

CHAPTER 11: "I will sing while you croak"

(An excerpt)

The songs for *Summerteeth* started taking shape on the endless road after *Being There*. Bloodier-than-blood feeling, transformed into music in hotel rooms, the back of the tour bus, backstage.

"During the *Being There* tour, we had about four days off in Paris and Jeff never left his hotel room, except to get food, a fish sandwich at McDonald's or whatever," Bob Egan says. "He had the room next to me, so I could hear *Summerteeth* through the walls as he was writing the songs. I went in one day to visit him in the back of the tour bus and he looked at me, and he just started writing words on a sheet of paper. After about five minutes, he handed the paper to me. I read it, and it was 'She's Jar.' It was heavier than the stuff we were playing on tour. A lot heavier. "

Summerteeth, though largely written while in the midst of a tour notable for its raucous misbehavior and punk pillaging, was in many ways the antithesis of the classic rock road record, bereft of bravado. Its world was dream-like and insular, a private struggle magnified by distance, drugs, loneliness and late-night phone calls.

"In 1997, that's all we did --- live on the road," Tweedy says. "When you come home, it's hard not to feel like you're in somebody else's house, to make that transition and feel integrated as a human being. There's Dad and there's this guy who gets a lot of attention --- a rock star or whatever you want to call it --- and that doesn't seem to make him feel any better. Being home and trying to get back in touch with your real self is almost impossible in the time span which you have to do it, which is usually only a few days."

Sue Miller acknowledges that "it was a weird, difficult year for both of us. There were things he was doing at those shows that he never did before or since. It was like a midlife crisis --- one of many, but maybe the worst of them all. I would see what was happening and wonder, 'Who are you?' "

Gary Briggs had seen this sort of thing before. A band suddenly finds itself with a bigger audience, and reaps the rewards --- and the consequences. "He was being more recognized, he was starting to get hit on for the first time in his career," Briggs says of Tweedy. "He would go places and girls would pay attention to him; there were never pretty girls backstage at an Uncle Tupelo show, ever. It was always guys, well-read guys and guys in baseball caps. That all changed with *Being There*."

Despite rave reviews and the confidence that they were growing into a mighty live act, Wilco was pushed to the breaking point several times on the 1996-97 tour. Stirratt, Coomer, Egan and Bennett were on the verge of mutiny while waiting to board a ferry in Scandinavia. They called Margherita from a pay phone, waking the groggy manager in the middle of the night back home in Chicago to vent their frustrations. Tweedy was in no better shape. He was breaking down more often, gripped by anxiety attacks minutes before he took the stage. The band would surround him with hugs and reassurance, and he'd somehow pull it together in time to play.

"It was a wasted year emotionally," Coomer says. "The breakdowns right before we went on stage, it got out of hand."

"Thank God they had the shows," says Jonathan Parker, a guitar technician beginning a six-year relationship with the band. "By the time Jeff got to 'Misunderstood' and could do some straining, that was his way of letting it all out. Some nights I definitely wondered how he could get up there knowing what state he was in or how depressed he was. But, in some weird way, playing shows was Jeff's therapy. That was the one place where he could control things."