

Liner notes for Warner Brothers rerelease of Uncle Tupelo's *Anodyne*

It's October 1993. The Midwest's biggest deluge in almost 200 years had finally receded. A summer of sandbags and debris careening wildly past St. Louis' Gateway Arch on the Mississippi and Missouri's angry waters had drifted already from the newspaper pages into folkloric memory.

That same month, Uncle Tupelo released *Anodyne* – the group's fourth and final album. It was a record awaited with eagerness and uncertainty in sodden St. Louis and elsewhere. Would the fiercely independent Tupes – newly signed to a major label – deliver the goods?

After all, Uncle Tupelo's debut, 1990's *No Depression*, was a blaze of punk-inflected country (or was it country-inflected punk?) that lent its name to a new movement in American music. The band's original members – Jay Farrar, Jeff Tweedy, and Mike Heidorn – connected the dots between punk and honky-tonk and reached further back to a populism long abandoned by Nashville's glitzy kitschmakers. Uncle Tupelo replanted and nurtured that neglected seed into a string of potent and thorny songs that drew blood from the “trickle down” economics of the Reagan/Bush years.

Nineteen ninety-one was the year of Nirvana's *Nevermind*, Pearl Jam's *Ten*, and Smashing Pumpkins' *Gish*, and Uncle Tupelo's brilliant follow-up record, *Still Feel Gone*, refined their sound into a fluid amalgam of incendiary rock and exquisite balladry. Yet expectations that the band would be another standout in the burgeoning U.S. Indie rock scene were confounded by the startling turn they took with their next album.

Put simply, *March 16-20, 1992* exploded indie-rock conventions. Made in only five days with R.E.M.'s Peter Buck in the producer's chair, the album juxtaposed stripped-down but supercharged acoustic originals such as Farrar's “Grindstone” and Tweedy's “Black Eye” with impassioned covers of murder ballads such as “Lilli Schull” and the pious apocalypse of The Louvin Brothers' “The Great Atomic Power.” It is a classic that effortlessly justifies the “timeless” tag hung upon it. But at that particular time and place, it was a cocky and defiant roll of the dice.

The gamble paid off in many ways – including a move from independent Rockville Records to Sire. But it was easy to be on pins and needles as you slipped *Anodyne* into your CD player. Would success spoil Uncle Tupelo?

“We had made *March 16* with a minimum of overdubs,” says Tweedy. “And we had to decide how hard-core we wanted to be about sticking to the idea of making a live record.” Tweedy observes that the group stuck to its guns “as a guarantee that we wouldn't clean everything up and make it slick.”

Anodyne was a slashing riposte to any doubters – and a triumphant summation of their all-too-short career. Its opening songs, the elegiac “Slate” and the winsome “Acuff-Rose,” extended and sharpened the vibe of *March 16-20, 1992*. But then “The Long Cut” swells through your speakers, and a vast landscape of churning guitar rock, bittersweet sentiment, and dark whispers tumbles out to rough up and spook your eardrums. Many of *Anodyne*’s songs have already become classics.

The story of Uncle Tupelo’s split over the direction of the band in May 1994 is an oft-told tale. Alt-country pop psychologists pore through *Anodyne*’s lyrics, searching the runes for signs of impending ruin. It’s a narrow view, to be sure, but it’s there for the taking if you want it.

The broader and more interesting story is the one of how a band from the Midwest got as far as they did, as fast as they did, without compromise and without much cheerleading from their own hometown. It’s a story often overlooked amidst the successes that Farrar and Tweedy have racked up since the group’s demise. (Farrar founded Son Volt, and Tweedy took much of the last incarnation of Uncle Tupelo with him into Wilco. Both have also had success with solo projects.)

Uncle Tupelo got their start in Belleville, Illinois – a factory town in metropolitan St. Louis’ orbit. The original lineup played together as The Primitives in the mid-‘80s, with Farrar’s brother Wade on lead vocals. Then the group thinned to a trio and changed their name to Uncle Tupelo in 1987. They began playing gigs in a music scene dominated by new wave cover bands and ersatz blues and classic rock combos.

Uncle Tupelo’s hybrid of loud guitars and sharp, imagistic lyrics – soaked in alcohol and Rust Belt dolor – put them squarely at odds with that scene. But the band won a coterie of local fans through shows at the legendary Cicero’s restaurant and Basement Bar in University City – a dank yet ubercool venue that also spawned The Bottle Rockets and Dazzling Killmen. They expanded that base through regional touring until Rockville took notice and signed them in late 1989.

In a replay of the timeless antagonism between prophets and hometowns, Uncle Tupelo was mocked by many in St. Louis, even after they’d received critical praise and attention elsewhere. This reaction is what Tweedy’s referring to when he sings, “Nobody likes ‘em where they’re from” on “We’ve Been Had” – *Anodyne*’s pungent dissection of the rock biz – or when the band emblazoned their ranking in a local weekly newspaper’s annual music poll (“St. Louis’ Fourth Best Country Band”) on the Hatch Show Print posters for their farewell tour.

Yet touches of St. Louis lore remain stamped on the band. Tweedy’s marvelous “New Madrid,” for instance, is a love song that mines one of the most bizarre incidents in recent Midwestern

history – scientific quack Iben Browning’s 1990 prediction of an earthquake along the New Madrid fault line. The warning sent people from St. Louis to Memphis into a paroxysm of “earthquake preparedness” when the media hyped it without vetting its scientific worthiness. Tweedy’s light touch transmutes this collective lunacy into a rollicking valentine that travels all the way from “the fountain” (a notable Belleville landmark) to New York City.

