



TOM WAITS

[BY ROBBOWMAN]



AS IS THE CASE with a select few genre-defining artists such as Miles Davis, Bob Dylan, and Joni Mitchell, Tom Waits, over the course of his nearly forty-year career, has operated under the maxim "He not busy being born is busy dying." Refusing to stay still and rest on his laurels, Waits has continuously sought new influences, dramatically reinventing himself and his art along the way. In the process, he has forged a highly original, personal, and idiosyncratic musical lexicon, resulting in one of the most distinctive, rich, and diverse bodies of recorded work in American popular music history.

It is commonplace to refer to singularly original artists as being ahead of their time. Waits, though, has never been of his time, ahead of his time, or, for that matter, locked into any particular time. An outsider artist before the term was in common use, Waits has been enamored, at various points in his career, with the cool of 1940s and 1950s jazz; the 1950s and 1960s word-jazz and poetry of such Beat and Beat-influenced writers as Jack Kerouac,

Lord Buckley, and Charles Bukowski; the primal rock & roll crunch of the Rolling Stones; the 1920s German cabaret stylings of Kurt Weill; the postwar, alternate world of invented instruments and rugged individualism of avant-garde composer Harry Partch; the proto-metal blues of 1950s and 1960s Howlin' Wolf and their extension into the world of Captain Beefheart's late-1960s avant-rock; the archaic formalism of 19th-century parlor ballads; Dylan's early- and mid-sixties transformation of the possibilities of language in the worlds of both folk and rock; the elegance of pre-war Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Hoagy Carmichael; the sophistication of postwar Frank Sinatra; and, more recently, the bone-crushing grooves of 1980s and 1990s funk and hip-hop. Indeed, the art of Tom Waits has altogether transcended time and, to some degree, place.

Waits was born in 1949 in Pomona, California, and came of age in the San Diego area. He began his performing career at San Diego's Heritage club and the Troubadour in Los Angeles. It was at the latter, in June 1971, that Frank Zappa compatriot Herb Cohen first heard Waits and signed him to a management and publishing contract. A year later, at the same club, David Geffen was similarly struck by the young singer-songwriter's facility with words and melody: Waits's first album for

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Asylum, 1973's *Closing Time*, proved to be an anomaly, containing twelve rather mainstream examples of early-seventies southern California singer-songwriter soft rock. One song in particular, "Ol' '55," caught the zeitgeist of the time and place so perfectly that the Eagles chose to cover it for their third album, *On the Border*.

By his sophomore album, *The Heart of Saturday Night*, the influence of Jack Kerouac and Steve Allen's 1959 LP, *Poetry for the Beat Generation*, was evident as Waits began to re-envision himself as a neo-beatnik jazz hipster. With a layer of rasp now overlaid on his natural voice, the influence of R&B artists such as Ray Charles and Dr. John was also manifest. The album is notable for the inclusion of "Diamonds on My Windshield," the first recorded example of Waits reciting poetry over a jazz backing. His 1975 live recording, *Night Hawks at the Diner*, took things further, with Waits deftly weaving extended banter and hilarious, Beat-inspired monologues seamlessly between each song, accompanied by a small jazz ensemble consisting of drums, bass, piano, and sax.

Small Change (1976) made it clear that Waits had evolved into a master storyteller, reflecting the influence of crime-noir writers such as Dashiell Hammett and John D. MacDonald. Arguably his first masterpiece, the album featured exquisite piano ballads such as "Tom Traubert's Blues" and "The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)," the word-jazz of "Pasties and a G-String," and the tour-de-force tenor-sax-accompanied hucksterism of "Step Right Up." *Foreign Affairs* (1977) and *Blue Valentine* (1978) continued apace, as Waits gradually began writing about junkies and prostitutes instead of skid-row drunks. In songs such as "Christmas Card From a Hooker in Minneapolis" and "Red Shoes by the Drugstore," his writing became ever more vivid, compact, and complex. Vocally, he adopted a blacker sound reflected in the blues tune "\$29.00" and the funky R&B of "Wrong Side of the Road" and "Whistlin' Past the Graveyard."

