

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘Come On Up To the House: Women Sing Waits’ Review: Girl Power

Nov. 27, 2019

Barry Mazor

A talented lineup of musicians put their own spin on Tom Waits’s music and in doing so further reveal his gifts as a songwriter.



Rosanne Cash in 2018 PHOTO: ROBIN LITTLE/REDFERNS

On Dec. 7, Tom Waits reaches his 70th birthday, which will surprise those for whom he’s never seemed to be any one precise age or exemplar of any set musical era. For decades, the standard line of demarcation in his singular body of songs and performances has been placed in 1980. That’s when he began collaborating with his wife, Kathleen Brennan, and relocated to New York from California. His music became more theatrical, daringly raspy and less dependent on his previous personal brew, which had merged eclectic yet rootsy Dylan-influenced singer-songwriter styles with sounds of the jazzier “Great American Songbook.”

Yet among the most-heard early interpreters of his songs were both the laid-back, West Coast Eagles (“Ol’ 55,” 1974) and the quite theatrical, East Coast Bette Midler (“Shiver Me Timbers,” 1976). And Mr. Waits’s carefully constructed boozy-beatnik persona and vocal style were in place by the ’70s; his evolution toward music that could sound like the Brecht and Weill oeuvre distorted by a bullhorn was mainly a matter of degree. So there are two varieties of Waits observers—those who posit that there are two drastically different Waits oeuvres and those who don’t.

Warren Zanes—indie pop musician, insightful author, and former education director at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame—is one of the latter. That shines through on the new salute album Mr. Zanes has produced, “Come On Up To the House: Women Sing Waits” (Dualtone), in which the blues, country, gospel and folk elements in the Waits palette are highlighted right across the years. That continuity is accomplished in part by mixing interpretations of songs from his early years with five from his much-loved 1999 “Mule Variations” album, in which American roots-music sounds and memes were particularly present again, if in deconstructed forms.

The irony-free sentiments in his lyrics, often disguised by snarling vocals and layered production on his own recordings, are left naked here, the songs assigned to distinctive, pointed but less facade-focused singers, all female. Most have been working in contemporary, roots-engaged Americana, including Rosanne Cash, Iris DeMent, Patty Griffin, and sisters Shelby Lynne and Allison Moorer. The results are enlightening, often moving.

“Downtown Train,” for example, is one of the more broadly familiar Waits numbers, a very New York regional anthem that he introduced in 1985—a plea from a lonely guy who eyes women on the subway who don’t know he’s alive. With its impossibly romantic melody, you have to listen carefully to notice the stalking menace, self-pity and misogyny accompanying the rhapsodic longing. They’re there.

In the 1989 Rod Stewart version, the singer seems absolutely exhilarated by his own fantasies, the dark side buried in the exuberance—which naturally made it a huge earworm hit. In the remarkable new take here, by rising young singer Courtney Marie Andrews, the catchy riff is there, and the same words. But with her nimble vocal the rising melody works its way subtly from calm confession to frantic, near-tears cries of desperation. She’s often labeled “folk”—but, if so, it’s of a particularly searing variety that places that track among the notable recordings of the year.

The album is built along similarly demystifying, freshly affecting lines. If the phlegmy vocal distracted you from the sensitivity and empathy in Tom Waits’s own rendering of his ballad “Georgia Lee,” concerning the real-life abduction and disappearance of a young black girl whose loss no one felt, you will be utterly unable to miss either in Phoebe Bridgers’s delicate reading. Ms. DeMent takes the haunting “House Where Nobody Lives”—like “Georgia Lee,” a song

from “Mule Variations”—and gives it the country inflections its desolate images always seemed to call for. And Ms. Cash (with “Time”) and Aimee Mann (with “Hold On”) both demonstrate their ability to involve listeners with a just-distanced-enough, memorable rendering of an observational, third-person story song with a catchy chorus.

There are, of course, women who can growl as grittily as Tom Waits and as effectively construct useful outsider personas—there’s nothing inevitable about the clarity and delicacy heard here. The strengths of these female artists are individual and, as noted, vary, but these singers, taking on this set of songs as they do, reveal much about Mr. Waits’s underlying gifts as a songwriter, strengths that have been there all along.

—*Mr. Mazor reviews country and roots music for the Journal.*