

**WILCO:** Being There (Reprise)

Rating: \*\*\*\*\*

By Bill Holdship

Face it: The number of great double rock 'n' roll albums can be counted on one hand--the Beatles' *White Album*, the Stones' *Exile On Main Street*, the Clash's *London Calling*, maybe Dylan's *Blonde On Blonde*, definitely nothing by Chicago, Springsteen, or, for that matter, the Who. Nah, double LP sets have almost always been a bad idea, and the CD era with its even longer discs made them an even worse one. I mean, when's the last time you listened to anything on *Use Your Illusion* or *Lucky Town*?

Which is why when Reprise announced that Wilco's sophomore effort would be a two-disc set, it seemed like the height of pretention and artistic indulgence. After all, nothing on the band's debut LP, *A.M.*, indicated that Wilco leader Jeff Tweedy had it in him. In fact, the album led many fans of Tweedy's former group Uncle Tupelo to suddenly believe that *that* band's Jay Farrar (Tweedy's onetime songwriting partner--who now fronts Son Volt) may have been the real talent behind Uncle Tupelo.

So it's best to drop any preconceived notions before diving into the rich musical smorgasbord that is *Being There*, an actual honest-to-God concept album which presents Tweedy as the ultimate '90s rock romantic looking at the state of, well, rock 'n' roll romance (and longing) in 1996. Heck, the guy actually sings here about going to parties where "they still love rock 'n' roll" (on the great opening track, "Misunderstood"), as well as lines like "Music is my savior, I was named by rock 'n' roll" (on "Sunken Treasures," kicking off the second disc), without sounding the least bit ridiculous!

And, sure, there are pedal steel and slide guitars aplenty here--even a fiddle every now and again--but sometimes those brilliant Gram Parsons-derived morsels metamorphosize into some of the most glorious punk-derived cacophony and feedback to be found on disc this year. "I know this sounds like somebody else's song from a long time ago" Tweedy knowingly sings on disc two, casting all things "hip" into the wind--and just a few of the choice influences one can pick out during initial listens of *Being There* include: A lot of Harvest-era Neil Young; glam-period David Bowie ("Monday" totally rips the opening riff from "Rebel Rebel"); the Beach Boys ("I Got You [At The End of the Century]"); early Jackson Browne; the Replacements; the Grateful Dead; Pink Floyd; the Fabs; Exile-era Stones; *New Morning*-era Dylan; mid-period Who; Charlie Daniels; the Eagles ("Hotel Arizona" has to be a deliberate pun) and that band's many superior predecessors. I could go on...

*Being There* kicks off with a track that quotes from a song by Peter Laughner (a '70s rock romantic/tragic figure who helped found both Pere Ubu and the Dead Boys) and concludes nearly two hours later with a ballad, one of the finest recorded tributes ever to Elvis (or Gram Parsons? Or both?) called "The Lonely One," and a rocker titled "Dreamer In My Dreams" (the title says it all), which effectively merges the Faces at their most raucous with "Country Honk"-type Rolling Stones. In the process, Tweedy and Wilco have created not only the best rock album of 1996 but, quite simply, one of the greatest double rock LPs of all time.