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The Words and Music of Tom Waits

Corinne Kessel
With love for Jethro, the maker of the tea, bringer of the flowers, pusher of the buttons, and without whom . . .
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Contents

Series Foreword by James E. Perone ix
Acknowledgments xi
Introduction xiii

1. Life and Works in Brief 1

2. Music, Instrumentation, and Voice 15
   Night on Earth: A Nomadic Soundtrack 17
   Dirty Water on a Swordfish Trombone 20
   A Voice from the Gutter 51
   The Black Box 59

3. Tom’s Wanderers: Character and Narrative in the Music of Tom Waits 63
   Nighthawks and Tire Tramps 65
   Rain Dogs 69
   The Pianist Has Been Drinking 75
   Black Market Babies 80
   The Only Kind of Love 84
   Soldier’s Things and Sailor’s Dreams 90
   Train Songs 95
   The Wild Years 99
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Oddities</th>
<th>105</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Little Drop of Poison: Outlaws and Bandits</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossroads</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sururalism</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Beautiful Maladies: Tom Waits’s Realism</strong></td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Time</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discography</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmography</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribute Albums and Covers</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Series Foreword

Although the term *Singer-Songwriters* might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and in terms of time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles will be represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named above will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers. But, while some have done so, all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, while others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject’s biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the
series will differ from book to book. All, however, will be organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners’ guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists’ recorded output.

James E. Perone
Series Editor
Acknowledgments

Special thanks to Michael Scholar Jr. for his invaluable contributions, resources, and theatrical wisdom, and for his tireless passion for Tom Waits, which made this book and November Theatre possible.

Thanks to all the people who have been a part of November Theatre’s 10 years of producing *The Black Rider* by Tom Waits, William S. Burroughs, and Robert Wilson.

Thanks to Alma, Dan, and Jaime Kessel, for the love, support, and motivation.
Desperate and depraved, lost and forgotten, catastrophically undone, the human detritus that history overlooks and society dismisses is given a voice through the music of Tom Waits, which is powered by the depth and strength of these very characters and their narrative expression. The idea of the wanderer, who seeks escape from all of his problems and dreams himself into oblivion, serves as the fundamental thematic category guiding the investigations of the dual dynamics of character and narrative structure. After sketching out a musical biography of Tom Waits, this book engages in uncovering and defining the misfit characters that run through Waits’s musical career from *Closing Time* (1973) to *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, & Bastards* (2006) and illustrates how they infiltrate his lyrics, music, instrumentation, voice, persona, and performance style. The larger narrative of Waits’s musical style is examined, along with a discussion that focuses on his “voice” in both the literal and the figurative sense of the word and on the subversiveness that governs his language. A study of the development of character autonomy and heightened musical imagery found in Waits’s theatrical collaborations, films scores, and street operas will be delineated. Character and narrative are shown to be integral to Waits’s songs, and it is revealed how he incorporates these elements into all levels of his musical and lyrical development throughout the sonic labyrinth of his musical career.

My goal is to demonstrate how Tom Waits’s music and evocative lyrics chronicle the daily lives and unravel the tangled memories of the lowlifes, misfits, and outcasts of society. The investigation isolates a catalogue of formal characteristics and thematic clusters in his work and illustrates Waits’s particular poetics of representation, whereby ordinary, often overlooked, or
forgotten characters are seen as extraordinary and their stories as profound, especially when placed within his penetrating musical soundscapes. It will be shown that his characters are restless wanderers, lonely travelers, desperate strangers, tormented deviants, and fallen angels who face their battered lives with drinking, prostitution, crime, religion, and the active quest for somewhere better than the place where life now finds them. This investigation is carried out with respect to the dynamics and contradictions of realism itself and, more locally, with respect to the dynamics of the musical text and the imaginary landscapes projected by that text, as well as the persona Waits portrays in performance. Waits is a prolific composer and diverse musician who does not chase after shiny red firetrucks to awesome blazing fires but instead looks at the fragility and intangibility of dreams found dissipating in the last wisp of smoke from a burnt-down cigarette in the weathered hands of a broken soul.
Life and Works in Brief

Though he is a successful and highly influential musician, actor, and film composer, Tom Waits has never been a mainstream commercial hit or been made into an action figure, and his songs that have been covered by more radio-friendly artists are perhaps the most familiar. Always an uncompromising individualist, Tom Waits claims to have been born on December 7, 1949, in the backseat of a taxicab just outside a hospital in Pomona, California, in serious need of a shave and hollering for the driver to head for Times Square. In a taxi or not, he was born Thomas Alan Waits to his schoolteacher parents, Frank and Alma, who he also claims conceived him “one night in April 1949 at the Crossroads Motel in La Verne, California, amidst the broken bottles of Four Roses, the smoldering Lucky Strike, half a tuna-salad sandwich, and the Old Spice.”1 Along with his two sisters, he lived his childhood in Whittier (known best for being the home of Richard Milhous Nixon) and many other typically blue-collar parts of southern California as his parents often moved around and eventually divorced when he was 10. As a result of (or in spite of) his family’s early peripatetic existence, Tom Waits developed a passion for travel, added a plethora of colorful names to his vocabulary, and nurtured an appreciation for American exoticism and kitsch.

