

## arts/entertainment

## Tom Waits music is best of neo-beats

By Michael Zangari

Jack Kerouac's biggest legacy in the literature of popular music may ultimately lie in a nightmare vision of motionlessness-strangling in the dead air of slow transition and growing older.

## backtracks

Terminal hipness has its costs, and for the beats who survived the transitions of the last two decades somewhat intact life must seem very strange indeed.

In many ways, Tom Waits represents the best and the worst of what the neo-beats have become.

His music owes more to Tin Pan Alley and Jazz than any sort of rock tradition, and yet his music has been

assimilated into the mainstream in a direct way. The Eagles recorded his "Old 55" (although they made it into an anthem for watching the sun come up. Waits' more bluesy original has only one reason for watching the sun come up—he hasn't been to bed). Also his sometimes roommate Riki Lee Jones has taken a chunk of Waits' music and gone Top Ten with it. Waits himself has remained fairly obscure, probably because of his voice, which has noticeably deteriorated to a rough Satchemo growl in the last few years.

## Song mixtures

His songs are a mixture of free-form street raps, and intensely melodic ballads. His lyrics are poetic rather than lyrical, and use free flowing imagery and humor to drive his songs home.

On stage he chain-smokes filterless cigarettes, and eventually envelopes himself in a nicotine cloud. Periodically he emerges and wraps himself around the microphone, using the smoke and the mike for props, often calling to mind a street lamp on a foggy evening. He is the melancholy drunk, a smart ass on one hand, prone to

sentimental ramblings on the other. There is an element of the jazz clubs of the late 40s in his act, and his concerts tend to evoke a total environment sheerly on the power of his verbal conjuring.

His songs range from the miscellaneous ramblings of a depressed drunk ("Spending the facts of his life like small change on strangers...") to stories about what he calls the "asphalt dancefloor." He is at his best when he tries to deal with the lost dreams and the efforts of people to piece together the bits and pieces of their lives.

His first album, *Closing Time* contains the first version of "Old 55"—gruff and evocative, and it is usually easier to take for beginners. His voice was just beginning to deteriorate, and has a nice smokey quality about it. The songs here tend toward the sweet though. Still, even the love songs are somehow charming—especially "I Hope I Don't Fall in Love With You,"—a catchy and quiet song about an eye-contact romance in a bar.

## Still good voice

*Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night*, finds Wait's still in good voice, but with a clearer vision. The title track, "The Ghost of Saturday Night," and "San Diego Serenade" all cut with an emotional urgency that combines the best of his poetry with some of the most emotionally honest vocal readings to date. A very melodic album, it also contains rougher readings of a couple of jazz/scat street raps. One of his bests.

*Nighthawks at the Diner* is Waits' live album, and best shows the continuity of his work. A wonderfully funny album, Waits gets a little raunchy at times. But, it also spotlights his very fine jazz band, especially the sax and acoustic bass interplay of two long time Waits' sidemen.

*Small Change* contains the closest thing Tom Waits has ever had to a hit single. "Step Right up" is a five minute street summation of every advertising cliché you've ever heard. His voice takes a noticeable step toward the gutter here, but it contains some of his best work. "Tom Trumviate's Blues," "The Piano has been Drinking (not me)" and numerous others. There isn't a bad song on the album.

## 'Last albums good'

His last two albums, *Blue Valentine* and *Foreign Affairs*, are both very good. *Blue Valentine* is especially evocative, putting Waits closer to a blues base with tunes such as "A Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis".

*Foreign Affairs* contains a duet with Bette Midler, and Waits best single song, "Burma Shave." "Burma Shave" is a metaphor for lost dreams and people who are headed nowhere and combines the best of all of Waits' features.

Waits is one of the few artists who doesn't have a bad record in his entire catalog. Take your pick.



Photo by Mark Billingsley

Street raps and melodic ballads are the brands of smokey blues and jazz that make Tom Waits a popular covered vocalist.

## Articles, cartoons satirize events becoming reality

By Scott Kleager

Peter Elbling created the idea of reviewing this decade in *The '80s, A Look Back*. Not only is it funny, because it forecasts the future rather than satirizing the

## book review

past, but it makes news stories unnecessary and is therefore more fictional than satirical. This means the writers can be extreme and consequently, even more satirical.

The only problem with *The '80s, A Look Back* is categorization. Is it a hard cover magazine or is it a news publication that's been issued in paperback? In any case it brings to light every tendency that

news exhibits today and emphasizes them by going to extremes.

## Worth a laugh

Sometimes worth a chuckle, most of the time worth a good laugh, its amazing attribute is its completeness. The magazine is hilarious, sobering, fun to read and socially conscious.

Its contributors and writers seem endless, but a few stories and cartoons stand out.

For example "Russia—The Iron Curtain Call" has to be one of the funniest things included. Written by Tony Geiss and Jeff Greenfield, the events in this story are outrageous.

In 1980 Leonid Brezhnev disappears for some time. He reappears on May Day and "it seemed clear to most Western observers that the heavy-jowled First Secretary had

been none too expertly stuffed."

The story describes the rollicking Russian radical populist movement called "born-again communism" with religious fanatics "singing the Internationale in 200-part and sometimes 300-part harmony."

## Good writing

Interestingly enough, the articles' first paragraph reminds the reader of the element of truth that follows: "The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has been described as a nation of mystery at best. What remains of it is no exception to the rule."

This is an excellent way to make the bizarre report that follows almost believable. This type of good writing is consistent throughout.

Other memorable contributions are Carl Gottlieb's "La Soluzione Finale," a story which reports on the ultimate results of

rampant terrorism; a cartoon called "Rats" by B. Kliban, and Bruce McCall's "United Magic Kingdom" which reports on the buying of London by Walt Disney.

The magazine is so well-written that it is ironic. Like many successful works, *The '80s, A Look Back's* original conception is based partially on making the reader laugh at stories that are in the process of becoming realities.

## Disco's boogie

For example, disco begins its long boogie to pre-eminence in the '80s, hypochondriac tendencies result in a Blue Cross "cradle-to-grave health program," and polls come out before the 1982 off-year elections that "suggest a voter turnout of less than 13 percent."

In the end, what you have is as educational as it is entertaining.