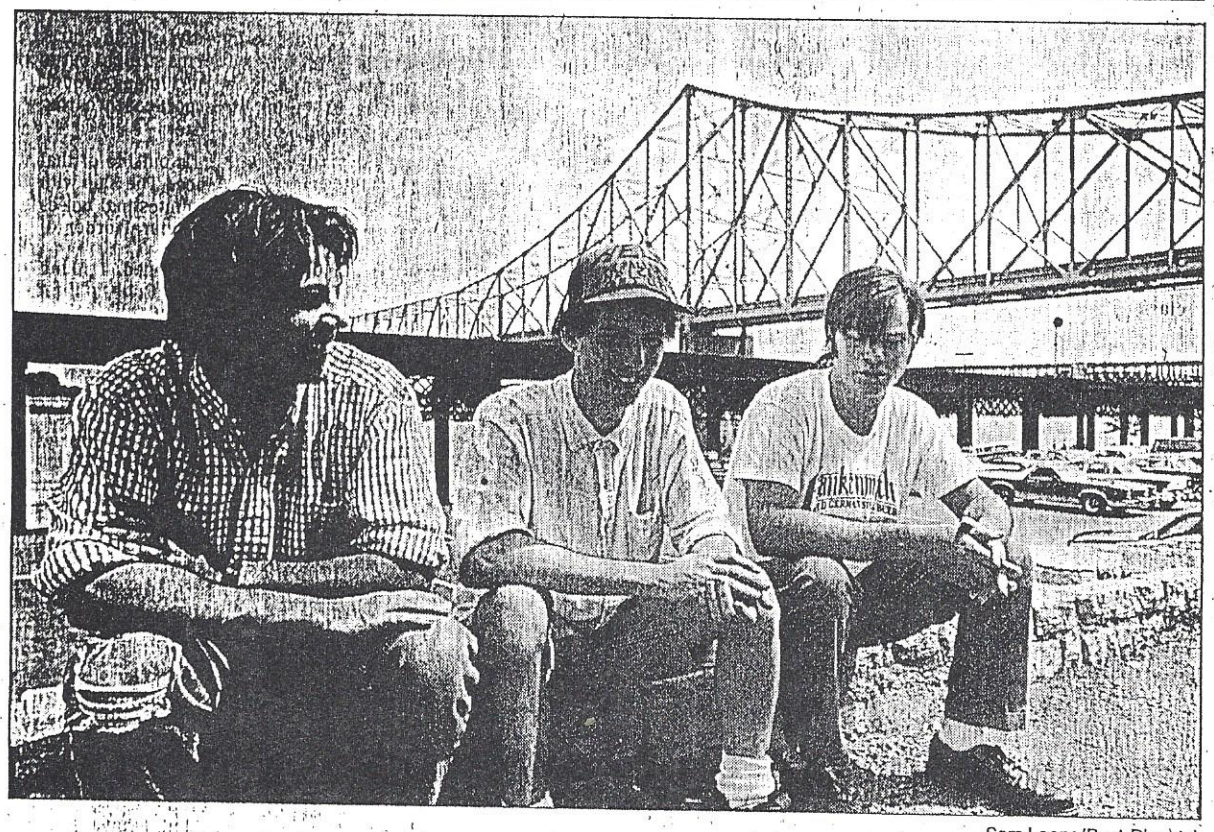
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 1992



Sam Leone/Post-Dispatch

Uncle Tupelo (from left): Jeff Tweedy, Bill Belzer and Jay Farrar

Unplugging Uncle Tupelo

New, acoustic album stresses songwriting more than sound

By Daniel Durchholz

IT WAS A MISERABLE late July day in southern Minnesota. A cold rain was pouring down, turning the fairgrounds in the small town of Austin into an oozing, primordial goo. Five or six thousand music fans, most of whom had come to see the farewell performance of their local heroes, the Gear Daddies, were covered with the stuff, and many huddled beneath the hulking grandstand nearly a quarter-mile from the stage.

Certainly these were less than ideal working conditions for Uncle Tupelo, the trio from Belleville, Ill., whose third album, "March 16-20, 1992," was released earlier this month. Not only had the crowd's enthusiasm been dampened, literally and figuratively, by the rain and by a series of lackluster opening acts, but this was the first concert that guitarist Jay Farrar and bassist Jeff Tweedy would perform with drummer Bill Belzer, who had replaced longtime band member Mike Heidorn only a week before the show.

