

Aug. 27, 1997---

Stars of innocence smile down on the Northwest Side home Wilco singer-songwriter Jeff Tweedy shares with wife Sue and their 18-month-old son, Spencer. The shelves of an enclosed back porch contain vintage board games based on "The Beverly Hillbillies" and Mad magazine. An inlet near the front door features a Dennis Rodman doll, still in its original box.

Tweedy's recent reading material includes "The Gas You Pass," Shinta Cho's best-seller for kids, and Taro Gomi's "Everyone Poops."
Spencer is being toilet trained, but it is Wilco who is ready to get up and go.

After the success of the double-CD "Being There," Wilco has emerged as Chicago's premiere songwriter's band. Only Smashing Pumpkins equals Wilco on the hometown register of national stardom. Warner Bros./Reprise rolled the dice on Wilco's rare 19-song double album that clocks in at just under 80 minutes of music.

"We thought the double album was dicier than it turned out to be," said Bill Bentley, vice president of media relations for Warner Bros./Reprise. "Something like that is just not done by newer bands. But fans responded - well over 100,000 units sold." Wilco's 1995 debut record "A.M." sold about 64,000 units, according to SoundScan's count.

Bentley added that the label likely will push "Being There" for Grammy consideration. "Being There" made the top 10 of dozens of critics' lists last year, and Tweedy was compared to an emerging Robbie Robertson and/or Bruce Springsteen several times.

But Tweedy, 30, writes with more wide-eyed innocence than Robertson or Springsteen. A pure point of view shines through "Being There" - material like the jangly "Outtasite (Outta Mind)," not outta Brian Wilson's league, and "What's the World Got in Store," a tender lullaby he wrote for Spencer.

A rambling, exploratory soul reminiscent of Woody Guthrie rolls beneath Tweedy's shy exterior. So it's not surprising that in the course of a recent 90-minute conversation on his back porch, Tweedy suddenly would suggest he wants to take a break from music - just as Wilco is on the verge of major stardom.

"My dream is to make enough money playing music to take five years off and go back to school," Tweedy says. "I always thought school was a joke. My mom and dad don't have high school diplomas. That was not a good bargaining point for getting me to pay attention in school. They did OK.

"I want to study cosmology or astronomy. I'd have to get a background in

mathematics first, which never was hard for me. It would be healthy to look at that as a goal, as opposed to 'Another year, another record.' It would be fun to start a mid-life life at some point."

Tweedy says his new son ironically inspired some of the more downcast, reflective material on "Being There." He explains, "I was happy about having a baby, but concerned I might not be well-rounded enough as a person to be a good dad. Since I've been 15, I've been in a band, writing songs, touring and playing music. I should have some real life experience to pass along."

Wilco also has signed on as the house band on Billy Bragg's upcoming Woody Guthrie record, featuring material culled from unpublished manuscripts found in the Woody Guthrie Archives in New York City. Recording begins in January in Dublin, Ireland. The project emerged as part of last fall's Woody Guthrie conference, co-sponsored by the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland.

Woody's daughter Nora is archives president. She allowed Tweedy to photocopy several Guthrie manuscripts after his recent visit to the archives. Tweedy and Bennett played two "new" Guthrie tunes, "Feed of Man" and the kids' song "Hoodoo Voodoo," before a full and noisy house during an acoustic show earlier this month at Lounge Ax, the Lincoln Avenue club owned by Tweedy's wife Sue Miller.

"I got about three songs done," Tweedy says, reaching for a stick of Nicoret gum. Spencer was out sleeping, Dad was out of cigarettes. "I don't know about the other three. I rarely work from lyrics first. Hopefully, music and lyrics would come at the same time, or at least lyrics attach themselves to a melody.

"With Woody, it was kind of cool working from something that you can't change. It's precious, and you have to make it fit into some kind of music. Actually, it opened up some new songwriting stuff for me. I haven't had a breakthrough in a while."

In the Tom Russell-Sylvia Tyson book *And Then I Wrote (The Songwriter Speaks)* (Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver, B.C., \$16.95), Woody Guthrie talks about writing with innocent truths.

He says, "*Your ballads will be lots better and sounds lots plainer and clearer when you stop all kinds of hiding, even hiding from your own people or from your own self.*"

"I can totally relate to that," Tweedy says.

"I always find that the songs that end up meaning the most to me are the ones I'm most embarrassed about initially. Over the years, I've tended to use that as a device to get better, not settling on lyrics until it makes me feel somewhat uncomfortable. Even if it's uncomfortable because I don't exactly know what it means. Eventually, I'll figure it out."

Last October, Tweedy was doing an acoustic show with Jay Bennett in London just before "Being There" was released. Billy Bragg is a Wilco fan and came to the gig.

"He actually missed our show," Tweedy says. "But we started talking and he told us how he was putting Woody Guthrie words to music. He was looking for a rock band that could play country and folk music, but he didn't want a folk band that could try and rock. Just joking, we said, 'We know a band like that.'

