

I Am Trying to Break Your Heart

story · November 12, 2007

Wilco – Iowa Memorial Union; October 14th, 2007.

Wilco is one of those bands I've been on the fence about for years. It seems to me that they can be astonishingly great or surprisingly dull. Years ago – a musician friend of mine loaned me a copy of their double disc: *Being There*. He swore it was brilliance – musical genius – nearly the best thing ever recorded. Had he not so highly recommended it, I wouldn't have listened to it in its entirety over 50 times trying to figure out what he thought was so great about it. To me – it was forgettable mediocrity from the first listen to the last.

So, when Wilco followed up a few years later with the critically acclaimed *Summerteeth* CD, I disregarded it as well as my musician friend who was formerly so hell-bent to impress on me the glorious musical heights Wilco had climbed to. I wanted none of it. I had given them a shot already – I was resolved that they simply were not for me. Wilco and I were oil and water.

Not long after relating this story – a co-worker of mine handed me a copy of *A.M.* He assured me that it would win me over by virtue of its 'twang' appeal. I gave it a listen right then and there and found he was right. It was no *Copperhead Road* – but the songs resonate a road-worn vibrancy and before long I was tapping along with the likes of *Casino Queen* and *Passenger Side*.

With the release of *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* (YHF), Wilco would officially stand up and be counted. With the buzz surrounding this record, you'd have to have lived in a cave to brush off the magnitude of its impact. Hell, even if you hate Wilco – you have to admire any band that goes toe-to-toe with their record company over creative license. (And gets shit-canned by them, no less.) Ah, will record company execs ever truly understand music, musicians and marketing? Could they really not have foreseen that dumping Wilco and refusing to release YHF would only result in a mass exodus of music fans clamoring to hear it? And smartly, Wilco went right along with it – making it available online before being snapped up by another label only too happy to release it. (Radiohead was most certainly taking notes.) The bittersweet irony of this story is the label that pounced on YHF was actually a spin-off of the label that dumped them in the first place. So in effect – the label paid twice for the same product.

Media blitz aside – Yankee Hotel Foxtrot exemplifies true brilliance indeed; testing the bounds of production experimentation while maintaining the integrity of its well-written and arranged songs. The songs are truly the stars – and no matter the bells and whistles, rhythm shifts, loops and the constant dropping in and out of various instrumentation – the material shines throughout it all – an unequivocal testament to their greatness.

Wilco's following release – A Ghost Is Born – is also very good – particularly considering how it came on the heels of YHF. (How do you top that?) For all intents and purposes – YHF is Wilco's Sergeant Pepper. The band buzzed through town during this tour – and sadly I missed them. I suspect what kept me away was the fear that my now upbeat admiration for the band would be spoiled by a less-than-stellar live performance of those same YHF songs which had held up so gracefully under the jagged blade of its out-on-a-limb production.

So despite these two very wealthy contributions to my music collection – I wasn't completely convinced that Wilco and I had put our oil and water days behind us. After all – there was still the memory of that confounded double disc. And for that matter – I was never all that taken with the Wilco-tempered renditions of Woody Guthrie's lost songs on Mermaid Avenue. (Billy Bragg, however – did not disappoint – but then, does he ever?)

The mixed reviews of Sky Blue Sky were enough of a deterrent for me to steer clear. (Pitchfork tagged it as 'dad rock' – yikes!) Notwithstanding, when they rolled through town this time, my wife picked us up some tickets.

The IMU is a great venue – small enough to be intimate, big enough to provide charm for the heavy hitters to come in and thoroughly rock the joint. To our great satisfaction, Wilco did just that. They hit the stage and racked up song after song (I'm assuming from the new record) for the first half-hour, then settled in and played nearly everything off of YHF and A Ghost Is Born. The rave in this review is that they preserved to a T the integrity of the intricately produced material off of YHF. All the ringing alarm clocks, SFX, percussive drop-ins and outs, and radio static, etc., were rendered sonically beautiful and in their respective positions. I expected Wilco to be good – but admittedly, I didn't expect them to be as good as they proved to be. Not to mention – they rocked a lot harder than I thought they would. The often quiet, under-emphasized gems off of A Ghost Is Born were driven home soundly like spikes into rails. (Rich attributes their newfound punch to the addition of Nels Cline – and I have to concur.)

Whether or not Wilco can or will deliver on their records is a moot point – one which will

continue to be debated. But on this night in Iowa City – the band unquestionably served up piping hot rock and roll... and we feasted.