As the weather cleared and Tupelo took the stage, you could almost see steam rising off the soggy throng squeezed in before them. Farrar seemed slightly distracted, and Tweedy's bass malfunctioned only a couple of songs into the set, but Belzer was solid as a rock. With their confidence in their new drummer bolstered, Farrar and Tweedy sharpened their attack, and the crowd responded by writhing in pleasure to such cyclone-force anthems as "Looking for a Way Out," "Gun" and "Factory Belt." It's long been true that you could mosh at a Tupelo show, but you'd better know how to two-step, too. On this occasion you could mud-wrestle as well, and more than a few availed themselves of the opportunity.

After the show, there were smiles all around.

"It was very emotional up there," said Brian Henneman, the band's guitar tech and occasional second guitarist. "On the one hand, I really missed Mike, but on the other, Bill was playing so well."

Everyone agreed, and, as Henneman said, whatever glitches existed in Tupelo's set, "It's nothing that a 30-day tour of the West Coast won't cure."

Uncle Tupelo has much more than a new band member to celebrate these days. "March 16-20, 1992," which was produced by R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck, is a stunner, brimming with brilliant original songs such as "Criminals," "Grindstone" and "Wipe the Clock." There's also an interesting selection of covers, including the Louvin Brothers' "Atomic Power" and the traditional tunes "Moonshiner" and "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down."

What's most surprising, though, is that, unlike the band's previous country-meets-punk releases, "No Depression" and "Still Feel Gone," the new album was performed almost exclusively on acoustic instruments. It's a testament to the group's courage and integrity that, in a time when Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" has made the world safe for grunge rock, "March 16-20, 1992" smells like nothing of the sort.

"This should insulate us from that industry b-------," Farrar said, "[from] people looking for the next Nirvana. I don't think anybody is the next Nirvana, certainly not us. People always talk about the next Beatles, the next Elvis. You can't predict that stuff. The next Nirvana isn't going to be Nirvana; they're going to be who they are. Those 'next' people never make it."

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>
> JEFF TWEEDY of Uncle Tupelo

"But it wasn't really a conscious thing on our part to go out and make an album like this," Tweedy added. "If we had thought about it more, it would have been a lot harder to do."

Farrar, Tweedy and Heidorn first got together as high school students in Belleville in the early '80s. They were part of a close circle of friends who, according to Farrar, "never could find our niche" in their school's social strata.

"Whenever we'd go to parties," Tweedy said," "we'd usually end up in a room by ourselves, preferably with the stereo."

Forming a garage band was as much an excuse to hang out and drink beer as it was anything else.

"We actually had some shows where, once a month, we would make serious money," Tweedy said, "but we had no idea what to do with it, so we'd go out and buy guitars and stuff. It was really something for other people to do as much as us — to have dances and rent a hall where under-age kids could drink."

Originally known as the Primitives, the band upgraded its name several years ago. As the story goes, the three made two lists of words and chose one from column A and one from column B. Uncle Tupelo was the result.

Over the next couple of years, they became a fixture at Cicero's Basement Bar, initially playing to small crowds but quickly

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developing a devoted following. They've since moved most of their local gigs downtown to Mississippi Nights, but Tweedy noted, "It was important for us to play places like that. Before anybody really notices you, you have a chance to work out what you're trying to do, as opposed to having your first show be at [the New York club] CBGB's or something."

Despite several tours and an eventual signing with Rockville Records, the Tupes say they never considered leaving their home town and moving to New York or Los Angeles, as do so many young bands eager to make it.

"I don't know," Tweedy said, "I guess 'making it' wasn't that important to us. We weren't in any big hurry to make whatever it is that we're supposed to make. Sticking around here made it a lot easier to do things without it having to be based on financial decisions. You can almost make a living here playing music, and since our rent's so cheap and we live like such scumbags. . . ."

Farrar finished the thought: "We can afford to make short trips out on the road without taking a whole two months out. Just weekends and whatnot."

Other St. Louis bands have signed more impressive recording contracts in recent years, but few have received the kind of raves earned by the Tupes. They were named Best Unsigned Band by the College Media Journal's readers poll in 1989. A year later, Rolling Stone said "No Depression" was "one of the most impassioned debuts in recent memory." What drove that album, as well as its successor, was more than the group's dynamic mix of stark folk balladry and wave after wave of grungy guitar. The lyrics — startlingly incisive and surprisingly mature, considering all three band members were still in their early 20s — were what cut deepest.

Both albums contain impassioned indictments of the hard-working, hard-drinking lifestyles the musicians saw while growing up in Belleville, a town of foundries, factories and, of course, the Stag brewery. Desperation, isolation and escapism are frequent topics, and they dominate songs such as "Graveyard Shift," which opened "No Depression" with the lines "Hometown, same town blues-/Same old walls closin' in."

