**Liner Notes for Sony Legacy rerelease of Uncle Tupleo’s *No Depression***

WITNESS TO THE REVOLUTION

Uncle Tupelo’s debut record No Depression is an essential document in America’s musical heritage – part of a lineage of commingled country, folk and rock stretching all the way back to Sun Studio.

Indeed, the particular blend of music Uncle Tupelo helped define remains vibrant to this day. So vibrant, in fact, that it is easy to forget that “country rock” was wildly unfashionable when *No Depression* was released in June 1990 – a genre exhausted by the gangs of outlaws, flatlanders and desperadoes that strip-mined the badlands of the 1970s.

But as the 1980s dawned, a handful of bands had begun to redefine the genre’s possibilities. Jason and the Scorchers, Dave Alvin and the Blasters, and Rank and File with Alejandro Escovedo took elements of rockabilly and country and twisted them to their own ends. In Britain, the Pogues dynamited an Irish music tradition wallowing in sentiment, while the Mekons dove headlong into country’s populist and honkytonk traditions as they rose from their ’70s punk flameout to play benefit gigs for striking coal miners.

Yet all those experiments eventually converged and coalesced around Jay Farrar (guitar/vocals), Mike Heidorn (drummer) and Jeff Tweedy (bass/vocals). Those of us who witnessed Uncle Tupelo’s climb to prominence from the St. Louis music scene – which didn’t fully embrace the band until *after* they’d already been featured in the pages of *Rolling Stone –* still marvel at how unlikely and how satisfying it was. The headwinds of culture and geography at the time were just that strong.

Even the band would acknowledge the strokes of good fortune that pushed them along. Uncle Tupelo found the right manager (Tony Margherita) and built an audience at friendly clubs like Cicero’s Basement (in St. Louis’ Delmar Loop) and the Blue Note (in the “three hour away town” of Columbia, Missouri). The band also found evangelists on local access television and on the airwaves at community and college radio stations like KDHX and KCOU.

But what proved decisive in Uncle Tupelo’s ascent was the band’s raw talent honed by the trio’s relentless gigging. The Uncle Tupelo of that era literally flung themselves across the Midwest (and, later, across the continent and the globe) in a decrepit van packed as full of desperation as it was with gear.

I first saw Uncle Tupelo at St. Louis’ Soulard Preservation Hall in May 1989. I was the new local music columnist at St. Louis’s alternative newspaper, *The Riverfront Times*. Sniff around on YouTube and you can see two of the songs I saw Uncle Tupelo play that night, filmed for a show on local access cable station Double Helix. One video offers a glimpse of the band feeding Creedence Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” into a buzz saw of sonic mayhem. And then there’s footage of the band playing “Graveyard Shift” – a Farrar song that has become an alternative country classic.

Glimpsed in that Soulard Preservation footage, Farrar is an unshaven vagabond, wearing a Red White and Blue beer t-shirt. His Rickenbacker is held to his body with a death’s head guitar strap. A baby-faced Tweedy stalks and stomps stage left, raggedy ass almost showing through his ripped and patched jeans. Heidorn sits behind them, head cocked, methodically pummeling a set of vintage Ludwigs.

And the music? Five minutes of blasting power chords, shuddering bass, and slashes of cymbal which yield briefly to delicate lyrical interludes before more noise rushes in to sweep them away. And Farrar’s voice – a growl of mingled hurt and anger – is sweetened by Tweedy’s high harmony.

I was floored that night in 1989, and when I got hold of the band’s latest demo tape, *Not Forever, Just For Now*, the ten songs on the cassette confirmed the overpowering first impression. I tracked Uncle Tupelo closely in my weekly column with all the fervor of a convert.

By year’s end, the converts swelled to include the influential *College Music Journal* (CMJ) who named Uncle Tupelo as the best unsigned band in America on the basis of that same demo.

This reissue of *No Depression* gives listeners a new perspective on Uncle Tupelo’s ascent, including remastered early tracks never released in any format and the full *Not Forever, Just For Now* demo. It is a story that should inspire American dreamers of any sort, but especially those who still believe that they can pick up an instrument and – as Farrar sings on the early Tupelo song “Outdone” – “take the leap from the common heap.”

