



## ***Come On Up To The House: Women Sing Waits*** **By Warren Zanes**

It was 1976, the bicentennial year, when my mother heard a song on WGBH, Boston's public radio station. She said we *all* had to hear it. That meant my brother, my sister, and me. We were living in New Hampshire on twenty acres of neglected farmland, so the outer world needed to be shipped in. Radio did this for us. That year on the radio we'd heard about the Tall Ships coming into Boston Harbor, the Son of Sam killings, the Concorde's first commercial flight to New York. And that's where my mother heard a man named Tom Waits singing a song called, "The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)." The one we all needed to hear.

My mother ordered the album *Small Change* from Pitchfork Records in Concord, a shop that's still there despite the world changing around it. When the record arrived, she gathered us in the dining room where the turntable was kept. Yes, anything our mother liked was suspect from the start. But on the cover of *Small Change*, there was Tom Waits, backstage in a burlesque club, looking like he knew something we didn't, or shouldn't. So we listened.

Musically, I didn't know what to make of Waits. It wasn't a matter of liking him or disliking him, more an issue of classification. What was this music? Who was this man? And what, in God's name, was our mother doing with him? We were already wondering who she was. Now *this*. And she was between husbands just then, always an uneasy time for us.

In hindsight I can guess why Waits got her attention. Beneath our family tree there were more than a few empty bottles. The central conceit in Waits' song—*the piano has been drinking, not me*—probably brought my mother back to one or another moment in a long, tangled history of family boozing. The time Uncle Jim passed out at a red light . . . *for four and a half hours*. And blamed it on the car. To my mother's ears, Waits probably sounded like he belonged in the family album.

I guess it was a year or so later, when punk rock came along, that classifying Waits became a simpler matter. Punk was a bomb that went off, after which more of the shabby things and the singing misfits found categories they could call home. Waits was a punk rock Louis Armstrong. Or something like that. We bought more records. *Heartattack and Vine*, *Blue Valentine*, *The Heart of Saturday Night*. We figured out that the Eagles' "Ol' 55" was a Waits song. Just as we'd soon figure out that Springsteen's "Jersey Girl" wasn't a Springsteen song. We didn't need training to see the craft in Waits' writing. There weren't a lot of Cole Porters left standing by pianos, scribbling unexpected rhymes, making language crackle, standing characters up and making them walk toward the listener. When a songwriter who could do all that came along, you took note.

In 1984, *Anthology of Tom Waits* came out. It was a collection that confirmed Waits' status as heir to the great American ballad tradition. The emotion was soaring, the scenes

cluttered in detail, the characters derelict but hanging on to a romanticism that made them as young as the listener needed them to be. It was good stuff to listen to alone. You could tell your friends about it afterward.

It was probably two years after that release, around 1986, when I met Tom Waits. I was just out of my teens, a kid in a rock and roll band, recording at the same studio as Waits. When I told him how much I loved *Anthology*, he looked at me like I'd praised a story he'd written in kindergarten. He'd moved on. *Swordfishtrombones* had come in 1983, *Raindogs* in 1984. Another era of Waits record-making was well underway, to the rhythm of a wrecking ball. He'd broken my heart with his early work and then moved on. He'd abandoned the beauty I'd fallen for. I knew he was wrong.

But the truth is, despite the seeming departure, Waits stayed true to all he stood for in the early years. He remained a balladeer and heartbreaker. He may have gone deeper into the dirt and the growl, deeper into a kind of performance art, but, *damn it*, he kept writing those songs that burrowed into the broken places inside of us. Waits could regularly deliver that revelation that comes with only the best songs: you may be lonely, but you're not alone. As the years rolled by, every Waits recording arrived like it had come just in time.

And years being what they are, they did roll by. In 2018 I got a call from Scott Robinson at Dualtone, a man who runs a record label who is also a friend. Yes, you read that right. Scott called me and said something along the lines of, "Warren, I have a project I'd like you to work on, and I hope you'll be interested." I agreed to this arrangement. I guess that tells you something about my relationship to the man.

But Scott's call got better. It turned out that he wanted me to produce an album of Tom Waits songs performed by female artists. Well, I'd already said yes, but, hearing this, I said it again for emphasis. Hoping to persuade me further, Scott said he'd send me a recording of a track Rodney Crowell brought in, Iris Dement doing "House Where Nobody Lives." Well, shit, I'd already said yes twice, but I said it again for dramatic effect. Scott told me to think about it, that he'd check back the following week. *Was I on mute?* In fact, I was. For how long, I didn't know. I unmuted and told Scott I'd think about it.

