

Review: Tom Waits' songs shine on female-focused tribute

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This cover image released by Dualtone shows “Come on Up to the House: Women Sing Waits,” a classy collection of covers performed by two generations of female singer-songwriters. (Dualtone via AP)

Various artists, “Come On Up to the House: Women Sing Waits” (Dualtone)

Hard-times troubadour Tom Waits gets the Great American Songbook-style treatment in “Come On Up to the House,” a classy collection of covers performed by two generations of female singer-songwriters.

The album, produced by musician/writer Warren Zanes to mark Waits’ 70th birthday, makes clear that he deserves it. Waits is a superlative American songwriter, whose snapshots of life in the streets and on the road have survived — even thrived on — interpretation by artists as varied as Rod Stewart and The Ramones.

Contributors on “Come On Up to the House” include Roseanne Cash and Patty Griffin, and many of the 12 tracks feature stripped-down arrangements that reveal the strong melodies and pungent imagery of Waits’ songs, with their veins of hurt and flashes of hope.

At its best, the result is spine-tinglingly melancholy. An understated vocal against a plain piano backdrop is all that’s needed for the title track to shine in a rendition by Portland, Oregon, trio Joseph.

Stripped of Waits’ raspy growl, the mood of many songs becomes plaintive rather than gritty. Phoebe Bridgers’ delivery of the tragic ballad “Georgia Lee” is a shade too delicate; the same could be said of indie-folk band The Wild Reeds’ wispy take on “Tom Traubert’s Blues.”

Distinctive takes are provided by Iris Dement, who brings an old-timey country feel to “House Where Nobody Lives,” and Kat Edmonson’s swoony retro-pop stylings on “You Can Never Hold Back Spring.”

At its best, this is an album on which fine singers and fine songs gel seamlessly, from Corinne Bailey Rae’s languid swing on “Jersey Girl,” to Aimee Mann’s authoritative rendition of “Hold On.”

Best of all, sisters Shelby Lynne and Allison Moorer bring a beautiful unhurried power to Waits’ “Ol’ 55” — another bittersweet tale of restless movement and “riding with lady luck.” Even in the gutter, Waits’ work reassures us, it’s possible to look at the stars.