

**I AM TRYING TO BREAK YOUR HEART
A FILM ABOUT **WILCO** BY SAM JONES**



**POP MUSIC;
FILMMAKER'S OBSTACLES
PARALLELED THOSE OF BAND HE
CHRONICLED**

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CHICAGO - Sam Jones has never lacked ambition. The Los Angeles resident has traveled the world taking photographs for the likes of Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone, and Esquire. Late in 2000, however, he began to focus on a different project, one that brought together his natural instinct for striking imagery with a lifelong love of music: a feature film on a band.

"The main ambition for me was to make a film that expressed why I love music," Jones says. "When I hear a great record, not just a collection of songs but a great record start to finish, I always think, 'What was it like to be around that?'"

"I Am Trying to Break Your Heart" answers that question with a timeless black-and-white testament. The film follows the Chicago-based alt-country band Wilco through personal and professional turmoil on the way to its most accomplished effort yet, the group's much-lauded fourth album, "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot."

Starting with the idea of making a documentary about a band, Jones came upon Wilco just as the critically acclaimed yet commercially questionable band was beginning work on what would prove to be the most challenging - and ultimately the most fulfilling - record the group has made to date.

"There's not a lot known about them," Jones says, speaking after the film's Chicago premiere. "They're not all over MTV, they're not on the cover of every magazine. That was the case with a lot of bands that made great records, like the Velvet Underground or The Band. They were doing these things that were ahead of their time in a lot of ways."

Finding a group to profile was relatively easy, but Jones couldn't have imagined the trials he and his subjects would face during production. Over the course of the shooting, Jones would run into financial and logistical nightmares, while the members of the band, singer-songwriter Jeff Tweedy in particular, would face other daunting obstacles.

Jones's first hurdle was one faced by many independent filmmakers: financing. Bailed out more than once by a generous Kodak staff member who provided free film, the director nonetheless felt the monetary binds of self-financing his dream.

"I'm a big thinker," he acknowledges with a laugh. "The hardest part was just getting anybody to work on the film, rather than being able to pick and choose the people I'd be able to choose if I could pay them the right money."

While Jones soldiered on, Wilco, by then in the mixing stage of making the album, was facing its own crisis. A division between multi-instrumentalist Jay Bennett and his bandmates was rapidly widening, eventually resulting in Bennett's departure. The factors foreshadowing his dismissal are captured in a control-room argument that manages to be simultaneously amusing and absurd.

"I was conscious of the camera," Tweedy recalls. "I didn't mind that they were filming this argument, I just really wanted to be expeditious about it." Although the squabble may have been a defining moment in the film, it's obvious that it was also symptomatic of bigger issues.

"Everybody had a part in the architecture of our music on 'Summer Teeth' [the band's previous album] and 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot,' and it was very distracting to see someone being so proprietary about it," Tweedy explains. "I don't think there was ever any effort for anybody to lessen Jay's contributions."

Reached by phone, Bennett initially claims to have not seen the film. He eventually acknowledges watching only "some scenes" but goes on to assert that the film's time line is inaccurate. He's not bashful regarding his importance in the creation of "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot."

"All I can say is that I wrote more songs on this record, and percentage-wise, I certainly played more instruments on this record than anybody else," he says.

"The feeling in the band was that everyone else's contributions were being diminished," Tweedy had said previously. "It wasn't accurate or productive."

Except perhaps for Jones, whose soundman had suction-cupped a microphone to the ceiling of the control room, capturing the entire argument for the film. Such serendipitous moments seemed to increase in number in direct proportion to the obstacles Jones faced, many coming while he was shooting live footage of the band.

"We didn't have the coverage that any normal rock film would have for concert stuff," he explains, but he says that fact

eventually helped distinguish the film. "It would've been a different thing with a different budget, but for what we had and what we got, I'm really proud of it."

While Jones's confidence in his film was building, the band was struck by another blow. After turning in the finished album to its label, Reprise Records, a division of Warner Bros., the band was informed that the company was not pleased with the results. Having already met the label halfway after a similar response to "Summer Teeth," Tweedy and company were in no mood to make concessions to the corporate chiefs.

"We all felt like we'd achieved something that we hadn't before," Tweedy says. "The whole idea was that 'Yankee Hotel Foxtrot' was like one song."

For Jones, the label's refusal to accept the album spelled potential disaster.

"There was a point where I thought the documentary might not have an end for a good long time," the filmmaker says. "I really felt like it did need a conclusion, and I didn't want the conclusion to be, 'Oh, they go on tour.'"

But go on tour they did, and in the process they became a living, breathing, guitar-strumming example of what many viewed as a major problem with the music industry: labels refusing to allow a band the time to grow artistically. Critics and fans alike sang the band's praises while using its situation as a means to trounce big record companies. Eventually, Warner Bros. ended up simply giving the record back to the band.

Free to negotiate with other labels, Wilco settled on Nonesuch Records, and nearly a year after its planned release date, "Yankee Hotel Foxtrot" was finally out. Ironically, Nonesuch is a subsidiary of AOL Time Warner, meaning that the media behemoth essentially paid for the same record twice.

For Tweedy, there seems to be no hard feelings.

"I still love the process, right or wrong, whatever consumer-culture problems you might have with any of it," he says. "The fact is, I think records are a really beautiful way for people to hear human spirit."

In Jones's case, this happy ending connected him with one of his favorite films, "Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory." "Pure Imagination," a song from the film, runs over the credits of "**I Am Trying to Break Your Heart.**"

"This is a movie about pure imagination," Jones says. "It's about a little pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, all those things that Willie Wonka promised to someone if they kept their integrity. Charlie got it because he passed the test. Jeff didn't change the record."