

Bad as Me—a new album from Tom Waits

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7 December 2011

Tom Waits has returned with *Bad as Me*, his first album of new material since 2004's *Real Gone*. An artist who has attracted a relatively small but loyal following over the years, Waits is highly regarded as a songwriter and performer. As a singer he is well known for his unusual, often abrasive voice.

Possessed of a strong sense of the theatrical, for better or worse, Waits (born 1949 in Pomona, California) crafted for himself a beatnik, barfly persona early in his career. He cast himself as a liquored-up troubadour among the lowlifes, a storyteller who had seen it all. He wrote pop music informed and influenced by jazz. *Small Change* (1976), with its wonderful send-up of advertising lingo, "Step Right Up," is among the more memorable showings in this phase of his career.

There was a major change in Waits' music in the 1980s. The jazz-influenced beatnik performer disappeared in favor of a new, quasi-disturbed vaudevillian character. Waits' music now gave the appearance of having been created with a patchwork of found objects and instruments pulled from the junkyard. In place of piano, one found stomping percussion, marimba, accordion and the plonking guitars of frequent collaborator Marc Ribot, who also features on *Bad as Me*. It was certainly unlike anything else created at the time. In Waits' peculiar "notes from underground," one heard dispatches on characters such as "Edna Million in a drop dead suit . . ." or "Uncle Vernon, independent as a hog on ice." One song title, "Cemetery Polka," probably sums up the music best.

There are noteworthy and moving songs to be found during every period in Waits' career, although rarely fully satisfying albums. He tends to be at his best when the beatnik and junkyard dog personalities are reined in and the singer more or less plays it straight. Too often, however, his music has the character of "pet sounds" worked over in the artist's own corner, hidden away from the world.

Bad as Me is an uneven work, but it also contains a few of Waits' more serious and moving recordings in recent

memory. The album's greatest strength is its sympathy for working people and Waits' ability, at his finest, to capture and communicate their moods and experiences in a way that immediately brings them to life and makes them real for listeners.

Most of the songs here tell the story of people overwhelmed by hardship and searching for some kind of relief. Perhaps they will run away to another city, as in the song "Chicago," in the hopes of making a better life there. Maybe they will simply turn their face toward the highway and go somewhere—anywhere—but just away from it all. There is a yearning to get out from under the burden of so much of the hardship thrust upon ordinary people that makes itself felt in this music.

Perhaps the best song on *Bad as Me* is "Talking at the Same Time," in which the narrator describes a life unfolding under the weight of unrelenting demands and pressures. On this slowly paced song which gradually slinks its way forward, Waits' typically gruff voice gives way to a fragile falsetto which suits the material very well. He sings:

Get a job, save your money, listen to Jane
Everybody knows umbrellas cost more in the rain
All the news is bad
Is there any other kind?
Everybody's talking at the same time

Later, he sings, memorably:

Well we bailed out all the millionaires
They've got the fruit
We've got the rind
And everybody's talking at the same time
Everybody's talking at the same time

On "Face to the Highway," we find Waits' singing at its most sensitive. Like the narrator of "Talking at the Same Time," we find another character overcome by the pressures and demands of his life, unable to keep up, to "build [his] nest high enough to ride out the flood." This time he turns his back on his home and leaves. There remains the sense that he hasn't really escaped anything and Waits' performance suggests the character knows

this, deep down. This is a story of tragedy rather than triumph. Waits sings:

The cradle wants a baby
Kitchen wants a pan
The heart wants a certain kind of lover if it can

Ocean wants a sailor
Gun wants a hand
Money wants a spender
And the road wants a man

I turned my face to the highway
And I turn my back on you

“Last Leaf,” featuring guitar and backing vocals by the Rolling Stones’ Keith Richards, and “Back in the Crowd” remind us what a talented pop songwriter Waits is when he leaves the contrived junkyard behind. Both songs are beautifully rendered and genuinely lyrical pop songs, in the best sense of the term. “I’m the last leaf on the tree,” Waits sings in “Last Leaf,” “The autumn took the rest, but they won’t take me.”

Other songs on the album are less successful. When Waits sings on “Bad as Me,” that “You’re Mother Superior in only a bra,” one only feels he’s trying much too hard, straining to paint his usual lowlife portraits. Here the parade of grotesques featured in Waits’ work of the 1980s returns, to the album’s detriment. It’s a jarring contrast to the more sensitive and sincere works referred to above.

“Get Lost” is a lively rock and roll song, clearly influenced by some of the earliest music in the genre’s history. It features an interesting horn arrangement and exciting if understated guitar work by Ribot and David Hidalgo of Los Lobos. But suddenly Waits places the song in a nostalgic past, singing:

Roll down all the windows
Turn up Wolfman Jack
Please, please love me tender
Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that

It’s a musically interesting but not very substantial work, ultimately.

The tune of the “jazzy” (but not jazz) ballad “Kiss Me” never quite takes shape. In spite of a memorable lyric—“Kiss me like a stranger once again”—this particular story of faded romance doesn’t come off. A great deal of thought has been put into the atmosphere of the song, but against the better-written “Last Leaf” and “Back in the Crowd,” its weaknesses become clear.

“Hell Broke Luce,” might be described as an anti-war song. The lyrics are fast delivered in a tuneless patter. It’s an angry song, and one which no doubt reflects some of Waits’ opposition to the US wars in the Middle East. The song’s heavy guitars and marching percussion are augmented by the sound of machine gun fire. Waits’ voice is at its most abrasive here.

The song doesn’t feel quite as genuine as “Talking at the Same Time” or “Face to the Highway.” Waits is perhaps straining to evoke an experience which is too unfamiliar to him. The lyrics tend to be more contrived and disjointed than on the remainder of the album. While well intentioned, it’s difficult to connect with:

When I was over here I never got to vote
I left my arm in my coat
My mom she died and never wrote
We sat by the fire and ate a goat
Just before he died he had a toke
Now I’m home and I’m blind
And I’m broke
What is next

Certain artistic problems remain, and too much of the record disappoints, but the best music here stands apart from much of what is being released today. The experience of the last decade—the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the economic crisis and bank bailouts, mass unemployment and the first mass response of working people to these crises—is making itself felt in the work of various artists, including Waits. It is to his credit that he has returned, after a seven-year hiatus from new recordings, with an album on which one finds moving songs about the struggles of working people and songs of protest against social inequality and war. For all its unevenness, it’s frankly a relief to engage with an album which does not, at least, feel trivial.



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