

INTERVIEW

Good Things Come to Waits

By Katherine Turman

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL O'BRIEN





TOM WAITS IS THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA'S MOST BELOVED NON-MAINSTREAM RECORDING ARTIST. LET HIM TALK, AND YOU'LL SEE WHY.

Tom Waits looks—and sounds—like he's been rode hard and put away wet. Which makes him a likely folk hero but an unlikely national treasure. Yet the Grammy-winning, Academy Award-nominated singer-songwriter (and sometime-actor) has achieved iconic status in his more than 30-year career as the scribe and roughshod voice behind some of music's most heartfelt and heartbreaking lyrics, his words the gritty poetry of the streets—and gutters, sometimes. *Los Angeles Times* critic Robert Hilburn declared Waits "one of the most important figures of the modern pop era," while *Rolling Stone* listed *Orphans*, a three-CD, 54-song collection, tenth among the top albums of 2006. Even such unlikely sources as *Reader's Digest* and *People* sing his praises. Critics fall all over themselves to laud Waits' "vintage Americana—blues,

The singer-songwriter-actor has the whole music industry looking over his shoulder.

The Waits Download

WAITS SONGS
FOR ALL
OCCASIONS



LATE-NIGHT DANCE

Song Tom Traubert's Blues
Album *Small Change* (1976)
What's so special: A waltz for the end of the night—or world—this is quintessential Waits for new and old fans, and remains a perennial concert favorite.



LOVE ON THE SHORE

Song "Jersey Girl"
Album *Heartattack and Vine* (1980)
What's so special: Bruce Springsteen covered it, Bon Jovi has performed it, but Tom Waits wrote it—for his wife and co-writer Kathleen—and still does it best.

ballads, rockabilly, hymns, salon songs, Tin Pan Alley..." and his "vignettes of unadulterated eloquence." Journalist Daniel Durchholz describes Waits' voice as sounding "like it was soaked in a vat of bourbon, left hanging in the smokehouse for a few months and then taken outside and run over with a car." That Waits is an intensely private person only adds to his mystique and hard-to-categorize appeal. You can see it in his notices: He won a Grammy for Best Alternative Album for 1992's *Bone Machine*, while 1999's *Mule Variations* received simultaneous nominations in two other categories—Best Contemporary Folk Album and Best Male Rock Vocal Performance (he won the folk one). His soundtrack for Francis Ford Coppola's *One from the Heart* earned Waits an Academy Award nod, while other songs appear in the unlikely vehicles *Shrek 2* and *Robots*. Music is the family business as well—wife Kathleen Brennan has been his lyrical collaborator since the early eighties, while one of his three children, son Casey, plays drums in his band.

The Southern California-born Northern California resident also happens to be a thespian, having debuted in 1978's *Paradise Alley* with Sylvester Stallone, moved on to a starring role in *Down By Law*, and taken smaller parts in films like *Short Cuts*, *The Fisher King*, and *The Cotton Club*.

Waits may be music's best-known unknown. Among his peers, however, the scruffy singer is rightfully revered, his songs covered by artists of every stripe. Look at range of musicians who have done his tunes: Bruce Springsteen ("Jersey Girl"); the Eagles ("Ol' 55"); The Ramones ("I Don't Wanna Grow Up"); Bob Seger ("Blind Love"); Rod Stewart ("Downtown Train") and many others.

But one thing Waits won't allow is commercialization of his songs or persona. He has filed—and won—several lawsuits, including a couple against behemoths Frito-Lay and Levis for unauthorized use. The Frito-Lay judgment made Waits the first artist to win against a company for using an impersonator without permission.

It's clear why Waits inspires impersonation: he's just that cool. Using instrumentation ranging from a "junkyard orchestra" to piano-and-strings ballads to demented lullabies meshed with appropriately noir lyrics that tell picaresque tales, Waits embodies his lyrical characters. A pathos-filled travelogue, "Bottom of the World," is typical of Waits' endearing hobo-cum-poet characters and his own per-

sona: "Well, god's green hair is where I slept last / You balanced a diamond on a blade of grass / And I awoke me up with a Cardinal bird / And when I wanna talk he hangs on every word." Sometimes, the evocative titles say it all: "The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)," "Whistlin' Past the Graveyard," "Clang Boom Steam."