While not from what he would describe as a musical family, Waits was interested in music from a young age, that is, interested in listening to music, never really considering it as a feasible career choice. His guitar playing, Spanish-teaching father (whose name would later become one of Waits’s central characters in the 1980s) instilled in him a fondness for mariachi and ranchera music, while his mother sang whenever she could. He taught himself to play the piano at a neighbor’s house; he also learned how to play the guitar and
delighted in the sounds of Bing Crosby, Cole Porter, Howlin’ Wolf, Irving Berlin, Ray Charles, George Gershwin, Bob Dylan, and Frank Sinatra and in the books and beat poetry of Jack Kerouac, Charles Bukowski, and Allen Ginsberg. Owing his musical and personal development and detailed vocabulary more to Beat-bohemian influences and the iconoclastic attitudes of earlier heroes like Lord Buckley and Lenny Bruce than to the “whole love and flowers bit” of the 1960s, the teenage Tom Waits tore “down the tarmac chasing the ghost of Jack Kerouac” and ignored “the psychedelic mayhem of the time.”

He dropped out of high school to take on various odd jobs and quickly became what he called “the jack-off of all trades,” working in restaurants, pizza places (Napoleone’s Pizza House, which he immortalized in the song “The Ghosts of Saturday Night”), and nightclubs. In these places, derelict and misfit characters with their captivating stories began to materialize around him. While working as a doorman at a small San Diego club called the Heritage, Waits was exposed to a wide variety of music until one night he “saw a local guy onstage playing his own material. I don’t know why, but at that moment I knew that I wanted to live or die on the strength of my own music. I finally played a gig there. Then I started writing down people’s conversations as they sat around the bar. When I put them together I found some music hiding in there.”

It became his project to represent these images and characters in song, and, while performing at a hoot night at the Troubadour in Los Angeles in 1972, which was one of the most important club showcases for new talent, Tom Waits caught the attention of an industry insider, Herb Cohen, who managed such acts as Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, Captain Beefheart, Lenny Bruce, and Tim Buckley. He signed Waits to his management and helped him secure a record deal with Asylum Records (which produced other popular Californian acts like The Eagles and Jackson Browne). Cohen called in Jerry Yester, a former member of The Lovin’ Spoonful and the Modern Folk Quartet and producer for several California groups and singers such as Tim Buckley, the Turtles, and The Association, to produce Waits’s debut album, *Closing Time*, which was released in 1973 by Asylum. Yester, with his own specific ideas, disciplined Waits’s music to conform more closely to the formalized marketing category of “singer-songwriter,” which typified Asylum’s artist roster, rather than follow Waits’s inclinations toward heavier jazz instrumentations and arrangements. Waits toured vigorously in support of *Closing Time*, often unsuccessfully paired by manager Herb Cohen with his other acts, including Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, whose audiences were largely unreceptive to the beatnik personality adopted by Waits and the bittersweet songs he performed.

For more appreciative listeners, Tom Waits’s rich, maudlin poetic lyrics of nighthawks and outsiders, his loungey sentiments, and his distinctive voice quickly earned him a dedicated following and critical praise, though just as swiftly separated him from the mainstream success of the more accessible
southern California singer-songwriter movement and the following trends of disco and then punk. The stories and myths soon began to grow about the finger-snapping, chain-smoking, and booze-soaked Beat poet who stayed in skid row hotels and hitchhiked from gig to gig. Early in his career, he set up residency in the notorious Tropicana Motel on Santa Monica Boulevard, notorious for the sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll lifestyles of the touring bands and inhabitants it housed, such as Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and Rickie Lee Jones. Comfortable with motel life, Tom Waits kept his piano in his kitchen and dove headlong into the excesses of a “time-warped Beat.” His performance persona was truly that of a drunken bohemian singer-songwriter, a consummate bar entertainer, sitting behind the dusty piano or cracked guitar at the back of the bar telling stories about real people with real lives and real struggles.

*The Heart of Saturday Night* was released in 1974 and was Waits’s first encounter with producer Bones Howe. This thematically linked series of songs hinted at the highly stylized jazz arrangements and lyrics that were a skewed balance between pathos and wit, which would come to be associated with Waits’s inimitable style. He often still performed solo for his live shows, but the instrumentation on *The Heart of Saturday Night* is laced with unobtrusive jazz featuring Waits on the piano, backed by a small, bass-dominated ensemble. The 1975 live album *Nighthawks at the Diner* saw the further development of Waits’s drunken bohemian after-hours persona, which was an amalgamation of beatnik, vaudevillian, and crooner qualities. Throughout the 1970s, Waits was often on the road, honing his gutter-trawling image, which often preceded him, and cultivating his storytelling. *Nighthawks at the Diner* demonstrates Waits’s brilliant rapport with intimate audiences and his fluidity at shifting in and out of different compelling characters. Musically, Waits’s foundation at this time was that of a piano and jazz combo with occasional lush orchestral arrangements. As well, the influence of the Beat generation on Waits’s compositional style is more prominent on this live recording with his 1950s-style back-up ensembles and the incorporation of storytelling and imagery with or without music as he admits, “Before I found Kerouac I was kinda groping for something to hang on to stylistically.” Instead of perfecting a songwriting style that would find a musical home for all of his stories and vignettes, he decided, “If I can’t find a melody to hang the words on to, I just don’t worry about it. I do it anyways, without music.” This decision to shift among spoken pieces, inebriated travelogues, and fully realized songs allowed Waits the freedom to explore his talents as a poet, storyteller, and songwriter with his main instrument being his vocabulary, without falling victim to the stigma of being labeled a pedigree poet or beatnik.

