

CHAPTER 3: "I Got Drunk and I Fell Down"

(An excerpt)

It was easy to read Jeff Tweedy. When he was among his friends, his emotions - like his songs at the time -- were up front, almost embarrassingly transparent. But within the complex emotional architecture of Uncle Tupelo, communication was not nearly so direct. Even though the trio were roommates who played in the same band, they shared little else. "Me and Jeff would joke to each other without Jay [Farrar] hearing: 'Hey, Mike, want to go and rap about our feelings tonight?' " [Mike] Heidorn says.

The chill would sometimes spill over into the living-room rehearsals.

"There was a lot of unspoken communication in the band," Heidorn says. "If Jay wanted us to learn a particular cover song, he wouldn't tell us, he'd just point the speakers out toward the kitchen and play the song on his stereo for a week. Or Jeff would sit around and play something on an acoustic guitar for a few days. It was more like we were absorbing the music rather than learning it. At practice, the buck always stopped with Jay. Me and Jeff would learn a song and we'd say, 'Let's try this.' Jeff would start the song on bass, I'd play the drums, and sometimes Jay would say, 'Give me the guitar, Jeff.' Or he wouldn't say anything, and we'd move on to the next song. So, Jay in that respect dictated what we did."

But when Jay Farrar did commit to a piece of music, he did it with the zeal of a true believer. Music for Jay Farrar was sacred ground. "Years later, when Jay and I were Son Volt, we weren't getting along for a day, and I remember playing the songs differently that night--not worse, just differently," Heidorn says. "I didn't miss any beats, but I just didn't play them with any of those extra accents I usually gave them. That was the only time in my whole life that he ever got really pissed off at me. Jay came off stage and said to me, 'You can call me an ass, but don't take it out on the music. Never mess with the music.' "

Plenty of musical tributaries converged in the early recordings of Uncle Tupelo, but one of the most prominent was Neil Young -- the off-the-cuff, midnight-of-the-soul Young of *Tonight's the Night* and *On the Beach*, as well as the hippie balladeer of "Harvest" and the primitive guitar genius of "Down By the River."

"You can't underestimate Young's influence on that whole scene," says journalist Richard Byrne. "I would say the main reason I got what was happening was because I was a huge *Tonight's the Night* fan, and *Tonight's the Night* was the album for all of these guys, for Brian Henneman, for Jay Farrar, for Jeff Tweedy. They were hearing the country and folk stuff that they grew up around, and they were listening to all their SST punk records, and Neil crystallized it for them."

If so, Farrar and Tweedy came at Young from opposite directions -- or from different sides of Tweedy's "Screen Door." Tweedy wrote about the world behind that door, Farrar about the one outside it. Jay Farrar didn't write love songs. He spoke through the voices of regular folks who didn't share in America's wealth, who were just scraping by or barely hanging on: barflies, factory workers, jobless outcasts. Farrar felt more comfortable speaking through those characters than he did pouring out his inner-most feelings about the girl who got away. Tweedy felt completely out of his realm writing about broader, populist issues, so he focused on the complex feelings stirred by a never-ending series of relationships with women. "He went through them like tissue paper," [his old friend Rene] Saller says. But it also allowed Tweedy to play Grant Hart to Farrar's Bob Mould, to build a partnership in the tradition of Husker Du, a band built as much on the tension and contrasts between its two primary songwriters as their compatibility as artists and people.