Farrar, Heidorn and Tweedy first played together – along with Jay’s brother Dade Farrar – in a band called The Primitives. The group thrashed out *Nuggets* and *Pebbles*-era garage rock covers (with a healthy helping of Yardbirds and Kinks) in rented Belleville venues such as the now- demolished Liederkranz Hall. Some of the songs from early demos included here as bonus tracks, including originals such as “Pickle River,” “Blues Die Hard” – and an abrasive cover of the Vertebrats’ 1981 lo-fi classic “Left in the Dark” (recorded a few years later) give brief but vivid glimpses of that era.

Garage rock was the simplest thing to play to the liquored-up teenagers who packed the Liederkranz (where Tweedy’s mom, Jo-Ann, sat at the door and collected the cover charge). But the future members of Uncle Tupelo were musical omnivores already making hybrid sounds in their own heads.

In his 2013 memoir, *Falling Cars and Junkyard Dogs*, Farrar recalls driving around in a Pinto station wagon in 1983 with a steady rotation of three 8-track tapes: The Ramones’ *Road to Ruin*, Jimi Hendrix’s *The Best of Jimi Hendrix* and the Rolling Stones’ *Sticky Fingers.*

“On the surface these three might seem mismatched or incongruous,” writes Farrar, “but through repeated listenings, I found commonality and musical continuity with all three.”

Indeed, in the earliest days of the band, the country influences seem derived as much from Neil Young (and particularly his 1975 classic *Tonight’s the Night*) as Faron Young*.*

“I always thought of us as a ‘rock country’ band instead of a ‘country rock’ band,” Heidorn recalls.

The band soaked up other influences too – Bob Dylan (and the Byrds and Buffalo Springfield), the classic rock and country pop that dominated St. Louis airwaves, and the punk and indie records filling the aisles of tiny record shops like Euclid Records in the city’s Central West End

Eventually, The Primitives whittled themselves down to a trio and took a new name: “Uncle Tupelo.” In late 1989, DeDe Schofield (beret-clad host of the St. Louis local access TV show *Critical Mass*) wandered bravely into the man cave that the trio had created for themselves on Eleventh Street in Belleville to quiz them on the origin of the name “Uncle Tupelo.”

“Two words,” smirks Heidorn in the interview. “English language. Sound good together.” Then all three band members whiff simultaneously at the punch line: “No one using them together at the time.”

But adopting a new name was the starting gun for Farrar, Heidorn and Tweedy to begin writing and arranging their own songs in earnest. The band’s early compositions boasted two distinct (and distinctive) voices. Farrar’s songs brimmed with ruin wrought in telling details. Tweedy preferred broader and more wistful strokes. Yet Farrar points to Heidorn’s central role in the process, not only in working up arrangements as songs took shape but as a reliable first listener.

“Getting Mike’s opinion on a song or an arrangement served as the ultimate objective sounding board,” says Farrar. “If it didn’t pass muster with Mike we moved on to something else.”

The earliest recordings included here – including 1987 versions of Farrar’s boozy hymn to oblivion “Before I Break” and Tweedy’s “Screen Door”– reveal that the puzzle pieces of these songs are already close to where they’ll eventually fit. There’s tentativeness in these early efforts, too. But Tweedy recalls that, from his perspective, writing was the easier route at this point in the band’s history.

“I’ve always been fascinated by musicians who can sit down and figure things out,” Tweedy says. “I’ve had to become one. But in those days, I’d just as soon make a song as learn one. Take a standard chord progression and feel like I invented it. It’s still the kernel of what I do. Delude myself that I’m doing something new.”

Writing and arranging their own songs also allowed Farrar and Tweedy and Heidorn to forge powerful links between the lives they lived (and observed) in Belleville during the Reagan-Bush recession and wider worlds of music and literature beyond. Whether it’s Tweedy making the leap from his own anxieties about war to the Book of Ecclesiastes (via Pete Seeger and Roger McGuinn) on “Train,” or Farrar deftly boiling down a key moment of Saint Augustine of Hippo’s *Confessions* to “Whiskey bottle/ over Jesus/ Not forever/ Just for now,” Uncle Tupelo was already writing songs thematically anchored in both the contemporary and eternal.

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In the credits for the original release of *No Depression*, Uncle Tupelo thanked “Matt Allison, for the demo that made it all possible.”

Uncle Tupelo’s early demos were workmanlike, but 1989’s *Not Forever, Just For Now* represented a quantum leap. Many of its arrangements turn up again on *No Depression* itself, but *Not Forever, Just For Now*’s intensity and assurance still startle. Songs explode out of the gate now. Ballads shudder and sway with authority. Both words and music seem more lived in now than simply sung and strummed.

