



Fans, new & old, got taste of Wilco CD at MoCA

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In many ways, "The Whole Love," Wilco's just released 10th recording in its now 17-year bandwidth, fits comfortably between the ears, like small talk and a laughs with a good old friend over a few beers. But the recording also moves the friendship along, in a new, sometimes unfamiliar direction.

At times like this -- in an age of uncertainty, if not decay, in music and the world -- it is welcome news to find out an old friend has plenty of life, and few surprises, left in him.

"This record (the third with the current band lineup) happened because we've been together longer," Jeff Tweedy, band lyricist/lead singer and lightning rod, said in supplied material. "Because we've played more shows together, because we have a lot more faith and trust in each other, and it sounds more natural than the last two. You just can't fake that, you can't make that happen, it's experience."

Since 2004, when the current band coalesced, Wilco has formed into a diverse, tight group of widely-influenced musicians: Tweedy leads, yes, but John Stirratt's base is as base to the band's sound as anything. Guitarist Nels Cline gives the band a player who can move from country twang to Led Zeppelin thumpin' -- and adds a little early Rolling Stones cool to boot. Calling percussionist Glenn Kotche a "drummer" is like saying calling the sound of thunder a "noise" - true but insufficient. Pat Sansone and Mikael Jorgenson are listed as "multi-instrumentalists" which means they do a dozen musical things well.

Another reason for the band's tight sound, on and off the stage, maybe that they are now their own boss. Wilco, which has had a history of, shall we say, rocky romances with record labels, released "The Whole Love" on its own label, dBpm (which stands for "decibels per minute") Records.

"I think everybody in the band feels like they were given more free rein to do what they want to do ... (in) the process of making this record," said Tweedy. And he says freedom from the record companies masters is a freedom he has not had since the beginning, since 1999s "Summerteeth" recording. "We've gone back and gone about things almost exactly the same way every time, and that is, at the end of the day, we want a record we're really proud to put on our shelves and know that we did the best that we could do. Now it's the same thing, except there's really no one to ... (blame for the results). Just ourselves."

No one is likely to complain about the results, though. At least not from me or the few thousand of the band's other close personal friends who got a sneak peek at the songs on the new album when Wilco played two shows as part of the band "curated" Solid Sound Festival in June at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in North Adams, Mass.

The Friday, June 24, opening night of the festival, as part of a 22-song set, the boys opened with the live debut of the song "I Might," the first single off the CD -- you got to love a song that reassures you that "You won't set the kids on fire/Oh but I might" -- followed by live debuts of the title track, "Whole Love," as well as "Born Alone." On the second night, Saturday, they opened an incredible 27-song set with their cover of Nick Lowe's "I Love My Label," and included live debuts of "Dawned On Me" and "Standing O" off of "The Whole Love."

Seeing Wilco proved that the surest way to fall in love with a band is to be out with your best gal, have a couple beers, and remember the days of loud, live concerts of one's youth.

I guess you could say I was a "Wilco-wannbe" until I saw them at MoCA. Anybody who reads my ramblings knows I have my favorites when it comes to music: I walk the back streets with the Boss; I nightswim with R.E.M.; heck, I even love the coffeehouse scene with Steve Forbert and have grown a bit of a jazz ear by getting in groove with Roy Hargrove. Wilco, though was a sidelight; an alt-country band a friend of mine turned me on to that never really "set the kid on fire."

To catch you up: Wilco really hit the streets in 1994 as more an alt-country band than anything - Tweedy came out of the true alt-country band Uncle Tupelo - and his new band hit most people's radar in 1996 with the album "Being There." I stumbled on them in '99 with "Summerteeth," which I bought because I thought alt-country was the next cool thing. (At MoCA they played a couple of my favorites off that CD: "Can't Stand It" and the rockin' "Shot in the Arm.")

For the next 10 years, I'd hear them around, and see them around - 2002's "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" got a lot of play on radio, TV and in the news with all its recording label madness; and 2004's "A Ghost is Born" won two Grammy awards including Best Alternative album - but I did not feel the

need to make another a purchase until "Wilco (The Album)" came out in 2009. I will be doing some filling in the blanks now.

(At MoCA, off "Wilco," the band played the love song "You and I" -- a great Tweedy duet with Leslie Feist -- and the techno-pop "Bull Black Nova," which got me a dancing on the field just as it does around the house when I hear it on CD.)

And that brings us to, last month, when "The Whole Love" was released. Among the songs on the CD that I hadn't heard before at MoCA include what I think will turn out to be my favorite on the new recording, "Open Mind," which sounds like a throw back to their alt-country days, and I kind of like it that way.

The most interesting song, though, is the opening track, "Art of Almost"; it sounds like a band that refuses to sound like anything predictable ... there is a minute of cacophony then it all comes into focus with Tweedy crying out: "No! I Froze. I can't be so far away from my wasteland ..." It is a great song that will never get played on mainstream radio - and I kind of think Tweedy kind of likes it that way.

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By the way, you can buy the new recording on vinyl, which comes with a CD as well, or the CD in a regular set or with a second EP. I got the EP because my man Hal at Toonerville Trolley in Williamstown pointed out "Hey, its only a couple extra bucks." Sold.

On the second CD, "I Love My Label" finds the band taking a shot not only at their previous labels but at the recording industry in general; by using Lowe's tune, Tweedy was smart enough to not reinvent the wheel. "Message from Mid-Bar" is a sweet ballad with a pleasingly strong country influence of a lapsteel line by Cline and the Tweedy's always-sly point-of-view lyrics: "The point is it could always be worse."

From there, "Speak into the Rose" is a 6-minute-plus instrumental that sounds too cool and trippy to not be heard even if Tweedy is, for once, lost for words. The final track is an alt version of "Black Moon," which is also on the regular CD. In the alt-version, it is cleaner, more haunting version (without a string section); I like both but more than anything else I think the song gives me a glimpse of the hundred little decisions musicians have to make when they record a song.

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