tour that wasn't. "We don't have a killer instinct as a band. We never felt like we had to capitalize on something, to really push it home. The response 'Mermaid Avenue' generated was gratifying. It was the most attention Billy had gotten in the press in a long time, especially in the United States, and he was gung-ho, booking mutual shows for us without telling us about it. Then he threatened to sue us when we wouldn't come and play with him, and he had to hire a band. I felt like I was watching a guy shoot himself in the foot. They had it in their heads all along that it was their record, and rightfully so, because Billy was asked to do it first, but they wanted to believe that the success of it had nothing to do with us, that the relationship hadn't evolved at all during the making of it, that we were Billy's backup band. We were in the midst of recording 'Summerteeth,' but we were willing to set aside a few weeks to tour with him. It ended up completely backfiring."

Billy Bragg got over it. The artistic accomplishment of the two "Mermaid Avenue" albums, rather than the acrimony that arose in their wake, is how the singer-songwriter prefers to remember the occasion. "That would be my only regret in the entire project. It wasn't really anyone's fault, it's just that I was between albums and they were in the middle of making one, and they were also at the beginning of their career. It was crucial for them to keep focused on what they were doing. So I put a band together with [ex-Wilco pedal steel player] Bob Egan, put 'California Stars' in my set, and just got on with it."

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