*Small Change* and *Foreign Affairs*, released in 1976 and 1977, respectively, furthered his Beat-oriented and jazz-influenced expression, while his hipster image continued to be “‘cultivated, derived from the way I am,’ he says. ‘I just try to steer a course between the pomp and the piss.’” *Small Change* also found Waits re-examining his writing style and moving toward a more
shadowy and melancholy landscape. In his previous albums such as *Nighthawks at the Diner* and *The Heart of Saturday Night*, Waits allowed himself the self-indulgence of intricate details, but with *Small Change*, he began to really develop his stories and the action within them, instead of just taking lavish snapshots. Still maintaining his flair for pungent detail, he filled the title track with images of violence, a new theme that would be added to Waits’s repertoire of narrative tales. *Small Change* departs from the very urban and funky feel of *Nighthawks at the Diner*, accents more deeply on jazz, and moves away from a heavily overdubbed and produced sound. With *Foreign Affairs*, Waits adopted another method for working with producer Bones Howe whereby Waits recorded his demos first and then presented them to Howe. Howe would then impart his vision and direction for the album separately, which for this collection of songs was that of a black-and-white movie, a theme that was carried through to the album cover artwork, as well. Unfortunately, *Foreign Affairs* was not a commercial success, but, always an uncompromising artist, Waits simply absorbed this disappointment and continued to produce the type of material he felt passionately about.

Around this time, Waits somehow connected with Sylvester Stallone, who offered him the opportunity to record some songs and to have a cameo appearance in the small role of a drunken piano player named Mumbles in Stallone’s upcoming movie, *Paradise Alley* (1978). While the movie ended up being a box office and critical failure, with most of Waits’s music and acting contributions cut from the final version of the film, Waits did not feel any of the disappointment that Stallone surely endured. Instead, he was inspired to develop his own film script with Paul Hampton called “Why Is the Dream So Much Sweeter Than the Taste?” about a used-car dealer in downtown Los Angeles. The project never came to fruition, but it garnered Waits enough attention (along with his duet work with Bette Midler on *Foreign Affairs*) to attract Francis Ford Coppola for a later project.

*Blue Valentine* (1978) and *Heartattack and Vine* (1980) stylistically began to head toward a more guitar-oriented rock sound. Produced by Bones Howe, *Blue Valentine* was recorded in a mere six days, with minimal backing instrumentation and no overdubs. *Blue Valentine* would feature Waits playing electric guitar for the first time and creating a much more theatrical stage presentation that involved sets, props, lighting, and special effects to add a dimension of heightened expression to his live performances. *Heartattack and Vine*, anchored by the late New Orleans drummer “Big John” Thomassie, is characterized by its venture into a heavily electric blues sound and rhythm, which balanced the lush orchestral arrangements still present on some songs. As well, Waits experimented with a broader musical scope in terms of the arrangements and instrumentations of his songs, allowing the drummer to use sticks instead of brushes and moving away from the upright bass, muted trumpet, and tenor saxophone formula he had grown accustomed to. *Heartattack and Vine* was also a creative marathon that was written and recorded by Waits while on a brief break from his work on the
all-consuming movie soundtrack *One from the Heart*. His sensuous imagery and narratives on both *Blue Valentine* and *Heartattack and Vine* have a much more cynical feel than his previous work, touching on caustic urban themes of death, violence, and crime. Impatient for the release of new material after *Heartattack and Vine*, Asylum released the compilation of established songs entitled *Bounced Checks* in 1981.

The 1980s found Waits further venturing into the terrain of film, both as an actor and as a soundtrack composer, working on such projects as Francis Ford Coppola’s *One from the Heart* and Jim Jarmusch’s *Down by Law*. For Waits, scoring the multimillion-dollar film *One from the Heart* (1982; re-released in 2004) was a very different and rewarding experience. With a piano in an office and a rigid schedule, Waits worked in the style of the old Brill Building songwriters and learned how to discipline himself and his composing. Waits and Coppola worked closely together, with Coppola being highly receptive to Waits’s ideas and even incorporating a fragment of his “Why Is the Dream Always So Much Sweeter Than the Taste” screenplay into a scene called “Used Carlotta.” His beguiling and Oscar-nominated song score is deftly woven into the narrative, visuals, and characters of this lounge operetta, functioning as musical commentary for the action taking place on the screen. In response to a question about his increasing involvement in film and theater, Waits replied that it is “thrilling to see the insanity of all these people brought together like this life-support system to create something that’s really made out of smoke. The same thing draws me to making records—you fashion these things and ideas into your own monster. It’s making dreams. I like that.” Theater and film were natural developments for Waits, who was increasingly utilizing an actor’s skill to give depth and complexity to the dysfunctional and emotionally bruised characters of his songs. Working in the film industry presented the opportunity to perhaps reach a larger audience than the cult following his albums had developed. It was also while working on this soundtrack at Zoetrope that Waits met his muse and eventual writing partner, Kathleen Brennan, who would singlehandedly transform his approach to music, composition, recording, production, and business. *One from the Heart* and *Heartattack and Vine* would also signal the end of an era for Tom Waits and producer Bones Howe, as these would be the last albums that they would collaborate on. At this point, Waits began to expand and experiment musically, as well as with the direction of his career.