Looking at film footage of his performances in the 1970s, one is struck by the incongruity of his youth and his ravaged, lived-in voice, world-weary posture, and bohemian, wise-before-his-time lyrics, which chronicled poignant moments in the lives of the dispossessed and disadvantaged—those who lived on the margins and drank to forget while populating the underbelly of mainstream America, a world consisting of greasy diners, petty crime, seedy bars, and even seedier hotels. Part of Waits's incipient genius, at least partially influenced by the writing of Bukowski, was his ability to find humanity and tenderness in the disenfranchised hobos and drunks that populated 5th Street in Los Angeles. As he alternated groove numbers and ballads, he'd

also finely honed his shtick: billowing clouds of smoke emanating from his ever-present cigarette, a beret or a porkpie hat slung low over his face, an oversize suit, and a loose-limbed, twitching, mannered-yet-mesmerizing visual style.

The apotheosis of the first part of Waits's career was reached in 1980 with the stunning *Heartattack and Vine*. On the title track and on "Downtown," his voice had become nearly corrosive in its intensity. Already a masterful vocalist capable of nuanced approaches to dynamics, percussive accents, and timbre, Waits had now added an idiosyncratic approach to enunciation involving popping consonants, otherworldly vowel sounds, elided syllables, and inordinate amounts of sibilance, breath, and spit to his arsenal of tricks. On "'Til the Money Runs Out," there was, for the first time, a hint of a gospel-derived falsetto that he was to use to great effect over the next thirty years.

If Tom Waits's career had ended with *Heartattack and Vine*, he would more than deserve to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. As it turned out, his first seven albums were simply a prelude to a reinvention so radical that, as was the case with both Bob Dylan and Miles Davis when they went electric, he polarized his audience, potentially risked his career, and came out the other side as a vibrant, renewed, and, arguably, much more important artist.

There were more than three years between the recording of *Heartattack and Vine* and his next album, the pivotal and enigmatically named *Swordfishtrombones* (1983). In the interim, Waits married Kathleen Brennan, who would become his creative as well as life partner, and he wiped the slate clean, parting company with his manager, producer, band, and record label.

Swordfishtrombones, his first album for Island Records, was shocking—to put it mildly. Brennan had turned Waits on to Captain Beefheart, and his voice became even more primal. "Once you've heard Beefheart," mused Waits in 1999, "it's hard to wash him out of your clothes. It stains, like coffee or blood."

Around the same time that Waits discovered the alternative sonic universe of Captain Beefheart, he also became hip to the invented instruments and forty-three-tones-to-the-octave soundscapes of composer Harry Partch. Suitably inspired, he dispensed with the omnipresent jazz saxo-

phone that had dominated much of his early work. For good measure, he also banished cymbals from the sessions that produced *Swordfishtrombones*. The music of both Beefheart and Partch employed marimbas extensively, and marimba and marimba-like instruments now became an integral part of the sound force that Waits worked with for the next two-plus decades. Latin dance



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THIS PAGE *Waits with wife and collaborator Kathleen Brennan at the premiere of One From the Heart, 1982; in the U.K. in the seventies.*



forms also became an area of interest, as reflected in *Swordfisbtrombones*' title track, while the raw contemporary blues of Mississippi Hill Country artists such as R.L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough appeared to be driving songs like "Gin Soaked Boy."

A few years earlier, Waits's music had been galvanizing in its intensity. Now it was frighteningly surreal, as he conjured up sonic firebombs while inviting the spirit to descend on such percussive tracks as "16 Shells From a Thirty-Ought-Six." He howled his way through a maelstrom of sound that was simply unprecedented in the world of rock. According to Waits, the process was one of trying "to listen to the noise in my head and invent some junkyard-orchestral deviation" from the norms of popular music. He was also fond of referring to his new sound simply as "organized noise."