"I'm really familiar with Woody's stuff, but that's not what they're going for. They want it to be contemporary. They're focusing on things that are kind of contrary to his homogenized public perception, like the quaint folksy guy who wrote 'This Land Is Your Land.' Most people don't know the socialist lyrics in that song. We found a lot of X-rated lyrics. There's a lot of weird stream-of-consciousness writing. Like in the mid-1950s before he got really sick (with Huntington's Disease, the degenerative nerve disorder that killed him), he was writing stuff that kind of resembles beat poetry, although Nora claims he had no connection to them whatsoever." However, at last fall's conference, Guthrie's compatriot Ramblin' Jack Elliott recalled that Jack Kerouac was a huge fan of Guthrie's.

The Bragg/Wilco/Guthrie project grew more serious as time went on. Bragg began writing songs to Guthrie's words. He debuted two songs at the Guthrie conference, the pop-rock "Against the Law" and the stark cowboy ballad "The Unwelcome Guest." Bragg also wrote new words to Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" to adapt to England. The record's mission veered off the "tribute" record road. Tweedy says, "It's not a Billy Bragg record. It's not a Wilco record. It's kind of a Billy Wilco record. We will probably have other people come in and sing some songs."

Spencer was up and rockin' from his mid-afternoon nap. Tweedy cradled his child and slowly walked around the house, stopping at an antique 1908 cylinder record player and a framed "Stars of the Grand Ole Opry" collage featuring original black and white snapshots of Tex Ritter, Kitty Wells, Dave "Six Days on the Road" Dudley and others. The collage was a wedding present to Tweedy and Miller from Dan Murphy of Soul Asylum.

Tweedy met Miller in 1989 when she used to book Tweedy and Jay Farrar's (now of Son Volt) seminal country punk band Uncle Tupelo at the Cubby Bear Lounge, across the street from Wrigley Field. "According to Jeff, he was calling me and I was never returning his calls," Miller chuckles in a separate conversation. "The first time they played the Cubby Bear, they opened for the New Duncan Imperials at my birthday party. There wasn't too much of their music going on, although who knew it would turn into what it has?"

Tweedy was born and reared in Belleville, Ill., near St. Louis. His father, Robert, retired after working 43 years in the Alton & Southern railroad switching yard near Belleville. His mother, Jo, is a homemaker. Jo road-tripped to Chicago to catch Tweedy and Bennett's Lounge Ax show.

"My mom claims I could listen to records before I could operate the turntable," Tweedy says. "My dad would get hooked on one song a year. I distinctly remember hearing Glen Campbell's (1977 hit with the Allan Toussaint composition) 'Southern Nights' about 3,000 times. Or Mac Davis' (1980 hit) 'It's Hard to Be Humble.' Now, he's hooked on all the stuff people compare us to. They go out and buy Neil Young and Bob Dylan records. My dad has more Dylan records than I do, which is kind of weird."

Robert and Jo Tweedy's work ethic was passed down to their youngest son. "I put down any ideas I have during the day, every day," he says. "Or at night, before I go to bed. I fill up tapes and tapes of chord progressions, a chorus, a verse. Eventually they make themselves into songs. It's not like I have any more ideas than anybody else. I just try not to lose them."

"The work ethic part of it is that I'm not going to have a musical idea that often without a guitar in my hand. I try to keep a guitar in my hand as much as possible. I catalog song titles, I write them down in a book."

Tweedy has written more than 150 songs since 1995. He subscribes to songwriter Dan Penn's philosophy of writing with a piano nearby. Penn and his keyboardist-partner Spooner Oldham had hits with James and Bobby Purify's "I'm Your Puppet" and Aretha Franklin's "Do Right Woman, Do Right Man." Penn says he hears an orchestra in the piano, and only hears clang-clang in a guitar.

"The acoustic guitar gets tedious after a while," Tweedy explains. "You try to make the songs all sound different and they end up sounding somewhat similar just because of the voicings available to you on acoustic guitar. 'Being There' is the first record I've done where I got to work with somebody else playing the piano. (Bennett played piano, organ and accordion, among other instruments.) It led to a lot of different parts I probably wouldn't have been able to come up with on acoustic guitar. Plus, the whole band got involved a lot more with arrangements."

Almost on cue, Spencer starts pounding away like Stevie Winwood-era Spencer Davis on his toy keyboards. He also loves strumming on his programmed micro-jammer banjo. Tweedy enjoys the sometimes innocent chores of being a dad.

Tweedy told his Lounge Ax audience that his mouth was sore from spending the afternoon blowing up a wading pool for Spencer. "I've had to make adjustments," he says. "I've had to learn to write differently. Now, when Spencer goes to bed, I sit down with a pen and paper. I never wrote lyrics down before. I just memorized them because I'd get in a meditative zone and internalize everything. I used to stay up all night, listen to records and write until six in the morning."

A new day is coming. And whatever different shades Wilco takes in future years, Tweedy will never lose the twinkle in his eye. It is a searching star that warms the

songs he sings.