

Partners Transcript Jeff & Spencer Tweedy

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Jeff: To be honest, I've been relating to him on a peer type level for a long time. I'm Jeff Tweedy, and I'm the lead singer in Wilco and father of Spencer Tweedy.

Spencer: My name is Spencer Tweedy. I'm a drummer, and I'm Jeff's son.

Hrishikesh: Besides being the frontman of the Grammy winning band Wilco, and before that Uncle Tupelo, Jeff Tweedy is also a Grammy winning producer. He's made two albums with the legendary gospel singer Mavis Staples and on the second one of those albums Spencer Tweedy played drums - he was still in high school. After that Jeff and Spencer formed a band together called Tweedy. They released an album in 2014 called Sukierae, named after Spencer's mother. And since then Spencer has played drums on two of Jeff's solo albums. Spencer has also played with Nora Jones, Beck, and more. But their story together starts 25 years ago, in early 1995. Here's Jeff-

Jeff: Things were pretty uncertain around the time that I found out that my wife Susie was pregnant with Spencer. Uncle Tupelo had just broken up. I had made a record with Wilco, my new band and it was not out yet. I was on a promo trip to the West Coast and I got a call from my wife telling me that I was going to be a dad. It was terrifying and invigorating at the same time because everything else in my life at that moment felt a little bit ungrounded and unreal. It was a scary proposition, especially considering how immature I was.

Spencer: I remember you told me once also that it felt like exactly what you needed, which is nice for a son to hear.

Jeff: It really was. The idea that I was going to be given a legitimate reason to grow up and think and care about something else besides myself felt like a much needed dose of reality at that moment in my life. My wife used to own a rock club called Lounge Jacks in Chicago. There was a drum kit in the basement, where my wife's offices were. At the time, I think Spencer's mother was practicing the drums quite a bit.

Spencer: What?

Jeff: Your mother was learning how to play the drums. You did not know that?

Spencer: I knew she bought a drum kit for Zade, her dad and my grandpa.

Jeff: No, she had a drum kit and she knew how to play the introduction, the intro, the drum beat for "Honky Tonk Women."

Spencer: Nice.

Jeff: And Spencer would be babysat downstairs a lot when Susie was at work. Really early on he would play the drums and he would play them so well that people would be coming down from upstairs, the bands that were setting up to do sound check and stuff would come down to witness this little kid that kind of looked like he knew what he was doing, even though he was like, couldn't sit on the drum throne by himself. He really sounded like a real drummer almost immediately.

Spencer: My first musical memories would definitely be watching VHS tapes of my dad and of Wilco on the TV in our family room. I would just watch those literally over and over again. I had one of the rapid VHS rewinders to rewind it and watch it over again. I drove my babysitters crazy, It was really exciting to me.

Jeff: I remember I was on tour and I went to a guitar store in Seattle and the only drum kit they had in the guitar store was this little tiny drum kit. I bought it and shipped it home. So one of the ways that we would play together would be to literally play music together. I'd sit and strum the guitar and he would play his tiny little drum kit. I would just play and see if he could follow me. Over time, I started trying different time signatures and trying to throw him off and he would always follow me like he knew where I was going. It was just this incredible, like molecular connection musically that I've never really even experienced with anybody else. We had a band really early on called The Raccoonists.

Music Clip

Spencer: Dad, was I five when we first-?

Jeff: We had your little kit, so it might have been five or six.

Spencer: I was somewhere between five and seven.

Jeff: I think we were just improvising and making up punk rock songs. I said, "I think we have a band. What do you want to call it?", and he said "The

Rockingist." I thought, he said The Raccoonists. Then I said, "The Raccoonists?" and he went, "Yes."

Spencer: I really, really loved to tell people that my dad was a musician. That he was a famous musician, that Wilco was really popular. I also, I had a little bit of an underdog attitude about it because I knew that Wilco was popular, but I didn't think they were popular enough. So I was, I felt righteous indignation and that not everybody knew who my dad was.

Jeff: I still feel that way. There definitely was a transitional period around 2001, 2002 that contributed to the band's overall profile being much larger. But, for me, it really gets pretty complex because there are a couple of tracks running alongside each other at this time. One is an idea of myself as being a good person and a good father and a good husband, taking care of everyone and being an adult. Alongside that was a very ambitious musician. Alongside that was a drug addict. I was starting to recognize that I had problems that I probably wasn't going to be able to fix by myself.

Spencer: I was completely oblivious to it at the time and even a long time afterward. Well, I had known that he went to rehab because my parents have always been honest with my brother and me. We knew that he was sick and then they told us where he was going to get better. Beyond that, I wasn't really aware and my dad kind of doesn't even really believe me when I say this, but I don't remember it affecting the time we were able to spend together or how much of it we were able to spend. I remember still being able to wake him up in the morning and play with trains. I still got to have a lot of fun and never felt like he wasn't present for us, even though I know he was having a really hard time.

Jeff: There were conflict free zones in my life even when I was struggling. One of them was getting on the floor with my kids. Thankfully I was able to still see that, that that was a really, really great place to be. We played a lot of music together and Susie's brother when he married his wife, Spencer and I performed at the wedding and that you must have been like eight or nine. I just remember Spencer wore a little country western shirt and they found a little drum kit for him. And it went really well. But by the time Spencer and I played together in front of people, Spencer had already played in front of people a fair amount.