Tom Waits’s jazz- and blues-inflected ballads characteristic of his early years qualified him as an acceptable artist for the prosaic California folk sound of the Asylum label. However, his new material was a striking departure from his previous work and provoked a move from Asylum to Island Records. Waits also began to produce his own albums with his new wife and cowriter, Kathleen Brennan, and stepped into more adventurous soundscapes and new means of expression. His earlier characters were all undeniably unique and came from diverse backgrounds, but, when captured in his music, they all seemed kind of similar. To remedy this, Waits began working with new
textures and layers, moved away from the secure sounds of the piano or jazz combo, and experimented with found and ethnic instruments, different recording techniques, more varied and unimaginable characters, and a wider vocal range. Waits’s earlier years were imbued with music and lyrics that were seeped in the cigarette and booze reality of his life, and now, as his life was changing, his music similarly underwent a transition that brought it much closer to his imagination and dreams. He began to understand that it was possible and effective to separate himself personally from who he was as a writer and composer. This helped to power Waits’s transformation in his musical direction and character placement.

With the move to Island Records, Tom Waits seemed to get leaner and edgier as he became less dependent upon finding romance and humor in a lonely whiskey bottle and reveled in a world and beauty that sounded angular and dangerous. Waits’s collaboration with Kathleen significantly refocused the direction in which his music was headed:

She has a fearless imagination. She writes lyrics that are like dreams. There’s no one I trust more with music, or life. And she’s got great rhythm, and finds melodies that are so intriguing and strange. Most of the significant changes I went through musically and as a person began when we met. She’s the person by which I measure all others. She’s who you want with you in a foxhole. She doesn’t like the limelight, but she is an incandescent presence on everything we work on together.9

Tom Waits credits Kathleen Brennan with helping him to integrate more far-ranging musical influences like Lead Belly, Captain Beefheart, Skip James, and Schoenberg and finding ways to reconcile this diversity within his music. Kathleen encouraged Waits to take more risks in his compositional style and lyrics and to challenge his insecurities and vulnerabilities as a musician, writer, and performer, while embracing a more exotic and cabaret sound. She helped him take control over his finished works and encouraged him to self-produce rather than allow the commercial considerations of labels, agents, and producers to dictate the sonic direction of his albums. As well, with her help, Waits was able to shake off the inveterate drunken-raconteur persona that was beginning to feel limiting, as he admitted, “People thought I was some kind of a throwback, a time-warp demented oddity.”10

For his next three ambitious albums, Swordfishtrombones (1983), Rain Dogs (1985), and Frank’s Wild Years (a play cowritten with Kathleen Brennan in 1986), the norm of Tom Waits’s musical foundations drastically changed from romantic piano ballads and jazz configurations to junkyard orchestrations with instruments such as metal aunglongs, glass harmonicas, mellotrons, optigans, banjos, accordions, pump organs, chairs, marimbas, bagpipes, bullhorns, and kitchen sinks. Predictably, Waits developed a fascination for the American composer Harry Partch, a “hobo” who deconstructed and reinvented music, creating instruments from virtually anything
he came in contact with. Now armed with a new melange of instrumentation and intensified percussion, Waits created visionary albums that melded a new mix of blues, the simplicity of nursery rhymes, free-form jazz, tango, and other styles, giving the albums a sense of creative absurdity and juxtaposition. Similarly, his production values greatly changed during this time in his career. As specific and particular as Waits became in attaining the sounds and chameleon vocals he required for his songs, rather than falling in with the high-tech digital gloss of the 1980s, he became equally concerned with developing his “lo-fi” idiosyncratic production style. Waits became so enraptured by the individuality of sounds and the textures of music that, if he wanted to capture the sound of an anvil, he would drag the brake drum from his car into the studio and figure out a way to mic it rather than work with sampled sounds.

Individual moments in time, like the individual sounds, would emerge as focal points in his storytelling style with this trio of albums as he learned not only to capture the grandiose stories and emotions but also to express the beauty or devastation of the small or fleeting incidents in life. Swordfishtrombones is fractured and dark and meanders along like a demented little parade band with Waits’s specific sounds and instruments themselves conveying the exotic environments he describes in his lyrics. Rain Dogs, which is the first album that was recorded in New York, is bleaker and more claustrophobic. Waits still writes about the same types of characters, but he places them in much more diverse and oddball situations, with the themes of insanity and incoherence prevalent throughout the album. Rain Dogs has the panoramic essence of a surreal collage, with bits and pieces melded together and different sounds, rhythms, and images juxtaposed against one another. As the score to a play, Frank’s Wild Years has Waits facing the need to have the songs stand alone as a thematically linked album without requiring the visual performance context to maintain its relevance and impact. For Waits, “Things like Frank’s Wild Years worked but sometimes a story can be too dry and alone. I’m getting to where I want to see things where either the words are more concise so that the picture I am trying to create becomes more clear, or be more vague in description and allow the music to take the listener to that place where you want them to go.” With the play based on a self-delusional character who first appeared in the song “Frank’s Wild Years” (Swordfishtrombones) and grew and transformed in Rain Dogs, Frank’s Wild Years seems to signify the end of yet another triptych (unofficially called the Frank trilogy) in Waits’s canon. Thematically, while there is no direct mention of Frank in the narratives on Rain Dogs, the strong, visceral imagery, word play, misdirection, and sonic alchemy present on all three albums link them, regardless of the literal presence of the Frank character.

