

## CHAPTER 16: "It was a traumatic year"

(An excerpt)

Ken Coomer, a gifted drummer with a big heart and little patience for replaying his parts in the studio, was not particularly cut out for the new Wilco. As *Summerteeth* gave way to *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*, the quintet tended to construct and then deconstruct tracks, looking for new angles of attack. The bash-'em-out days of *A.M.* were long gone. With its own studio space, the band could create and tinker with tracks at their leisure, and the band's most studio-savvy member --- Jay Bennett --- began outfitting the space with keyboards and recording equipment. The quintet experimented with multiple takes and varied approaches to each song; it was not unusual to hear as many as 10 distinct versions of a track, all of them with at least some merit. Bennett, with his microscopic attention to sonic detail and technical expertise, thrived in this world. And Jeff Tweedy, who wasn't interested in retracing his steps, welcomed the possibilities it opened up for his songs.

By December 2000, Wilco had more than enough songs for a new studio album, and had it been released at that point, it's difficult to imagine anyone --- Wilco's fans and quite possibly even their record company and rock radio stations --- complaining, if only because the music so readily lived up to expectations. "Magazine Called Sunset" was a sighing, uptempo piece of orchestral pop that compressed the lush *Summerteeth* sound into 2 1/2 minutes. "Kamera" came on like a Phil Spector anthem, with Coomer's thunderous "Be My Baby" accents. "Not For the Season" surged into Springsteen arena-rock territory, "Alone" shimmied with the sly charm of Doug Sahm, complete with touches of rinky-dink organ, ala the Sir Douglas Quintet's Augie Meyers; and "Nothing Up My Sleeve," with its off-handed whistling and gruff harmonies, found Tweedy and Bennett playing John Lennon and Paul McCartney in folk-rock mode, circa the Beatles' "Two of Us."

But Tweedy felt underwhelmed. He knew he'd already covered this ground. The new album felt less like a step forward than a hybrid of *Being There*, with its sprawling, name-the-influence rock moves, and *Summerteeth*, with its more elaborately produced pop songs. Several songs that he considered crucial to the new album --- "I Am Trying to Break Your Heart," "Reservations," "Ashes of American Flags" --- still weren't in shape, despite numerous attempts to find suitable arrangements.

Outside the Wilco loft, Tweedy had found a musical and personal confidante in Glenn Kotche. As the year wound down and the *Foxtrot* sessions dragged on, a decision dawned that would be drastic in its scope, dramatic in its timing and downright inexcusable in its execution.