I tend to call Aimee Mann whenever I need real help. She's never failed me. Years can lapse between my "episodes," but Aimee doesn't mark me down for absences, just picks up the phone and asks me how I'm doing. I remember a coffee shop in West Hollywood, me perched on the edge of a divorce, Aimee sitting across from me. I was in some cold, choppy water, and from Aimee's side of that coffee shop booth I saw a life preserver coming toward me through the air. Here's the problem with being one of those generous, kind types such as Aimee is: the people you help won't ever let you alone, they'll always want more. I knew I needed Aimee to sing a Tom Waits song. So I called her. She picked up the phone and asked me how I was doing.

It went from there. Shelby Lynne and Alison Moorer said yes right away. I knew them both from other, earlier projects. I got to know them better through "Ol' 55." Their session with Brad Jones was as uncomplicated as one wishes all of life could be. Was I falling in love

with two sisters at once? That's when you call Aimee Mann, by the way. Corinne Bailey Rae. Rosanne Cash. Patty Griffin. I didn't know if I wanted to be their brother, their son, their husband. What was happening? Who put all this emotion in the room? Well, the answer was right in front of me. A balladeer named Waits.

I kept trying to get artists to consider the more up-tempo, greasy material, some of that funny Waits stuff with the garbage can lid snare drum. Every artist thought about it for a moment. Then they'd come back with their favorite, the one they just *had to do*. And it was always a ballad, something special to them, some song that had been a walking stick as they'd gone through a dark part of the forest. I couldn't control it. It became a collection of ballads. The Tom Waits I felt like I'd made contact with through the *Anthology of Tom Waits* was going to be the Tom Waits of this album, even if much of the material came from later in his career. Yes, this was going to be an album of ballads. Or, as I began to realize halfway through the process, an album of spirituals. Spirituals, music of and for the spirit. That's how this remarkable collection of performers had taken these songs in and how they brought them back out again, as spirituals.

When Phoebe Bridgers delivered "Georgia Lee," Joseph handed over "Come On Up to the House," and Angie McMahon turned in "Take It With Me," the point was driven home. All were later additions, but they brought me to the front pew of a church I'd been walking past every day but never looked into. I thought back to the Tom Waits who, when I told him how much I loved *Anthology*, looked at me like I was lost in another era. And I thought, *we were both younger then*. Even Waits might be willing to disagree with what he thought in 1986. Not that it matters. Tom Waits doesn't get a vote in this. This album is about us telling *him* who we think he is, by assembling a collection of recordings in which artists interpret his work. I get the privilege of bringing together the recordings, writing these notes, of offering some kind of summation. And, really, I said it above: Tom Waits is a writer of spirituals. He is and always has been a man of God.

Of course, we already knew that Tom Waits' God is a complicated God. Not a plush toy. His God's word is that of an "unreliable narrator," his behaviors those of a rascal, a higher power not always minding the shop. "There ain't no devil, that's just God when he's drunk." Waits has been making this point for years. But I don't believe he'd keep singing about that God, singing *to* that God, if the old bugger—shortcomings or not—couldn't bring us all together somehow, some time, somewhere.

But to hear it all through these women's voices: for me, this is where the whole thing was delivered. I didn't just want to go to church, I wanted to go to *their* church. In much the way Burt Bacharach songs often seem most fully themselves in the hands of Dionne Warwick, or Dusty Springfield, or Jackie DeShannon, The Shirelles, Aretha, or Karen Carpenter. Or the way standards feel so fully *standard* in Ella Fitzgerald's rendering of the material. The Waits songs I was hearing through these women were breathing differently and deeply. In just the way Dylan cuts the definitive version but never stakes out the song's territory in a way that leaves no room for majestic covers, the recordings I was gathering were showing me the remarkable strength, the resonance of Waits' stuff. No one took ownership of the material, it was all on loan, still belonged to Tom Waits. But what a series of loans! And that's how it is with the very, very best songs.

It all brought me back to the Tom Waits I'd begun to see an outline of as a young man, back to the Waits my mother brought into the family dining room. That strange and beautiful character who seemed to belong to no one. Who I now believe belongs to us all.

Special thanks: Scott Robinson brought me in and gave me the experience, talking often and at length about what it all meant and why it all meant. Brad Jones has always made musical adventures more precarious and more precious, the one thing leading to the other. Florence Derieux listened to recordings and notes and grumbling and insights, letting me burst into the room with something urgent to say whenever I needed to say it. She arrived when I was bringing all the pieces together and beginning to see it as a whole. Lucian and Piero did what they always do, and I couldn't do without it.

**For more information about *Come On Up To The House: Women Sing Waits*, contact Jim Flammia [jim@alleyesmedia.com](mailto:jim@alleyesmedia.com) at All Eyes Media (615) 227-2770**