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childhood, if any?

S.T. I mean, a ton. When I was younger, and Wilco was not as successful as it is today, they had to be on the road a lot more. My dad was definitely on tour for a pretty good part of my childhood, but not so much that I feel like I was cheated of having a dad.

He was there for me (all along). And after he got healthy, which was really publicly documented in the movie ("I Am Trying to Break Your Heart: A Film About Wilco"), he was – and even before that – a great dad.

(Wilco) is part of my identity and growing up. I was always very proud of my dad being in Wilco and having a musical heritage with my mom running Lounge Ax.

It has all been pretty impactful.

S.Z. You have been touted as a drumming prodigy by your father. Do you feel a strong sense of connection to the drums?

S.T. I do. Drums are my favorite instrument, and they always have been. It became clear to me early on that I was better at drums than I was at guitar.

I don't know ... prodigy ... that's a funny word. Whenever my dad says that, he also self-consciously says, "But I'm his dad ..."

I've been playing drums for a really long time. Even though nowadays I have started playing guitar a bit more, (drums) have always been a constant in my life.

I'm a drummer. That's just who I am.

S.Z. You must write, too?

S.T. I love recording on my own at home. I've been doing it a lot. I have a bunch of stuff that I haven't put out yet, but I'm not really sure when I should do that. I have a lot of anxiety about putting out my first album. I don't know when the right time would be, and there is so much baggage that comes with a release.

S.Z. I can only imagine that that might be some of the weight of the Tweedy name – is carving out your own path ...

S.T. That's true. But I could never call it a burden because by far it has given me more opportunity than it has taken away.

Being a Tweedy is an advantage. But for me – I'm a sensitive person – it has a lot of emotional complications with it, too.

S.Z. You played drums on Mavis Staples' album "One True Vine" and on her collaboration with your dad, Jeff Tweedy, to finish the recordings of her father, Pops Staples, posthumously. What a remarkable experience!

S.T. It was insane. Mavis is a living legend, and her dad was a legend. I still can't believe that I got to record with them. Recording the Mavis album was actually the first time that I had been in the studio for an actual, full-length session. I had gotten to hang around Wilco or had done little, one-song things, but that was the first time that I had the opportunity to do the full shebang. It was really fun. I learned a lot.

With the Pops (Staples) album, which we did not too long ago, that was really special

because I got to go in the room and play drums along to Pops' vocals and guitar alone.

That was surreal – hearing Pops playing in the headphones and then playing along to it. It was very emotional, and it felt like he was in the room with us.

S.Z. You and your father named this first album "Sukirae" after your mother, Susan Miller. Sukirae is her nickname. Does her nickname have an origin?

S.T. When my mom was a little kid, she was in love with Peter Noone of (British band) Herman's Hermits. She read in a teen magazine that Peter Noone's sister was named Suki. So she asked all of her friends in elementary school to start calling her Suki. She did this so that she would have something to talk to Peter Noone about when they inevitably met and got married.

At some point, somebody tacked on her middle name, Rae.

S.Z. Working on the album has been particularly meaningful for you both as your mother was diagnosed with cancer, in early 2014. What effect has this had on you and your family?

S.T. It has been absolutely terrible to watch my mom go through all of this and be so fatigued and in pain from her treatment.

At the same time, we have always been a close family, but I think going through this together has been a bonding experience. Talking to my dad, I've learned that cancer sort of makes or breaks some families.

The stress of dealing with the disease can be too much for some to handle. For us, it brought us closer together, which is, I guess, a silver lining on something really terrible.

S.Z. How is your mom doing these days?

S.T. Thankfully, she is doing really well, and things are good right now. So, that's a big part of that silver lining.

S.Z. I have a friend who is in the middle of her treatment right now. She surprises me with her positive attitude. She says when she looks around her, all she can see is a sea of love. I imagine you all have a lot of love surrounding you too ...

S.T. Oh yeah. It's been overwhelming sometimes to see the amount of support that people have poured out to my mom. It's really amazing.

S.Z. You have said that you are a "proud Jew." Have you any thoughts about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent speech to the U.S. Congress, or Israeli relations in general?

S.T. I have not taken the time to watch or (read the transcript of) his speech. I'm a bit behind on that.

It's a really problematic thing for American Jews. Especially progressive ones, like myself. I live in Chicago. I am a liberal, and all of my Jewish friends are (also progressive).

We have a difficult relationship with all of that because Netanyahu is the conservative.

I don't know, I'm not extremely versed in politics ... but I don't identify with him or his leadership of Israel.

What I will say is as an American Jew, I feel an immense pressure from my (larger) community to be an unconditional supporter of the state of Israel. And that is problematic because there are undeniable atrocities that aren't OK and that we shouldn't justify by all of the things that we believe.

S.Z. You are now playing for sold-out audiences with the band Tweedy. In fact, you went on your first world tour just weeks (and four full rehearsals) after graduating from high school. Does that faze you at all?

S.T. I was pretty nervous going out to play our first shows. It was a little bit scary. It made it easier having a family member in the band. It made it easier having my dad with me. It wasn't like I was just sent off on a major tour by myself.

I've grown a lot since the first shows we've played. I think we did a good job back then, but we're even tighter as a band now after spending all of these months together.

S.Z. You opted to defer your entrance to Wisconsin's Lawrence University for a year to be with your family during your mother's treatment. What will your focus of study be when and if you do attend college? What interests you?

S.T. I'm not really sure. I'm thinking something along the line of an English major. Part of the beauty of liberal arts is that they're not gonna make me decide right off the bat.

I don't think I will be studying music. I really appreciate traditional music education, and it definitely has a ton of value, but I got a good taste of it when I was in high school. I think I want to use my remaining time in formal education to look at other (disciplines).

Thankfully, I also have some pretty crazy opportunities to get music education outside of school.

S.Z. You and your brother are the flesh legacy of your father and mother. Where do you see that legacy heading in you?

S.T. Ever since I was a really little kid, I have wanted to be in a band. And I have looked up to my dad that way and I've watched Wilco music videos on VHS like over and over and over again – driving my baby sitters insane.

As far as my mom goes, by continuing to be a part of the Chicago music scene, (I can be a part of her legacy). She is such a big part of music in this city.

I would feel really lucky to make a career out of playing music.

It's a dangerous thing to romanticize the idea of carrying on a name in that way because it really should be motivated by enjoying what you're doing and enjoying the process – not necessarily by fulfilling some mythical idea of carrying on a name or something like that.

I definitely want to play music. If it ends up being perceived as a sort of a continuation of a legacy, that will be very flattering.



PHOTO BY PIPER FERGUSON

"It has been absolutely terrible to watch my mom go through all of this and be so fatigued and in pain from her treatment. At the same time, we have always been a close family, but I think going through this entire experience together has been a bonding experience. ... For us, it brought us closer together, which is, I guess, a silver lining on something really terrible."

SPENCER TWEEDY
MUSICIAN