

## No Depression by Uncle Tupelo (1990)

To say that I had been looking forward to hearing Uncle Tupelo's No Depression would be putting it mildly. I had been better prepared for this album than perhaps any other — not least because I was coming to it 12 years after its release. As I discovered more and more of the 'Americana' field, it seemed like I was re-tracing the steps that country-rock had taken to get to where it is now. Among the Ryan Adams and Lucinda Williams records, Jay Farrar's Sebastopol found its way into my collection and into my consciousness, and its immediacy and originality were quite startling. And then my education in Uncle Tupelo and their various offspring really did go backwards. I listened to some Wilco CDs, saw the film about the making of their classic album Yankee Hotel Foxtrot, read all about Uncle Tupelo's history, got to grips with their final album, Anodyne, and finally laid my hands on a copy of their debut record, No Depression - one of the albums widely acclaimed to have grabbed country music, shaken it free of its schmaltz, introduced it to punk, and reminded it what a few well-written songs could do. If the term country-rock seems to be a meaningless label, a convenient way of making country music sound cool and accessible, when actually it never needed that kind of assistance, how about country-punk? Imagine Clarence White's country picking style, combined with power chords which are delivered as a short sharp shock to your ears, literally cutting out before they begin to echo the big rock band excesses of the late sixties and seventies. That is more or less what you get in songs like That Year, Factory Belt and Flatness. These are songs written to reflect a United States that is both rural and yet industrial. The tone of the lyrics is remarkably weary coming from such young songwriters, but weary it is, as their characters (if not their selves) live an industrial life while displaying a rural mentality — there is a yearning quality which conjures up vivid images of small-town America. Whether those images are accurate or not is another issue, but this matters less than the fact that the stories told match the uneasy combination of authentic country and biting rock. Indeed, the stinging riffs were what I came away remembering after hearing the album for the first time. Not that I was humming them to myself — if you are seeking a collection of catchy melodic hooks or vocal lines, look elsewhere. But the constant random sequencing of quick riff after quick riff, sudden tempo change, rapid country pick, lends No Depression a dynamism which is unique in character but also quite unsettling. This is not background music, and I am glad I came to it after hearing the more approachable side of Americana. The same can be said of the voice of Jay Farrar, who in the early part of Uncle Tupelo's career was the dominant singer. Feted by such writers as Greg Kot, Wilco's biographer, as having a golden voice, Farrar can sound very peculiar. His low tones in particular can sound graceless. But this album is pretty short of ballads, and its fast and lively style suits Farrar's strident vocals more than any other type of song. So did No Depression live up to the expectations I had formed? Just about. I will listen to it again and again — the way it remains resolutely upbeat in the face of some pretty gloomy subject matter makes it an album I, like many people, will turn to when I need a lift. With No Depression, Uncle Tupelo brought a modern feel, an interesting sound and a good attitude to nineties American folk music, and the influence of this album on a musical generation is undeniable. But to be honest, they left others to think about the tunes.

## About the Author

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