

**Song Exploder**  
**Wilco - Magnetized**  
**Episode 58**

Hrishikesh: You're listening to Song Exploder, where musicians take apart their songs and piece by piece tell the story of how they were made. My name is Hrishikesh Hirway.

*("Magnetized" by WILCO)*

Hrishikesh: Wilco formed in 1994, and 21 years later, they released their 9th album, *Star Wars*. In this episode, Jeff Tweedy, the band's singer and principal songwriter, breaks down the song "Magnetized." In addition to collaborating with his five bandmates, John Stirratt, Pat Sansone, Mikael Jorgensen, Nels Cline, and Glenn Kotche, it turns out Jeff Tweedy makes an active effort to remove his own ego from the process of songwriting. Coming up, you'll hear why.

*("Magnetized" by WILCO)*

*(Music ends)*

Jeff: Most days I don't come into the studio with an idea for a song. Most days I come to the studio with this interest in discovery or idea that I'm, can't wait to hear what's going to happen today. And I just start making sound and try and follow where it leads without trying to lead *it* too much. My ultimate goal is to get out of the way as much as possible. The joy of it is the discovery.

*(Synth)*

*(Synth ends)*

Jeff: Periodically, I'll just have the guys that don't live here in town come in to just play around in the studio.

*(Synth)*

Jeff: This was one of the sessions where Mike had come into town. We were just kind of playing around with different ideas, and he was using that synth sound And I started to hear something melodically in what was there, like a monotonous kind of chant or something, you know, like that's the idea.

*(Vocals: "Orchestrate the shallow pink refrigerator drone / Carried in the shadows almost bone")*

Jeff: I'll do a vocal melody based on just sounds or, we call them mumble tracks. And I will sit and listen to the first line over and over and over, and sketch things on my notepad, and try and figure out things that have the same syllables or the same meter, until I get something that's satisfying, and then I'll sing it.

*(Vocals: "The moment that you thought would murder motions you wait / Every apprehension alien, ache, ah")*

Jeff: The idea is to not think too hard at that stage. Once you have translated all of the mumble tracks into a set of lyrics that are real words, it's generally pretty jumbled and doesn't make a whole lot of sense. And then, there's another layer of moving things around and getting closer to some meaning. And it's a really rewarding process for me. Maybe it's really alien to someone who really wants to come at something with a solid idea of what they want to say. I just trust that some meaning will come out of this process, and that something I want to say is going to be harder to conceal when I get my ego out of the way, and I'm not trying to direct all meaning. Your ego isn't really that interested in what's really inside of you. Your ego is very much interested in presenting an idealized version of yourself to the world. And vulnerability only cracks through that by accident unintentionally. When your ego is really working hard to be smart and clever and on par with your heroes musically, those are real roadblocks to discovery. I just trust the process a lot more than I trust myself to present something honest and vulnerable and real. Your unconscious has somehow allowed some part of you to slip through.

*(Vocals: "I sleep underneath / A picture that I keep of you next to me / I realize we're magnetized")*

Jeff: There are a lot of jumbled lyrics, but I assure you, they all end up meaning something to me. I'm sustained by a deep pull and connection to my family, to my wife. "I realize we're magnetized," I don't know if I can say it any more plainly than that, even though it sounds silly out of context.

*(Vocals: "I realize we're magnetized")*

Jeff: I don't think it's necessarily about romantic love. I think it's about something stronger than that, and that's family.

Spencer: My name is Spencer Tweedy, son of Jeff Tweedy [laughter].

Jeff: Spencer, my son Spencer, did a pass after school one day of how the drums might come and go or enter and work in the context of the song.

Spencer: It has a lot of Glenn in it because of listening to Glenn's drumming since I was six years old, and even taking lessons with him when I was a little kid, so probably has a lot of overlap with what Glenn does.

Jeff: We always heard Spencer's part as being kind of tossed off. But yeah, I think that some part of it directed the way that Glenn approached his drums. He kind of emulated some of that, but obviously, kind of, refined it into a drum part.

*(Drums)*

*(Drums end)*

Jeff: I'll play guitar on tracks to finish them. And I don't really think I spent much time composing it as much as just doing one track,

*(Guitar)*

Jeff: getting excited, and then not wanting to put the guitar down, and then hearing another track.

*(Guitar)*

Jeff: And eventually it became this anthemic thing, started triumphant sounding.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar fades)*

Jeff: You know, it makes no sense at all for me to be playing guitar at all on a record, when you have Nels Cline in your band. Oh, I'm just happy he's in the band, and he's happy doing whatever he's doing.

*(Guitar)*

Jeff: A lot of times what Nels is happiest doing, is making things work texturally that people maybe don't always notice as a guitar. And I think Nels gets a lot of satisfaction out of being a stealth guitar player in the context of the song.

*(Guitar)*

Jeff: Nels isn't a guitar player exclusively. I think Nels is an effects player, and I think he's a really great one. He's obviously got all of the technique that you need to make a guitar work with just his hands. But he has also spent so much time becoming an expert at how pedals affect that sound. I don't know many people that know that world better than him. He's always moving between pedals in such a fluid state, it's like a virtuoso performance on pedals.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar fades)*

Jeff: I always hear certain songs as having closing credits going over them. You know, like, and this one definitely felt like it was a closing credit moment, musically.

*(Guitar)*

Jeff: When you get to the end of a process like this and it works the way you trust that it will work, then yeah, you sit back and go, "How did I do that?" And you have made yourself feel something somehow. Like, "I need you, and I couldn't even fight it if I wanted to." You didn't start with the feeling, you discovered a feeling.

*(Guitar)*

*(Guitar ends)*

Hrishikesh: And now, here's "Magnetized," by Wilco, in its entirety.

*("Magnetized" by WILCO)*

Hrishikesh: Visit [songexploder.net](http://songexploder.net) for more information about Wilco and this song. My thanks to Spencer Tweedy for his help making this episode happen.

*("Transparent (Main Title Theme)" by DUSTIN O'HALLORAN)*

Hrishikesh: Next time on Song Exploder, composer Dustin O'Halloran breaks down his Emmy-winning theme to the Amazon original series *Transparent*. Song Exploder is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. You can find all of the past episodes of this podcast and subscribe to future episodes at [itunes.com/songexploder](https://itunes.com/songexploder). If you're on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, you can find Song Exploder there too. On the Song Exploder instagram, I just posted a picture of my interview with Jeff Tweedy in Chicago at Wilco's recording studio. So check that out. My name's Hrishikesh Hirway, thanks for listening.

*("Transparent (Main Title Theme)" by DUSTIN O'HALLORAN)*

*(Music fades)*