The Frank’s Wild Years play would be Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan’s first fully realized theatrical production together. It premiered at the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago, featuring Waits in the lead role of Frank O’Brien under the direction of artistic director Gary Sinise, who took over for Terry Kinney, who left the project late in the process due to creative differences.
Operatic maverick and director/creator Robert Wilson was first approached to direct the project, but a collaboration at that time was not possible. The show was sold out nightly for its two-month run, which began on June 17, 1986, but the critics’ reviews of the production were mixed. Originally wanting to take *Frank’s Wild Years* one step further and create a movie version with Jim Jarmusch, Waits changed his focus to the more feasible live album and concert film *Big Time*, which was released in 1988. The theatricality of this hyperstylized video was very much informed by his experiences at Steppenwolf and had Waits channeling the lounge-singer incarnation of Frank. This musical montage brought together a diverse catalogue of stylistic variations and a spectacular array of unexpected instrumentation from the Island trilogy and was Waits’s last album with Island Records until the film score to Jim Jarmusch’s *Night on Earth* was released in 1992. Thematically and pictorially linked to the show business themes of *Frank’s Wild Years*, *Big Time* highlights the pathos of small-town dreamers. It challenges Waits’s skills as an actor, storyteller, singer, and theatrical jack-of-all trades and accomplishes his primary objective: “to take a show and give it some dream life.”

Meanwhile, at this same time, *The Early Years*, which is a collection of demos originally recorded in 1971 prior to Waits’s debut album, *Closing Time*, was released by Herb Cohen and Frank Zappa’s Bizarre/Straight labels. While *The Early Years* and *The Early Years Volume 2* gave audiences a fascinating glimpse of Tom Waits at an amorphous, much less stylized stage in his musical career, he was not at all pleased with the release of this series of rough demos, which were unfortunately under the control of Cohen. Here Waits’s voice sounds like it is overflowing with world-wearied resignation and subterranean sentimentality, rather than fitting neatly into the understated contemporary folk-rock spectrum of producer Jerry Yester. The unexpected release of these collections definitely gave Waits an even deeper appreciation for the independence and creative control he had gained over his music with his Island Records albums.

Throughout the 1990s, Tom Waits continued to build his fan base, expand his film and theater career, and delve into greater experimentation, boho artiness, and genre mixing with his music. *Bone Machine*, containing eight tracks cowritten with Kathleen Brennan, embodied these innovations in a haunting and skeletal musical construction. This album, released in 1992, was another edge-pusher for Waits’s sonic and poetic boundaries and concerned itself with the omnipresence of life, death, and destruction. Filled with the sounds of clattering sticks and foreboding boot stomping and with dark narrative vignettes gathered from biblical allegories and newspaper clippings, the corrosive *Bone Machine* was his first album to win a Grammy for Best Alternative Album. Compared to the esoteric, seductive, and otherworldly Frank trilogy, *Bone Machine* is dauntingly minimalist and focused on texture as Waits “tried to make songs that felt a little more hand-made. Experiments and expeditions into a world of sound and stories.”

Tom Waits’s next album, or perhaps more correctly labeled as a side project, *The Black Rider*, was released in 1993 and is the score to an expressionist
operetta created in collaboration with the theatrical visualist and avant-garde director Robert Wilson and the legendary Beat icon William S. Burroughs. Based on a famous German ghost story called “Der Freischütz” (The Free Shot), upon which Carl Maria von Weber’s master opera of the same name is also based, The Black Rider was first performed by the Thalia Theatre Company in Hamburg in 1990. Wildly popular, the piece quickly spread all over Europe, with more than 30 productions in seven different languages. Wilson’s inky, childlike drawings, eerie Expressionist lighting, and minimalist movement informed his architectural design; Burrough’s libretto infused the text with roguish American touches and a dark comic spirit dripping in addiction metaphors; Waits’s romantic and experimental sonic dreamscapes fused the macabre images and the disjointed text of the haunting production. The songs from The Black Rider album, which Waits went to Hamburg to write, evokes a calliope-infused carnival atmosphere and weaves through the themes of addiction, obsession, insanity, and pacts with the devil. Through the cacophonous score that accompanied this theatrical work, Waits explored thematic developments within the style of the German dance-hall style of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht. While many of the songs from The Black Rider may work better in a theatrical context, Waits’s strong sense of style, story, and thematic evolution maintains a sense of coherence throughout the album. Shortly after this project, Waits and Kathleen Brennan were enlisted again to collaborate with Wilson and the Thalia Theater in 1992 to mount a second operatic production. The title of the project was Alice, and it was based on the relationship between the Reverend Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll and Alice in Wonderland. The production combined stories from Alice in Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, and dark personal episodes from Dodgson’s life. Though Waits’s score for this production is more accessible to American audiences than the score for The Black Rider, the touring German production as a whole did not receive heavy media praise or attention and slipped into relative obscurity until Waits had the opportunity to record and release the Alice album on Anti Records in 2002.

In 1998, when Waits returned from a five-year hiatus, his first impulse was to end his 15-year relationship with Island Records. It was an amicable split, particularly since Island Records had the year before been swallowed up by Polygram, which in turn was absorbed by the Universal empire. Favoring close relationships and artist support over being lost in a stifling corporate superstructure, Waits released a collection, titled Beautiful Maladies: The Island Years, of 23 songs spanning his seven Island albums from Swordfishtrombones to The Black Rider to signify his departure from the label. Musically, in his 19 years with Island Records, Waits had expanded all realms of his compositional styles, from the dark, blues-inflected ballads and storytelling to the disjointive, subversive, surreal, and angular elements and the bang-on-anything approach to instrumentation that has surfaced in his latest albums.