Heidorn says “*No Depression* was built on the foundation of *Not Forever, Just For Now*,” and he credits the trio’s willingness to get in a van and play beyond St. Louis for the leap. “The songs got a lot better through rehearsals and live shows,” he recalls. “We were able to really find the beginnings and middles and ends of songs.”

When I accompanied the band on a trip to Nashville late in 1989, I saw firsthand how Uncle Tupelo used life in the van to test their mettle and soak up new sounds over the highway miles. And the gigs at the end of the line – whether they were played for a dozen people in a club that lost its beer, wine and dancing license (as happened in Nashville) or for increasingly bigger and enthusiastic crowds in Chicago and Columbia – were approached with equal ferocity.

*Not Forever, Just For Now* catches a band ready to break out. And the person who caught that moment was Matt Allison – a young engineer launching his own recording career in Champaign, Illinois with Midwestern power pop stalwart Adam Schmitt.

Steve Scariano – who worked with Tweedy and Tony Margherita at Euclid Records – made the introduction. Scariano had played with Schmitt in a band called Pop the Balloon a few years before, and he recommended that Uncle Tupelo record with Schmitt in Champaign. But eventually it was Allison who ended up twiddling the knobs.

“Matt had just begun and was learning a lot from Adam,” says Scariano, who believes that *Not Forever, Just For Now* is as close as anyone came to recording the classic three-piece Uncle Tupelo live.

“The majority of Uncle Tupelo fans never saw the original three-piece,” says Scariano. “So Matt’s demo really is one of those happy accidents. He caught lightning in a bottle.”

It’s hard to disagree with Scariano’s assessment. *Not Forever, Just For Now* possesses a clarity and texture that is a hallmark of the Champaign power pop sound – and a striking simplicity in overall approach that the band would return to in making *March 16-20, 1992* in Athens with R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck.

Allison says he and Schmitt set up an 8-track studio in the attic of the house shared with their friend Dean Patterson. “To say that the setup was amateurish would be kind at best,” he says. “At one end we built a 12’ x 9’ ‘control room.’ The rest was left unadorned and wasn’t acoustically treated, and that’s where bands would set up.”

Amateurish or not, Uncle Tupelo felt comfortable there. “Due to the size of the attic, they were able to play together just like they might in a nice sized practice space,” says Allison. “They were exceptionally tight and knew their songs well, so the basic tracking didn’t take very long at all.”

Farrar says that “working with Matt really taught the band a lot about working in a recording environment and the mechanics of the trade.”

Tweedy quips that “As far as knowing about the recording process, we might as well have been migrant workers at that point.”

But Uncle Tupelo did know that they wanted some effects – and Allison tacked some flange onto “Graveyard Shift” that lifts the demo version from its grinding depiction of the Rust Belt into orbit. Heidorn says the idea came from the band’s close listens to the Byrds’ version “I Wasn’t Born to Follow” from *The Notorious Byrd Brothers* (and featured on the *Easy Rider* soundtrack).

“We loved that sound from the late ’60s Byrds,” recalls Heidorn. “We were covering that song a lot at the time.”

Allison says that as he and the band put the final touches to *Not Forever, Just For Now*, “I realized even more how exceptional the songs and the band were. I remember very clearly feeling the emotional power of the songs, and how I would occasionally lapse into temporary periods of true melancholy as I was recording them; this despite the fact that I was probably happier in my life than I’d ever been.”

*Not Forever, Just For Now* also proved to be a turning point for Allison, who says that the demo “essentially began my recording career. Seven or eight months later, I decided to move to Chicago and really take a shot at it.”

As owner of Chicago’s Atlas Studios, Allison has produced scores of vital records by prominent bands over the past two decades, including Alkaline Trio, Less Than Jake, The Methadones and the Smoking Popes. “The primary thing that was confirmed for me from recording Uncle Tupelo was something that I still adhere to this day,” he says. “Making great records isn't all about sonics; it's about making a true emotional connection between the artist and the listener. Everything that is done in the studio must be in the service of that goal.”

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During an Uncle Tupelo show bootlegged sometime during the *No Depression* era, you can hear Jeff Tweedy ask the audience a simple question.

“Van Halen. Or Black Flag?” Tweedy asks. “Van Halen or Black Flag?”

Someone in the audience growls “Van Halen.” Tweedy replies: “Good Lord. Are you serious?” But before the last “s” leaves his lips, Farrar has launched headlong into a blistering reinvention of “Little Guitars” from *Diver Down*.