Though at 57 Waits is not exactly a household name, he still has time—and the inclination—to make music you'll hear someday. "I love nothing better than being in a room and the door locked, and the piano and the tape recorder going," he says. "It's a great job, making up tunes. It's like turning on a saw—then the saw goes looking for wood. I'm the saw."

The man really does talk like that. I've interviewed a great many musical stars, and all have been characters. But they don't hold a candle to Thomas Alan Waits. Here are some snippets from a recent conversation. Set them to music—Waits' music, at least—and you'll have some great songs.

2 x 4 guitars

I like going to guitar shops and pawn shops and salvage yards, and I really like to go to hardware stores to see what they got out there. I like to go to hardware stores in Europe. I bought a two-by-four guitar in Cleveland—a guitar made of a two-by-four! I thought, "Man, something like that could really go." Everybody has a two-by-four lying around their yard. Send me a two-by-four and I'll make a guitar out of it.

Touring

You don't see a lot when you're on the road, needless to say. You see the gig and the town on the way in and the town on the way out, but there's something sort of exciting about that at the same time—the stealth. You come in and sting 'em and go. That's what I call it. It sounds like a rockabilly title. [*Sings like Elvis*] Ya sting 'em and go.

The sweater and the hotplate

Bob Moog [*inventor of the music synthesizer*]. He started making Theremins [*instruments that make sounds from electrical waves*] toward the end. Interesting man. My first experience with a Theremin was this gal Lydia, the granddaughter of Leon Theremin, [who] was living in Russia. We were in Hamburg doing *Alice*, this Robert Wilson [play]. So we wanted a Theremin player, and someone said, "I know Lydia," and she came in and she looked like a



TRICK OR TREATING

Song "What's He Building?"

Album *Mule Variations* (1999)

What's so special: A spooky spoken-word tale of a mysterious neighbor—not to be listened to by paranoiacs, insomniacs, or alone, it's perfect for Halloween. "He has no friends / But he gets a lot of mail / I'll bet he spent a little time in jail."



SINGING IN THE CAR

Song "Downtown Train"

Album *Raindogs* (1985)

What's so special: Rod Stewart made it famous (and Bob Seger also recorded it), but Waits' gruff-voiced yearning and vulnerability make this catchy gem with its memorable chorus an accessible but cool classic. "You wave your hand and they scatter like crows / They have nothing that'll ever capture your heart / They're just thorns without the rose."

little Russian doll, a traditional Russian sweater, and her Theremin looked like a hotplate. And inside, all the connections were held together with cut up little pieces of beer cans that she twisted around the wires to hold the connections together. And the aerial was literally a car aerial from like a Volkswagen. And when she played, she sounded like [violinist] Jascha Heifetz.

Behind his new collection

I was concerned I'd lose all this stuff, so I wanted to get this out. A lot of the stuff I bought from a guy in Moscow who had this stuff on a CD that he'd collected. Black market stuff of my own, from a guy in Russia, it was weird.

Digital recording

It seems like you can create digitally—you can recreate everything that was once done

in analog. As soon as vinyl left, someone put pops and cracks over a song, so I guess culturally we're always burying something and digging it up, and burying it in order to dig it up. They do the same thing with hairdos and shoes and furniture. It's what we do. As far as the sound stuff, most of the people I know are always looking for some very obscure apparatus that will give them some unusual sound source that they can use in the studio. I'm not an audiophile by any stretch of the imagination.

CDs are like bagels

They were designed to be carried in your pocket. And the outer surface was hard and leathery, so that the bread would be protected inside. It's just as big as your hand and fits right in your pocket. CD is the same way. More room on the shelf. I have pockets that CDs fit in, and I appreciate that sometimes.

This antique one-string violin with a megaphone sums up Waits, though we're not sure how.



On Nature

Here's something interesting: You know the angle between a branch and trunk of a tree? If you look at a leaf from that tree, you'll see the exact same angle on the main pulmonary leaf vein that goes down the center of the leaf. Find a leaf, and you tell me if I'm right.