Subsequent releases such as 1985's *Rain Dogs*, 1987's *Franks Wild Years* (adapted from a stage production mounted by Waits and Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company a year earlier), 1988's live *Big Time*, and 1992's Grammy-winning *Bone Machine* were simultaneously shocking and riveting as Waits ricocheted from one style to another: Keith Richards was featured on three tracks on *Rain Dogs*, including the incendiary "Union Square" and "Big Black Mariah," but on the next album, the Latin- and European-influenced *Franks Wild Years*, rock music was notable for its virtual absence.

"For me, there are things that I imagine and that thrill me," mused Waits in an interview with *NME* in 1985, "and that I wanna hear, that I'm gonna try to accomplish in the studio, but sometimes you only get halfway there. The way I'm constructing songs is different now from the way I used to; it's more like collage. I'll take this and I put that there and I'll nail that to the side, and then we'll paint it yellow and brown. It's more constructional."

Making a significant contribution to his new method of composition was the music of German cabaret composer Kurt Weill. Sometime between *Swordfisbtrombones* and *Rain Dogs*, Waits had become interested in Weill's late-1920s and 1930s musical-theater works, and in 1985 he contributed a recording of Weill's "What Keeps Mankind Alive?" from *The Threepenny Opera* to *Lost in the Stars*, a Weill tribute album produced by Hal Willner. Weill's slightly off-kilter, stylized cabaret approach to melody, rhythm, orchestration, and musical narrative permeated much of Waits's subsequent work, in particular his three collaborations with director and playwright Robert Wilson: 1990's *The Black Rider* (recorded and released in 1993), in which Waits worked with one of his Beat heroes, William Burroughs; 1992's *Alice* (recorded and released in 2002); and 2000's *Blood Money* (recorded and released in 2002).

Fascinated by timbre, texture, and rhythm, Waits seemed to have no limits to his imagination. For *Rain Dogs*, he all but dispensed with his trademark piano, using pump organ and harmonium instead. Later albums featured mellotron and the obscure keyboard instruments the Optigan and the Chamberlin. For percussion, Waits took to banging on any surface that produced an arresting sound—the opening track from *Rain Dogs*, "Singapore," was constructed around his drummer hammering on a chest of drawers until the piece of furniture was completely destroyed. A traditional trap-drum kit was missing from *Bone*

Machine, while tracks such as "Diamonds & Gold" (*Rain Dogs*) and "Telephone Call From Istanbul" (*Franks Wild Years*) were built nearly entirely around various percussion sounds, melody being downplayed in the extreme.

Stating that he wanted to work with instruments that nobody liked anymore, Waits began using the accordion regularly in his work on tracks such as "Cemetery Polka" from *Rain Dogs* and "More Than Rain" and the plaintive "Cold Cold Ground" from *Franks Wild Years*. Bagpipes, bowed saws, metal anklungs, and brake drums also became part of his sonic arsenal. Most of *The Black Rider*, *Blood Money*, and *Alice* featured small chamber groups of strings and winds alongside various keyboard instruments, and all but eschewed guitars. For *Franks Wild Years*, Waits began singing through a police bullhorn. On tracks such as *Bone Machine*'s "Dirt in the Ground," he restricted his vocal to a haunting, otherworldly falsetto slightly reminiscent of that deployed on occasion by Prince. Ultimately, there didn't appear to be a sonic color Waits wasn't interested in painting.

"I use things we hear around us all the time, built and found instruments," commented Waits in a 1988 interview with *Playboy*. "Things that aren't normally considered instruments: dragging a chair across the floor or hitting the side





of a locker real hard with a two-by-four, a freedom bell, a brake drum with a major imperfection, a police bullhorn. It's more interesting. I don't like straight lines. The problem is that most instruments are square and music is always round."