With a somewhat surprising change to the indie-operated punk label Epitaph Records, Tom Waits released, in 1999, the highly anticipated Mule Variations, for which he received a Grammy for Best Contemporary Folk
Album. With more than one million albums sold and with a debut at number 30 on the Billboard charts in America, *Mule Variations* earned Waits greater mainstream acceptance, though he still maintained his reverent cult following. Receiving greater support and freedom with Epitaph, Waits fervently embraced the uses of contradictory styles: from avant-garde apocalyptic clanks to carnival stomps to tender nursery rhyme melodies. Coproduced and cowritten with Kathleen Brennan, *Mule Variations* also reunited Waits with his long-time sidemen, like horn player Ralph Carney, guitarists Marc Ribot and Joe Gore, drummer Stephen Hodges, and bassist Greg Cohen, as well as introducing new collaborators, such as Beck guitarist Smokey Hormel and Primus bassist/singer Les Claypool. Using less of the theatricality and brutal images that occupied his last few works, like *The Black Rider*, *Alice*, *Bone Machine*, and *Frank’s Wild Years*, the long-awaited *Mule Variations* had Tom Waits delving comfortably into dusty tales of rural domestic bliss and charm, rather than concentrating on tales of woe and seedy urban night life.

Once again, in February 2000, Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan were approached by Robert Wilson to collaborate on yet another theatrical production, this one entitled *Woyzeck*, in Copenhagen. The show premiered at the Betty Nansen Theatre on November 18, 2000, and toured in Danish across Europe in 2001 and in English in 2002, including stops in New York and Los Angeles. *Woyzeck* is based on George Buchner’s 1837 uncompleted tragic stage play, which in turn was the basis for the bleak, groundbreaking opera *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, in 1925, and, later, a powerful film by Werner Herzog, in 1979. Loosely based on the true story of Johann Christian Woyzeck, it is a dark tale of a soldier in a nineteenth-century garrison town who is obsessed with his wife’s infidelity and who falls victim to his raging jealousy, madness, and the dehumanizing effects of doctors and the military and who eventually succumbs to murder and suicide. It is a story of the everyman, an ordinary person who is just trying to survive but is gradually degraded by the loss of the woman he loves and eventually the meaning of life. Because Waits had other commitments at this time, the release of this score with the more fan-friendly name *Blood Money* was delayed until 2002, when Waits would also revisit *Alice*. When questioned about the 6-year hiatus until *Mule Variations* and the 2- and 10-year delays for *Blood Money* and *Alice*, Waits simply responded, “I stuck it all in a box and stopped recording for awhile. When I did start again, I wanted some really fresh material, so I did *Mule Variations*. Then I got back to *Alice*. You don’t want songs to go bad on you, and you don’t want to waste them. A good butcher uses every part of the cow. So I either use them or cut them up for bait to catch other songs.”

In 2001, while Waits was happily moving forward with much more control over his musical career, one of his old labels was bringing skeletons out of the closet. Rhino Records, which spawned the enormously popular album reissue craze, had been bought up by Warner/Elektra/Asylum and began putting together a collection of Waits’s early material, as well as hunting through the
vaults for any previously unreleased recordings. After calming from his initial reaction to the proposal, which was a wild rage at Warner Music, Waits simply insisted on being permitted to choose the songs that would be included and eventually to participate in the sequencing of the tracks for the album. He was reunited with his old producer, Bones Howe, and they put together what would be released as *Used Songs (1973–1980).* However, the same year, a much more contentious compilation of a bootlegged live show from the mid-1970s was released by a European record label called Burning Airplane. Despite Waits’s protests, *The Dime Store Novels (Volume 1)—Live at Ebbett’s Field* was released in Europe, though it will be noted that a *Volume 2* has yet to surface.

Despite the fact that work on the scores to both *Alice* and *Blood Money* had occurred years earlier in collaboration with Robert Wilson, Waits took a bold step and released both of these highly distinctive albums on Anti Records in 2002, on the very same day. While some felt that, despite the commercial success of *Mule Variations,* the simultaneous release of two very disparate albums was perhaps an overly indulgent marketing ploy, Waits shrugged it off by saying, “If you’re gonna heat up the stove, you might as well make more than one pancake. It’s a lot of work to go into a studio, mobilize a lot of people and equipment. So I figured once we got in there, . . . let’s do another one while the motor is running. Eventually, no one will care what day they came out on. If it’s a good idea, I’ll take credit for it. If it isn’t, I’ll blame it on somebody else.”

With debut positions of number 32 for *Blood Money* and number 33 for *Alice* on the Billboard album charts, this simultaneous release made these albums Waits’s second- and third-best-selling albums ever, following only *Mule Variations.* As these recordings were released later than the time of the actual Wilson productions, Waits was careful to make sure that the albums acknowledged their theatrical pasts, while at the same time possessing enough integrity to be seen as stand-alone Tom Waits albums. A strange and unusual barrage of quirky instruments infiltrates both of these works, along with the same stylistic variations that are united by an overall rasp-and-clang production aesthetic. While *Alice* is filled with soaring melancholic melodies and a sonic alchemy that harks back to his early years, *Blood Money* is more carnal, disjointed, and percussive, filled with guttural yowls deploping the desolation of the human condition. With *The Black Rider, Alice,* and *Blood Money* there is an undeniably decadent European flavor to these albums, which were all commissioned, created, and performed in Hamburg or Copenhagen. However, the characters and their stories continued to be bizarre and stretch the imagination, with *Alice* exploring esoteric dreamlands and *Blood Money* exploring disturbing emotions and feeling somehow more earthbound, both communicated by Waits’s trademark gravel growl.

