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**D**ownstairs in a dressing room at Chicago's Double Door, Wilco frontman Jeff Tweedy has just been propositioned. Cynthia Plastercaster, the infamous Chicago sculptress, would like to add

Tweedy's penis to her collection of body parts. For a documentary, the camera operator is waiting expectantly, and his wife, Sue Miller, is also present. "Honey," she asks tentatively, "I want your penis cast." "Yes, I want my penis cast." "No, you don't!" she yells. "I do, too," Tweedy insists.

*The True Adventures of the Penis* is the title of the documentary. "I don't think your fans should see this," Tweedy says. "I really don't. They're already seeing it. It's the girth of your manhood."

"I'm willing to accept reality," Tweedy says. Finally Plastercaster, typically direct, says, "This is a scene one might expect to see in Chicago, where roots figure prominently in the local avant stalwart/Sonic Youth-influenced Noise Pop Chicago 2000, a fringe scene that

but came here to expand. The organizers picked the right town. As mainstream "alternative" has declined, Chicago has thrived, evolving beyond indie rock into the most multifaceted underground in the United States. It

boasts the country's highest concentration of profit-splitting record labels, artist-run recording studios, fringe-friendly concert bookers, and affordable nightspots, plus a growing number of musicians who can't quite believe

Labels aren't the only key to sustaining a scene. Affordable recording studios help labels and musicians keep expenses to the low thousands, or even hundreds. Rick Wojcik owns Dusty Groove, Chicago's real-life version of *High Fidelity's* Championship Vinyl and a world-class source for rare groove soul and Brazilian pop ([www.dustygroove.com](http://www.dustygroove.com)). "The hype in the early '90s about Chicago brought a lot of money to this town that Chicagoans then took and reinvested," he argues. "What [Liz Phair producer] Brad Wood did with Idful Studios is, I think, the Chicago idea. Steve Albini and [Tortoise's] Casey Rice, John McEntire, and Bundy Brown have all gone on to form their own studios and teach other people."

and the Handsome Family, a local indie label, to the house and studio. Since Recordings, from free to \$100,000 at Fireside Bowl, Chicago's largest international conglomerates. The chance of selling platinum—lucky to sell 10,000 albums. For-label "prestige act," as he says. An A&R man who signed him. Tweedy could easily end up. long. Backstage, he and Sue Miller. When a carton of fancy. Tweedy retorts, "It's in the

angled in the same commu-

Chicago. Sue Miller isn't just another rock wife: She and Julia Adams operated the recently closed Lounge Ax, a hugely loved venue for indie bands. Adams is married to Patrick Monaghan, head of the indie Carrot Top label. Alt-country bumpkins the Handsome Family were recruited to Carrot Top after a few drunken shows at Lounge Ax; Tweedy lent them equipment early on. Of such connections an entire infrastructure of scenes has evolved. In fact, Noise Pop drew the bulk of its acts from Chicago labels: Touch and Go, Thrill Jockey, Bloodshot, Carrot Top, Okka, Drag City, Sugar Free, Kranky, Minty Fresh, even longtime jazz and blues cultivator Delmark.

The last, which dates to the '50s, points to the city's deep indie roots, which include the seminal blues/early-rock Chess label and the influential '60s free-jazz think tank the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). It's no accident that post-rockers like Tortoise and O'Rourke began rediscovering jazz here; in true Chicago

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