In a 1992 interview with KCRW while promoting *Bone Machine*, Waits added that he was interested in making "songs that felt a little more handmade. Experiments and expeditions into a world of sound and stories. I was more interested in percussion—in those Bermuda Triangles of percussion that you find and sometimes drop off the edge of the world."

There was a six-year gap between *The Black Rider* and 1999's *Mule Variations*. In the interim, Waits switched from Island to Anti-Records and spent a fair bit of time listening intently to early blues, specifically the Library of Congress recordings made by Alan Lomax between 1936 and 1942. Perhaps not coincidentally, on *Mule Variations*, Waits began embracing a low-fi recording approach, cutting the album in a storage room at Prairie Sun Studios rather than using the studio itself. Selling over a half-million copies, *Mule Variations* won a Grammy for "Best Contemporary Folk Album." This was the second time around for Waits, as seven years earlier, *Bone Machine* had won a Grammy in the "Best Alternative Album" category.

Over time, Brennan increasingly became an integral part of Waits's creative life. She co-wrote one song on *Rain Dogs*, three on *Franks Wild Years*, a further three on the 1992 soundtrack *Night on*

OPPOSITE PAGE *In stereo, 1992 (top); in the backyard, 1999.*

THIS PAGE *Never without a topper: Waits in Prague, 2008.*

Earth, half of the fourteen songs on *Bone Machine*, and all but four of the sixteen songs on *Mule Variations*. From that point on, she participated as a co-writer and co-producer on all of Waits's original material.

In 2002, Waits simultaneously recorded and released the songs from two of his productions with Wilson: 2000's *Woyzeck*, renamed *Blood Money* for the CD release, and 1992's *Alice*. Two years later, he released his most recent album of new material, *Real Gone*. *Mule Variations* had featured DJ M. Mark "The III Media" Reitman on turntables on four tracks. On *Real Gone*, two tracks featured Waits's son Casey on turntables.

Much of *Real Gone* was built around oral-percussion home recordings that Waits made in his bathroom, using his mouth as a human beat-box. A superb example is the bed track underpinning the hellacious groove of "Metropolitan Glide" that Waits aptly described as "cubist funk." In stark contrast, the album's closing track, "Day After Tomorrow," returned Waits to his singer-songwriter roots, and features a beautiful melody that sounds eerily similar to Dylan's early acoustic work.

In the nearly seven years since *Real Gone*, Waits has released a triple album, 2006's *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards*, consisting of various outtakes, a B side, his soundtrack and tribute-album contributions, tracks he produced for albums by Chuck E. Weiss and John Hammond, and guest appearances on albums by Sparklehorse and jazz saxophonist Teddy Edwards. Three years later, a live CD, *Glitter and Doom Live*, followed.

At the dawn of the second decade of the 21st century, Waits's influence can be seen in the work of many of the most forward-thinking contemporary artists, including Beck, PJ Harvey, and Radiohead's Thom Yorke; his songs have been recorded by an impressive range of artists (Bette Midler, Rickie Lee Jones, Tori Amos, Rod Stewart, who took *Rain Dogs*' "Downtown Train" into the Top Five in 1989, Bob Seger, Johnny Cash, and Norah Jones). Beginning in 1978, with Sylvester Stallone's *Paradise Alley*, Waits has maintained an on-again/off-again acting career, often playing parts loosely based on his real-life character and personality. Directors Francis Ford Coppola and Jim Jarmusch have been especially enamored with his work, using Waits and/or his songs in a number of different films, including full soundtracks for Coppola's 1982 feature *One From the Heart* and Jarmusch's 1991 film *Night on Earth*. Most recently, Waits appeared in Terry Gilliam's surreal *The Imaginarium of Dr. Parnassus* and Albert and Allen Hughes's post-apocalyptic *The Book of Eli*. His songs have also been featured in literally dozens of films and television shows; "Way Down in the Hole," from *Franks Wild Years*, served as the arresting theme song for the widely acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*.

By any standard, his has been a creative life well lived. We are the richer for it. ❁