It was only the first of many Tupelo songs bemoaning lives wasted filling quotas all day and drowning sorrows all night. On "Still Feel Gone," the song "Looking for a Way Out" pointedly asks, "what has a life of 50 years in this town done for you/'cept to earn your name a place on a barstool?" And so it goes.

"It seems like if you go into bars around Belleville," Tweedy said, "you pretty much see that type of guy. It's all over this town. It might be all over everywhere, but it's really apparent here."

"There are a lot of destructive forces at work here," Farrar said.

"But since we've gotten out on the road," Tweedy added, "we've discovered there's not a geographical solution. There's destructive forces everywhere."

Tweedy and Farrar deny that their work is dominated by a working-class sensibility, or any particular sensibility at all, for that matter. Yet Tweedy admitted, "Our parents are working class. They work. I'm sure we would have had a lot of different ideas if they had been lawyers or something."

Despite the artistic merits of "No Depression" and "Still Feel Gone," the band was determined to approach its latest project in a new way.

"I think after our last album we were fed up with this whole rock record thing," Tweedy said. "It just takes so long. I don't know what it was, but there was something we didn't like about the way 'Still Feel Gone' was recorded."

Enter Peter Buck, R.E.M. guitarist and producer of a host of up-and-coming alternative bands.

"I met them right after their first record came out," said Buck. "I was talking to Kevn Kinney of Drivin' N' Cryin' on the phone, and he said, 'Man, these guys are really great.' The same day, I just happened to look in the paper and realized they were playing in Athens, [Ga.], so I thought I'd check them out.

"They opened with a song that's actually on the record we did, 'Atomic Power,' by the Louvin Brothers. After the set, I walked up and said, 'I can't believe you opened with that 'cause nobody knows the Louvin Brothers anymore.' And they said, 'You're the first guy who's recognized that song in our entire career.' Things just kind of fell together after that."

Buck says that Uncle Tupelo impressed him with "strong songwriting and good playing — they were really tight. They didn't seem to follow the rules that a lot of young bands think they have to follow. Mostly, I listen for songs, and I really liked their songs. They gave me their first record and I really listened to it a lot."

Despite the more esoteric appeal of an all-acoustic album, Buck says that he doesn't see it as being limiting in any way.

"I always tend to think that any time you make a good record, things like that don't matter," he said. "Good work will always overcome people's perceptions of what the band is about.

"Also, I think they're eventually going to get a major-label deal. I can see that in their future. This is a good time for them to do this record because it'll stress their songwriting more than their sound, and I have a feeling that it'll be less easy for them to do a 90-degree turn once they've signed."

The album was recorded and mixed in five days — the March 16-20 of the title.

"We started on Monday at one in the afternoon and finished Friday at 11," Buck said. "Usually, when I work with a band that is — I guess broke is the operative word — you just have to figure out how to minimize the time spent diddling around. Songs have to be ready to go, and the guys were easy to work with in that respect. I never felt rushed."

The most intriguing aspect of the album is that the group chose to cover no fewer than three traditional white-gospel tunes, including "Atomic Power," "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down" and "Warfare." That's pretty uncharacteristic for a band with Tupelo's rough-and-tumble reputation, but maybe not for a band that once sang about choosing the "whiskey bottle over Jesus/Not forever, just for now."

"I've always been inspired by old Folkways albums and stuff," Farrar said. "But for me, I just remained kind of removed from those songs thematically. I'm not religious at all, and I wouldn't want anybody to take the Jesus stuff literally. It's a lot more subjective than that for whoever happens to be listening to it."

"What I really get from those songs," Tweedy added, "is that they're more about fear than they are about religion. They're really frightened-sounding songs. Ultimately, I'm more inspired by a song about Jesus than I am by Jesus himself."

The most insightful song on the album is the Farrar/Tweedy original "Criminals." It's a terse indictment of an over-legislated society, where personal freedom is in constant peril. With a defeated, yet defiant edge to his voice, Farrar sings what should be the theme song for this, or any election year:

"We got shackles to keep the laws
Made by men who bought and sold themselves
With not a prayer to keep, the powers that be
They want us kinder, gentler, at their feet."

With songs like "Criminals" leading the way, "March 16-20, 1992" is a remarkable recording, every bit as pointed and as personal as, say, Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska," and far and away better than anything attempted by other bands eager to jump on the current "unplugged" bandwagon.

It's proof that Uncle Tupelo has come a long way from being simply an amalgam of such disparate influences as Neil Young, Gram Parsons, Woody Guthrie and the Clash to what it is today: a band that is perhaps destined for greatness and — who knows? — maybe even popular success. It doesn't belong just to Belleville, or even St. Louis, anymore.

Daniel Durchholz is assistant editor of Request magazine.