*Real Gone* (2004) maintains much of the experimentation and even reunites Tom Waits with some of the collaborators found on his preceding albums, *Mule Variations, Blood Money,* and *Alice.* Here Waits takes on many new approaches, including the fractured vocal percussion tracks that
he created using only his voice and a four-track in his bathroom at home. Speaking to his constant musical evolution, Waits comments, “Well you do the dishes first. You want it to be fresh in some way. I don’t want to repeat myself. It’s always a little bit of something old and something new—except I don’t record with great frequency so, with the time that’s gone between records, you can’t avoid having gone through some changes.” While some of the tracks are strangely evocative of the nightmarish clank of Bone Machine, others are traditionally structured odes steeped in morality and suffering, and others are dissonant whirls of cacophonous sound or literal human beatbox experiments. The more urban sound found on this album can perhaps be attributed to the influence of his son Casey, who makes an appearance on the album, contributing percussion and turntables to such songs as “Metropolitan Glide.” As well, despite the plethora of instruments found on the album, the piano is notably absent on Real Gone; Waits did not intentionally exclude it from the album but felt it just did not seem to fit the raw, primal, and immediate soundscape he was creating. As striking as the absence of piano is the appearance of political commentary and indignation in songs such as “Day after Tomorrow,” “Hoist That Rag,” and “Sins of my Father,” where Waits felt he was simply “reflecting in some way what’s going on. I’m watching and listening and finding things on the road and picking them up and sticking them in there. But I don’t know that I completely believe that it in fact can make a difference. Sounds a bit cynical, but...” For Waits, the title for this album emerged from the fact that he considers himself to be “one of those people that if I don’t have my knees skinned and a cut on my hands, I don’t really feel like I’ve had much of a days work. That’s where the title came from—the blues thing, like I’m really gone.” Rich in political resonance and debuting at number 28 on the Billboard charts, Real Gone eclipsed even the Mule Variations peak at number 30.

Following Real Gone was an impressive three-CD, 56-song anthology released in 2006 that, according to Waits, comprises “a lot of songs that fell behind the stove while making dinner, about 60 tunes that we collected. Some are from films, some from compilations. Some is stuff that didn’t fit on a record, things I recorded in the garage with kids. Oddball things, orphaned tunes.” Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, & Bastards rounds up a sprawling mix of Waits’s songs that his wife, Kathleen, once said are either grim reapers or grand weepers. Including 30 new songs that Waits recorded after the release of Real Gone, the project began as an attempt to assemble one-offs from movie soundtracks, theatrical works, tribute albums, and side projects from the past 20 years of his musical career. Brawlers contains blues stomps and jagged confrontational rockers, Bawlers is inundated with beautiful train wrecks and nostalgic broken-down ballads, and Bastards is an experimental series of disoriented clanks and howls with the occasional beatboxing. Including covers of a Frank Sinatra ballad, traditional folk songs, two Ramones punk tunes, a Weill/Brecht cabaret piece, a Jack Kerouac song, a Bukowski spoken
word, and a Disney tune, *Orphans* encapsulates more than three decades of surreal narratives and adventurous noisemaking and brings together all of his wayward songs.

Whether bringing together his odd songs or juxtaposing wildly incongruous elements, Waits has an incredible talent for transcending this incoherence, navigating the negative space between what is said and what is meant, and cajoling these snippets into seemingly complete narratives. Contradiction, ambiguity, the profound simplicity of the everyman, and the fantastical distortion of dreams are all elements that pepper Waits’s storytelling as he perpetually reinvents himself and his musical aesthetic. Tom Waits is not merely a singer or an entertainer but has become somewhat of a mysterious American cult icon who occupies a shadowy personalized space in popular music and remains largely absent from commercial radio, with his live vaudevillian performances always a rare treasure.
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Music, Instrumentation, and Voice

The semiotics found in genre styles and instrumentation choices are important aspects of Tom Waits’s compositional process. Waits uses instrumentation, arrangements, and genre styles to define his characters and to narrate his strange and unusual tales, whether at a barroom piano telling a sad love song or screaming through a bullhorn accompanied by the crow of a rooster. Structurally often very simple, such as when following basic blues or classic folk patterns, Waits’s compositions find their distinct character through his unusual textures, sounds, percussion, rhythms, and recording techniques.