Spencer: My friends and I had and still have a band called The Blisters which we formed when we were seven. In the first five or six years we played and practiced almost every single week, but also, we were playing lots of shows.

Jeff: They played Lollapalooza when you were eight?

Spencer: Yeah, The Blisters played the Kids at Palooza stage and then again when we were 12. I think the most important thing was that it gave me a sense of belonging and agency because I knew that we could do it and we could do it in real venues.

Jeff: I think the first real moment for me where I figured out that Spencer is 100% legit ready to be a working musician was working on the second Mavis Staples record that I helped her with. Mavis had said that she wanted to record "Revolution" by The Beatles. Mavis had kind of been insisting that the record just be an acoustic guitar and me and her doing duets and acoustic versions of songs without really a full band instrumentation. So I was trying to prepare a track for her to come and sing. But it just didn't feel like an engaging version of "Revolution" to not have a drum kit on it. Spencer came by after school and I just asked him if he knew that song. He said, "I think so." I had already recorded just the acoustic guitar. Spencer sat down and he played a perfect exact version of "Revolution" with all the same Ringo drum fills and everything. It was pretty astonishing how good it sounded and how he was able to play along with some of my tempo inconsistencies and make it all sound completely natural. I just remember saying, can you come by after school every day.

Spencer: It felt like that was how the rest of the record should be. I think they reconfigured it to allow for all those songs to have my dad playing guitar and bass and me playing drums on all of them.

Jeff: And from that point on it's been pretty much, whenever we have an opportunity to play together, we do.

Music Clip

Jeff: It was pretty much almost immediately when that project was finished with Mavis, Spencer continued to come to the studio every day after school. We just started accumulating tracks. Over time, it became obvious that we were making some sort of record.

Music Clip

Jeff: Around the same exact moment in time, Spencer's mother, Susie, my wife, was diagnosed with cancer and was beginning treatment on a couple of different diagnoses for lymphoma and liposarcoma. So I was going to stay home for a while. We're going to pretty much try and keep the schedule clear as far as touring went, so I could be there to go to her treatments with her. So this process of Spencer and I getting together in the studio every day and the progress we were making with different tracks started to become a focus for the family in terms of there being

some normalcy. There's still music being made, there's still something to look forward to. It was a scary, really scary time. I think Susie felt comforted by the idea that we were doing this family project.

Spencer: We didn't really play any shows until 2014

Jeff: Yeah

Spencer: Until we had already made a full record. I really hadn't expected that we would be doing full scale touring and real shows like that. But I never had much anxiety or I never really felt weird because I was spending so much time with my dad getting to play these shows together and make music together.

Jeff: We started with a father and son's trust and faith in each other and put that into a musical setting and we never really had to even think about it.

Spencer: I think the thing that felt weird to me was when people would ask me about the experience in a really loaded way. They'd be like, "isn't it weird to be playing with your dad?" Asking it in that way, I was worried that they would see someone who wasn't independent enough and wasn't, didn't have ownership of where I was and what I wanted to be doing.

Jeff: When we're on tour together we try and focus on the fact that we're musical peers more than father son dynamics. But to be honest, Spencer hasn't required a lot of parenting for a very long time. So I've been relating to him on a peer type level for a long time.

Spencer: I know that a lot of people aren't lucky to have good relationships with their parents.

Jeff: My relationship with my dad was 100% different than the relationship I have with both of my sons. Part of it is because of that experience as a son to my father. My father worked on the railroad for 46 years, and I think I maybe went to the railroad one time and I never had a clear idea of what his day to day life was like or what he did. So a lot of things in Spencer and Sammy's lives in terms of how we parented them was based on what we didn't want to do, like my wife's and I, what our childhoods were like. Early on, I really felt like it was important for Spencer and Sammy to be able to see where I was, what I was doing. Be able to understand what my environment was when I wasn't in their sight. If I said I'm backstage, I wanted them to know what that meant and what that looked like. They didn't travel with Wilco all the time, but they were there and around it enough to understand. The one thing that has changed is that we're both busy. Spencer has become a much busier musician outside of Tweedy and other projects we've done together in the past year or so. And at this point we're very grateful when we get to do it.

Spencer: When I was watching all those VHS tapes of Wilco when I was growing up, like that was exactly what I wanted to do. I wanted to make music with my dad. And it's still really awesome. It's still really, it still feels really crazy that we get to do that.

Hrishikesh: Jeff Tweedy and Spencer Tweedy are partners. Go listen to their album Sukirae. The Raccoonists by the way recently reunited, Jeff and Spencer, along with Spencer's brother Sammy, recently performed a song on Jimmy Kimmel Live during the current quarantine. They filmed it from home in their family bathroom. You can also find them on twitter Jeff can be found on Twitter @jefftweedy and Spencer @spencertweedy. This is the final episode of the first season of Partners. Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I produced, edited, and made the music for this show. With editing help from Maureen Hoben, and production assistance from Casey Deal. Partners is a mailchimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm Thanks for listening.