

Music hero Waits' latest portrays urban living pain

By Jeff Taebel

Tom Waits may well be one of the last authentic heroes of American music. While other artists who have claimed distinction in the past are touring with Las Vegas-style revues or worrying about property taxes in Malibu, Waits has retained his modest digs at Hollywood's Tropicana Hotel, in order to keep in close contact with the seedy street life that he seems to have a love/hate relationship with.

album review

Waits' music can take listeners to places they might not ordinarily go and introduce them to various denizens of the night they might otherwise never see.

His latest album, *Blue Valentine*, is similar in its focus to his 1974 classic, *The Heart of Saturday Night*. Both albums vividly portray the boredom, restlessness and pain of urban living. However, Waits sounds much more coarse and cynical on *Blue Valentine*, perhaps as a result of all the trouble he's seen.

Barroom backing

Waits' is backed by a variety of musicians, all of whom strive to create the intimate kind of barroom sound that he works so well with. Waits contributes his fine piano work and plays some surprisingly fluid electric guitar.

Blue Valentine opens with a tortured, evocative rendition of "Somewhere," from *West Side Story*. This tune sets the tone for the album much the same way that "Ginny's Waltz" did for last year's *Foreign Affairs*. "Somewhere" is followed by the rather undistinguished "Red Shoes By The Drugstore," which has excellent lyrical potential, but never gets going musically.

Side one's third offering, "Christmas Card From A Hooker In Minneapolis," is the kind of poignant classic that very few songwriters could pull off. Waits wrenches out every ounce of agony from his voice on each phrase,



building things up throughout the song and crashing them down in the end.

Straight blues

Side one closes with "\$29.00," which is a departure from style for Waits since it is essentially straight blues. Even though Waits camps it up on this number, he still sounds more sincere than most of today's pop artists when they attempt a blues song.

Side two is highlighted by the last two songs, "A Sweet Little Bullet From A Pretty Blue Gun" and "Blue Valentines." These songs certainly equal or surpass most of Waits' previous work and are indicative of his expanded artistic scope.

"A Sweet Little Bullet From A Pretty Blue Gun" is Waits at his snarling, cynical best. Waits exposes present-day Hollywood as a crumbling Babylon, rife with shattered lives and broken dreams. His crisply intoned vocals tell a murder story with a frightening sense of realism,

with lines like: "it takes a sweet little bullet, from a pretty blue gun/To put those scarlet ribbons in your hair."

Intense statement

"Blue Valentines," which closes the album, is just as powerful, even though it is more subdued. Waits sings it in his inimitable melancholy vocal style, supported only by his electric guitar. This song showcases Waits' ability to make an intense personal statement without sounding awkward or self-indulgent.

Blue Valentine is possibly Waits' finest work to date and if the diverse array of talents exposed on this album are any indication of things to come, he may well achieve hero status on a large scale.

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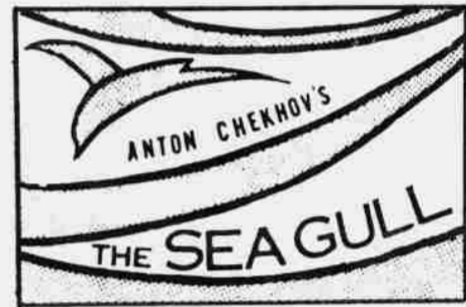
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