Two of the bonus tracks on this remastered and expanded version of *Anodyne* (covers of Waylon Jennings’ “Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way?” and Terry Fell’s “Truck Drivin’ Man”) give listeners a taste of another uniquely St. Louis moment in the band’s existence – the legendary “Coffee Creek” gigs. Created as a way to continue playing at Cicero’s after their popularity challenged fire code compliance, the Tupes and lead Bottle Rocket Brian Henneman played acoustic covers of country classics (including “Hank”) under the Coffee Creek moniker a few times in the early ‘90s.

“The idea came from hanging out with Brian,” recalls Tweedy. “Brian’s a whirling vortex of energy, and we just got sucked into all of his crazy ideas. That one was a great one. We talked about it for years before actually getting together and playing. Speaking for myself, it was such a blast and so relaxing – and it was good for me and Jay to have another ‘leader’ at that point in the band’s history.”

Regrettably, only St. Louis fans got to see Coffee Creek in action.

One of the ironies of Uncle Tupelo’s career is that by the time that its hometown warmed to the band, it had already lost the group to the rest of America. When Farrar sings about “the lessons we’ve traveled” on the blistering “Chickamauga,” it’s more than a metaphor. *Anodyne*’s range and sweep take in any number of mile markers and roadside attractions stretching from Illinois and Missouri to Texas to Georgia to New York City. It remains among the most “American” albums released in the 1990s – or any other decade.

Anodyne was recorded in the late spring of 1993 in Austin, Texas. The choice of location was an inspired one. Austin has long been a crossroads for rock, honky-tonk, blues, folk, and the Tex-Mex sound personified by the late Doug Sahm of Sir Douglas Quintet and Texas Tornados fame.

Sahm is *Anodyne*’s special guest star, showing up to sing on a rousing version of his classic “Give Back The Key To My Heart” from the 1976 album *Texas Rock For Country Rollers*. Sahm’s stripped-down sound and soulful lyrics appealed to the band, but it was his ceaseless devotion to music through the waxing and waning of critical and popular fortune that made him a touchstone for Uncle Tupelo.

“Doug brought an element of added inspiration to the sessions,” recalls Farrar. “He was the

personification of what propelled us at that point.”

As they'd done with their third record, Uncle Tupelo created *Anodyne* live in the studio. The result is songs that literally crackle with a profound intimacy and warmth. “With March 16-20,” says Farrar, “the method of recording live whenever possible was adopted so the recording could be completed in five days. Recording live became more of a concept with *Anodyne*. It was partially done as a reaction to the growing trend in the early '90s to construct recordings piece by piece in the computer.”

The band also tapped new musicians as well. Drummer Ken Coomer entered when Heidorn quit in 1992. John Stirratt arrived to play bass and guitar from the Oxford, Mississippi band The Hilltops (who later came to prominence as Blue Mountain). Max Johnston handled everything from fiddle to lap steel to banjo and Dobro. “Having John Stirratt and Max Johnston helping out was conducive to recording it all live,” says Farrar. “It would have been difficult to do without overdubbing if it had been done as a three-piece.”

The interplay between Farrar's haunted landscapes and Tweedy's sardonic takes on love and music imbues the album with the kinetic energy of a tug-of-war. This push and pull enlivens *Anodyne* immeasurably.

The first two songs are a perfect illustration. “Slate” is Farrar's ghostly meditation on loss and loneliness, which ends just right by stopping dead on the third pass of its chorus' admonition to “Lay it down in full view/Lay it down.” The eerie closing silence of “Slate” lingers until driving chords and a ebullient fiddle kick off “Acuff-Rose” – Tweedy's plaintive ode to the power of music to console and heal.

This kind of juxtaposition continues throughout *Anodyne*. The angry resignation of Farrar's “Chickamauga” and the spiky, taciturn poetry of his “Fifteen Keys” butt up against the aching hopes of Tweedy's “The Long Cut” and the bittersweet cynicism of his “We've Been Had.”

Nineteen ninety-three was the year of the Waco siege and the sight of U.S. Marines being dragged through Mogadishu's streets, and *Anodyne*'s lyrics capture this bleak American landscape perfectly. It's a place crammed with particular agonies and collective angst, earthquakes and bloody battles, voodoo economics and bad faith – a crossroads where all paths lead to the “chronic impending disaster” of which Farrar warns on “Chickamauga.”

Even the lyrics to Farrar's “*Anodyne*” dissect the pain of separation, rather than attempt to relieve it. Yet there is a muscular vitality in the album's music that can be seen as its true message. There are no maudlin missteps here.

Just listen to the way that the pedal and lap steel curl snugly around the melody of the title track's shuffling lullaby or the corrosive guitar attack of "Chickamauga" – which summons up the rage of the band's earliest work. The puckered banjo on "New Madrid" teases out a wry smile from the wreckage, and Lloyd Maines' pedal steel pirouettes over Tweedy's ambling "No Sense In Lovin'."

For all the bitterness and bleakness of its words, *Anodyne*'s music is ebullient, unflaggingly inventive, and shot through with luminous sparks. Its melodies possess a peculiar strength that stretches past language. Its songs remind us that when words fail as a remedy, music can step into the breach to salve life's pain, indignity, and loss.

A rock 'n' roll farewells go, it's hard to beat that.

– Richard Byrne