We're out in the sticks. Out here in the country, I like to say we watch a lot of TV. But TV stands for "Turkey Vultures." Well, I guess they're the turkeys of the vulture world. The reason they circle as long as they do is that they weigh almost nothing, and what they're really trying to do, you think they're circling and trying to land, but a lot of them are unable to land, they weigh so little. It's like watching a leaf try to land in a windstorm.

Rhyming illnesses

This project that they're doing in England...I don't know if it's ever going to happen, but they said, 'pick a disease' and they had this long list of these terrible diseases, and they want you to write a song about this disease, then they're going to put it all on a record. It's just gotten out of hand. I didn't want to get involved. I just said, "No, I can't pick a disease." Scurvy is a disease. Finding rhymes is hard for diseases. Scurvy. What rhymes with scurvy? "She had scurvy, but she was so curvy..." That's not going to fly.

Four-part cricket harmony

Here's something interesting. I have a recording of crickets that's slowed down. That's all, it's just slowed way down. But what you hear is what sounds very much like, in fact it sounds exactly like...if I didn't tell you you were listening to crickets, you'd say, "What is this, the Vienna Boys Choir?" It's four-part harmony—bass, cello, viola, violin. It's orchestral, and the melody that they're singing, it's the beginning of the melody for "Jesus Christ Superstar." You think I'm making that up, but I'm not. It's quite astonishing, really. Nothing has been done to the tape...other than the fact that it was slowed down.

Water music for whales

A good friend of mine, Richard Waters, created an instrument called the waterphone, and he used to go out on the rocks and claims to have been able to communicate in some way with the whales. He was just surprised that there was any call and response at all. It's an interesting instrument, you probably have heard it a lot in horror movies but didn't know what it was. It's, um...you bow it. If you

can imagine putting two pizza pans together facing each other and creating a vessel, then coming up at a straight angle out of the pans you'd have metal dowels. And all the way around the circumference of the pan, so it looks like a fence. And they're all varying lengths. In the center of the pan, there's a pipe, into the center of the pan, and there's a hole, and the first thing you do is fill that with water through that pipe. Then you hold on to the pipe, and you take a bow and you bow around the circumference of the pan, along the fence of dowels, and the sound is just amazing.

Being typecast

Go ahead, typecast me—just cast me. It's like some people say: "The only trouble with tainted money is 'taint enough.'" I'm not actively trying to alter my image. I'm just letting it kind of go along. Now and then I get a call from somebody with an interesting project, and I do it.

The future

There are a million things to do. I'll probably go on the road, do some shows. I'll probably go to Australia, Sumatra, or someplace. Writing stuff, we're always making new tunes up; that doesn't ever stop.

Playing with his son

He's playing with folks in their sixties, but it's actually good for the old-timers to be around kids of 20 because they all perk up a little bit when a new dog comes into the room. They get up off the couch, start moving around a little more...

You don't really pay any attention to what your parents tell you, but you do watch the way they live their lives. If I was an archeologist or a cook, or I made instruments, that's the family business, so this is kind of the family business. You start thinking, "When I get to a certain age, maybe I'll be part of it." He did real well. It was a hoot...

Prestige of a musical dad

There's something great about everything that a dad does, sometimes. It's great if you want tickets to the Chili Peppers, then it's cool if your dad is in music, otherwise, it's like, *awwww*.

Katherine Turman is a music writer who has interviewed many of the greatest living singers and musicians. Parts of this interview appeared in Stop Smiling Magazine.



FEELING PIRATICAL

Song "That Feel"
Album *Bone Machine* (1992)

What's so special: There is no cooler old guy than Keith Richards...except Tom Waits, and they're together on this song, which they co-wrote. The apotheosis of cool. Period.

"I cross my wooden leg / And I swear on my glass eye / It will never leave you high and dry."



SITTING ALONE

Song "Frank's Wild Years"

Album *Swordfish-trombones* (1983)

What's so special: A more descriptive yet elusive album title is hard to find. Plus, if you want a story but can't be bothered with reading, this is a tale of ordinary madness with a surprise ending and a slight loungey musical accompaniment.