Tupelo’s Black Flag cover (“Gimmie Gimmie Gimmie”) was equally devastating – warping the song’s nihilism into a folksy twang. But the most important Tupelo covers (including the version of The Carter Family’s “No Depression in Heaven” that gives their debut album its title) were anything but sardonic upendings of genre expectations. They were reclamations of vital American music – a task that became a central tenet of the entire alternative country project.

Not that the versions of “No Depression” (including a 1998 demo version with Jay Farrar’s brother Dade on mandolin and harmony) or “John Hardy” or The Flying Burritos Brothers’ classic “Sin City” included here are naïve. They aren’t. Uncle Tupelo clearly cherishes this music – and offers it to listeners without a hint of condescension. That was a revolutionary act in 1990.

“Drawing inspiration from country and folk music was born out of conviction,” says Farrar. “Uncle Tupelo’s music didn’t fit into the preexisting alternative music establishment but that didn’t matter because it was liberating to not be automatically lumped together with the rest of what was happening at the time.”

It is perhaps strange that alternative country itself was defined at Boston’s Fort Apache Studios during Uncle Tupelo’s *No Depression* sessions. The band chose producers (Paul Kolderie and Sean Slade) who tipped the band’s sound toward a more consciously indie vibe they helped to pioneer as engineers and producers with Dinosaur Jr., the Pixies, Big Dipper and the Lemonheads.

Yet *No Depression* didn’t m rely pump up the volume. Choices made during the record’s production – including stripping away harmonica on “Whiskey Bottle” in favor of Rich Gilbert’s pedal steel – also pushed the recording definitively toward a more country feel.

“*Not Forever, Just For Now* had a real Champaign power pop feel,” Tweedy observes. “*No Depression* was what we were doing filtered through that Boston sound. As a band, we were probably something in between those things.”

The making of *No Depression* in that bleak Boston winter of 1990 has been well chronicled. But despite the band’s increasing alignment with the burgeoning alternative rock movement of that era, the battle to be heard wasn’t quite over. Uncle Tupelo was touring more than ever, and the band’s earnest intensity and deep reverence toward the sources of their music didn’t always sit comfortably with critics. Older writers often plucked out the roots of Uncle Tupelo’s sound without noticing just how definitively the band had rewoven them into something new. And the hipster contingent just didn’t hear the accustomed ironic distance they expected in indie rock.

Touring the Midwest was one thing, but the band remembers there were moments of culture shock as they spread the *No Depression* gospel across the nation.

“We did get some pushback from the ‘cognoscenti,’” recalls Farrar. “I remember in Chicago the band was accused of having a ‘rural affectation.’ The irony is that the rural drawl of my father was something I consciously chose not to replicate.”

Tweedy concurs: “I didn’t understand it. I sensed somehow that it didn’t have much to do with the music itself. Maybe more where we were from. Our accents. I remember a woman asking me if we’d seen escalators before.”

So Uncle Tupelo proved to be a bit of a wide-eyed lightning rod – especially after Rockville marketed the band as “Hüsker Dü meets Woody Guthrie.”

The battle lines extended to the sidewalk in front of CBGB’s at the New Music Seminar in July 1990, where Matador Records owner and alt-rock trend setter Gerard Cosloy questioned Tupelo’s Woody Guthrie bona fides within earshot of Farrar – who then stepped up and demanded that Cosloy name more than one Guthrie song himself.

“A lot of it comes down to mistrust of sentiment and earnestness,” says Tweedy. “We were guileless in that regard. This is so much what we wanted our lives to be. It was not a game.”

Chronicling that time spent on the road trying to introduce America to *No Depression* – and to make music their career – yielded some of the best songs on the band’s second record, *Still Feel Gone* – including Tweedy’s “Nothing” and “D. Boon” and Farrar’s “Postcard.”

Now that the dust had settled, it’s clear that the guileless Uncle Tupelo triumphed after all. The band itself never stopped being restless, veering over the last four years of their existence from that brilliant sophomore record to a timeless third record (*March* *16-20, 1992*) that mingled their own songs with music salvaged from the American past and capping it with a swan song (*Anodyne*) that touched all the bases they’d covered as a band as they moved on into the future.

Looking back at the band’s journey, manager Tony Margherita observes that the band “never stayed anywhere for very long. They were more a river than a lake.”

And the inspiration provided by *No Depression* and the other music made by Uncle Tupelo? It’s still flows onward carrying along new generations of musicians and listeners with it.

*– Richard Byrne*