Sitting at a desk in an office, preparing to answer questions for his record company as if at a job interview, the underground rock star Stephen Malkmus wondered if he should have worn the one suit he ever owned.

“It was a Jos. A. Bank, ‘work on the bottom of the totem pole on Wall Street’ suit that my parents got me when I graduated from college,” he said. “I never used it. I think it got moths.”

Instead, Mr. Malkmus entered into a career that landed him in tattered shirts on stages across the world, with a collection of cerebral songs and a persona steeped in poetic nonchalance. Both figured in his stint with Pavement, the indie-rock band he helmed in the 1990s, and they remain in his current state as leader of Stephen Malkmus & the Jicks.

The band provides the occasion for his latest visit to New York—he performs Wednesday at Bowery Ballroom and Thursday at Music Hall of Williamsburg—but he is no stranger to the city.

Mr. Malkmus, who currently lives in Portland, Ore., keeps an apartment on the Lower East Side, and he lived in New York full-time for five years in the ‘90s, when he spent a formative period working as a Whitney Museum of American Art security guard.

“When you’re a guard, you’re supposed to zone out,” he said. “You’re kind of just holding up the wall.” His post gave him a special vantage, though. “The early ‘90s still felt like the
'80s. There was some residual excess, a late-Warhol fabulousness to a lot of the people who would show up there. It had a lot of wacky uptown wealth.”

Mr. Malkmus, now 47 years old, added: "But it felt sort of frivolous and not as sinister as the art world now, where the confidence-game aspect is so apparent.”

Through it all, he stood silently, jotting down ideas for lyrics. "For better or worse, we managed to use these little notebooks,” he said. "I can't imagine now with cellphones. They must be in more of a lockdown mode.”

Eventually, as Pavement developed a following in the 1990s, Mr. Malkmus stopped needing a day job. In the years since, he has garnered a reputation as one of the most distinctive songwriters of his generation.

"I spend most of my time reading books and always considered lyrics in music a lesser form of poetry,” said Jesper Eklow, whose band Endless Boogie opens for Mr. Malkmus on Thursday. "But he's a remarkable lyricist, and it seems effortless. He's a reluctant genius in a way.”

Describing the life of an aspiring songwriter, Mr. Malkmus, in the first single to his new album, sings, "We lived on Tennyson and venison and the Grateful Dead.” Other new songs allude to the allure of Micronesia and Portland’s devotion to “cinnamon and lesbians.”

He lives there with his wife, a ceramics artist, and their two daughters, ages 6 and 9. The city serves as the command station for his current band, whose fifth album, “Wig Out at Jagbags,” came out last month.

"I went more in a sort of David Foster Wallace ‘everything' style,” he said of his songwriting this time. "When I listen, I’m not sure if I would even like it, because it's a lot of images and a lot to take in, like the music is going and then there’s a television with numbers running underneath. It's almost like a game to keep up or catch up. But I keep doing it.”

It brought him back to New York too, where he still feels at least partly at home. "It's just a little cooler here than anywhere else, and it always is," he said. "People seem pretty happy here, even if they're bellyaching.”