

America's Greatest Rock Band, via Chicago

Wilco bassist discusses touring, playing and recording its best album yet

With R.E.M. having disbanded last year, it would appear that Wilco now stands pretty well unchallenged as the greatest American rock band. Since rising from the ashes of seminal post-punk country/folk/rock pioneers Uncle Tupelo in 1994, this Chicago-based band has released a series of albums that continues, with each successive drop, to challenge, confound, frustrate, mystify and amuse its fans.

In short, Wilco – whose parts include founding members Jeff Tweedy (singer/songwriter) and John Stirratt (bass), as well as guitarist Nels Cline, drummer Glenn Kotche and multi-instrumentalists Mikael Jorgensen and Pat Sansone – is to American pop what film noir was to the founder of French New Wave: a reason to rethink everything you thought you were doing.

And like R.E.M., Wilco won't sit still. The band is constantly fluxing and evolving, recreating and broadening its own artistic parameters only to bust them down at every new turn. Former R.E.M. guitarist Scott McCaughey, who collaborated with Wilco on the Minus 5 album *Down with*

Wilco, says the band appears capable of anything at any time. "Like there is no limit to their greatness," McCaughey told me last week. "The band gets better every

year. They seem to have struck the perfect balance between visionary leader and democratic contributors, so that each member adds such an important element to the realization of the songs, in the studio and on stage."

The visionary leader of whom McCaughey speaks is Tweedy, whose songwriting has ascended to that rarified level of "scary good," permanently occupied by legends with names like Wilson, Dylan, Leiber, Lennon and Berlin. On Wilco's brand-new album, *The Whole Love*, Tweedy and company have hit some kind of peak, stitching together a flawlessly integrated cycle of songs that is even more daring and refined and melodically smart than the band's Grammy Award-winning *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. It is also the first record released on Wilco's own label, dBpm Records.

As McCaughey puts it: "Jeff can push outward with his songwriting, getting extremely esoteric and innovative, but he can pull inward at any time and deliver statements of simple and direct beauty."

Along with Tweedy, the only Tupelo alum still in Wilco is Stirratt, who, with his anchoring bass lines and avian vocal harmonies, seems to play the steady Starbuck to Tweedy's mad Ahab. "Jeff leaves a lot of things open-ended," Stirratt says admiringly of Tweedy's songwriting. "Jeff, he's tough. He seems really to like being able to bring it."

Stirratt says he thinks *The Whole Love* represents a

culmination for the band, as though this might be the album Wilco was striving to make from the get-go. "It's the most successful recording that we've done," he tells me. "We just kind of approached it the right way this time by giving ourselves a lot of time. I do think everyone's personality came out on this record in a great way. I think this record has really been the first to sort of hint at what really could happen."

Because the band recorded the new album without a tour hanging immediately over its head, Stirratt says there was a more relaxed attitude in the studio, more time to explore the hidden beauty and power of each song. This extra stretch of playing together and collaborating, he adds, has made Wilco a more cohesive and focused, and just plain better, live band. "We can play together really well as an ensemble," Stirratt says. "Things just really fell together in a great way."

And bring it Wilco will, with a tour stop in Eugene on what will be their first West Coast jaunt in several years. Stirratt says the band rarely gets out this way and is excited to play for fans that might not have seen Wilco live in close to a decade. "We kind of just get back on the horse," he replies when I ask how it is Wilco maintains its typically furious pace of touring and recording. "It's a tough way to make a living," Stirratt continues, and then he laughs. "But it's still rock and roll."

Wilco plays 8 pm Friday, Feb. 3, at Hult Center; to request or dedicate a song, visit the band's website at wilcoworld.net; \$40-\$45.



Breathe It In

There are a lot of reasons I shouldn't like **Breathe Owl Breathe**. They sound a bit like Jack Johnson meets Feist in a hookah lounge. They have all the hallmarks of easy-goin' adult contemporary indie-folk. But there are things going on beneath the surface that set Breathe Owl Breathe apart from the "tailor-made-for-Starbucks" scene.

The Michigan-based trio is largely acoustic. There are cellos, shimmering tambourines, playful keyboards and tuneful banjos. Vocalist Micah Middaugh's warm wool blanket of a voice is juxtaposed against the chirping tones of songbird Andréa Moreno-Beals, creating impressionistic images via word fragments and gentle sounds.

You know when you're watching that indie film – the one with the impossibly pretty girl-next-door actress and the sure-wish-I-was-that-charming lead? You think to yourself, *They're too young; their love will fail*. You hope that just for once *this* will be the love story that comes true. And you surrender yourself. This is Breathe Owl Breathe.

When Middaugh sings "I was afraid of losing you" on "Across the Loch," you believe every word and remember, bittersweetly, all the times you've lost something. When he sings "I'll never tell where the rope swing is" on "Swimming," you can't help but remember those days of freedom and first kisses. This is what Breathe Owl Breathe is for me, and why I like them. Maybe they'll mean something else to you. But they will mean something.

Breathe Owl Breathe plays with Purple Sparrows and Dan Jones (solo acoustic) 8:30 pm Saturday, Feb. 4, at Cozmic Pizza; \$8 adv., \$10 day of. – *William Kennedy*

International Sweat Fest

Like an international sweat fest of nostalgic pleasure, **Dengue Fever** is better suited as a warmer-upper than a cold. With a gruff, garage-rock spangle slathered in funk, this L.A.-based band welds '60s Cambodian pop to a surfboard and floats it out to sea. Founded in 2001 after a trip to Cambodia, Ethan and Zac Holtzman met a Cambodian-native lounge singer named Chhom Nimol, a star in her home country, who could sing and write songs in Khmer.

Recently returned from a tour of Southeast Asia (thanks to a State Department grant) that took the band to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, Dengue Fever uses its members' varied influences, both musically and culturally, to fuse a thick-skinned, critically-resistant-to-all-forms-of-vaccination new style.

The most recent album by Dengue Fever, 2011's *Cannibal Courtship*, blends a bilingual, almost Beirut-esque indie rock with thick horns and jungle funk. *Electric Cambodia*, a 2010 compilation curated by the band, allows them to dredge history and music from the past and re-present that era's original tracks to a new wave of listeners.

Secret Chiefs 3 founder Trey Spruance released Dengue Fever's first album on his label, and members of both bands have collaborated on various projects. This is the first time the two bands have toured together, sharing a co-headline bill. Get there and infect yourself.

Secret Chiefs 3 and Dengue Fever play 8 pm Monday, Feb. 6, at WOW Hall; \$13 adv., \$15 door. – *Patrick Newson*