Waits’s music has always brought humanity to his visionary chronicles of derelict America, whether in the form of a crazed tango or swampy blues. In addition to general portrayals of emotional states such as romance, bliss, fear, pathos, humor, and anxiety, music has been imbued over time with cultural and even geographical associations, associations Waits clearly chooses to either absorb or ignore. For composers and listeners, particular properties and idioms of melody, harmony, rhythm, and instrumentation form a veritable language indicative of Africa, India, Japan, the Scottish highlands, ghettos, the countryside, battlefields, and so forth. Waits often explores the semiotics of genre, instrumentation, and style that categorize music, for example, using wheezy organs, accordions, and toy pianos to generate carnival sounds or banjos to give a rural feel. However, he manipulates these properties and looks beyond them, to a more sublime place, a geographical microcosm, where sounds abundant with specificity unfold in his music to give a feel of a gutter in New York, a strip club in Los Angeles, a train station in Australia, or a tattoo parlor in Singapore, as he works to bring forth the stories and emotions stirring around in these places.
Music works to give people different identities and social groups that they can identify or identify with. Though Waits does not necessarily use obvious references like Taiko drums and pan flutes to indicate Asia, he creates a mood that appropriately sets the story that he wants told, and his music takes on another level of narrative structure in which the listeners must situate themselves. This layer in his compositional style is illuminated by the fact that there is “a power in places more felt than known. Just as Tom explored the lyrical possibilities of that which is unsaid, I think *Swordfishtrombones* draws depth and potency from these unseen but sensed geographies: the carnival everywhere in the music and album cover, but nowhere in the lyrics.” Waits’s music offers the possibility of an alternative experience within the social forces that govern everybody’s daily life by allowing his listeners to familiarize themselves with the different cultural, social, spatial, and economic narratives found in his songs. In an interview with Mark Richard, Waits comments on how music has the potential to infiltrate all aspects of life and notes, in particular, that he has always thought that in Mexican culture songs live in the air, music is less precious and more woven into life. There is a way of incorporating music into our lives that has meaning: songs for celebration, songs for teaching children things, songs of worship, songs that make the garden grow, songs to keep the devil away, songs to make a girl fall in love with you. My kids sing songs they have made up that I listen to and know by heart, and these songs have become part of our family life. You have to keep music alive in your life or else music becomes an isolated thing, just a pill you take.

Rather than writing all of these types of songs to fit within a single genre, like a jazz musician or ska band might, Waits embodies a creative process that involves finding the right style, sound, and instrumentation to situate the listener within the sonic realm of his narratives, characters, or situations. Physical space and distance are also used by Waits to heighten emotions such as longing and loneliness when his characters are placed far from where they want to be. Smay discusses this concept of horizontal, vertical, and emotional distance and movement in reference to songs from *Swordfishtrombones*, where he feels there is the distance in “Shore Leave.” This is a song subject he’s addressed several times, and it’s perfect for his sailors: it’s the distance of looking back. There’s a vast geography to traverse but emotionally it’s even further away, in the past. A place you can never return to. This distance fills up with Tom’s songs of longing and regret. Another space is the one addressed in “Underground”—the vertical space between your feet and some place under the dirt: death, Satan and diamonds down there.

Movement and space play a literal role in the design and construction of Waits’s songs; even his densest songs maintain a sense of space where the
performer and audience can breathe and the imagination is allowed to create meaning from not only what is heard but also from what is not there.

Tom Waits’s music from *Swordfishtrombones* on defies the norm in terms of production values, song structure, instrumentation, and vocal timbre, as far as the glossy, highly produced, three-minute, verse-chorus-verse-chorus, pop-rock radio standards go and is often ignored by all but college radio stations. Sanitized covers of his songs like “Downtown Train” by Rod Stewart or “Ol’ 55” by The Eagles are much more readily embraced by the masses than his original jagged performances, favored by his more discerning audience. The hoary rasp and vast character of Waits’s voice and crude production values brings an element of sincerity and a haunting evocation of humanity to his music. If his songs were to be performed by a vocally polished singer with slick, highly produced accompaniment, his lyrics and music might come across as contrived or even ridiculous. His work over the years has always stood outside the current of musical trends and obliterated commercial pressure with its singularity and idiosyncrasy of style, lyricism, and elemental storytelling. With grace and ease, Waits transcends genre and generation labels and continues to create his music in his own way, at his own pace, for his own purpose. Throughout his four-decade-long musical career, he has striven for grit, texture, and artistic vision rather than for finesse and aural sheen, and he has diligently worked to create a constantly evolving musical language in which his use of genre, instrumentation, and recording techniques are as emotionally and aesthetically evocative as his distinctive voice, lyrics, and melodies.

**NIGHT ON EARTH: A NOMADIC SOUNDTRACK**

Jim Jarmusch’s episodic film, *Night on Earth*, for which Tom Waits provides the suitably atmospheric soundtrack, explores the simultaneity of an urban experience of five taxi drivers and their passengers in one night, in five different locales: Los Angeles, New York, Paris, Rome, and Helsinki. With this soundtrack, Waits works to complement Jarmusch’s minimalist sensibility and demonstrates how minute details such as changes in timbre can express and evoke larger meanings. With only three vocal tracks in the score, his 13 instrumental pieces center around very similar melodic themes and contours, which lend a sense of coherence and congruity to the low-key and offbeat encounters of the characters found in Jarmusch’s vignettes. Using the creaks and groans of accordions, harmoniums, Stinson band organs, bass clarinets, saxophones, horns, stalking bass lines, and tin cans, Waits endeavors to depict the tragedy and comedy of the scenes as well as express the shifting American or European flavor of the locales in which they take place. While *Night on Earth* cannot be called a quintessential Tom Waits album, because his powerful lyrics and characteristic voice are absent for the majority of the album, it does highlight his highly adept skills at capturing and representing musically the geographical, emotional, and narrative components of the film.
The story takes place in a taxi in each of the cities. The use of the taxi as the setting from which each city is experienced “both captures the transitory nature of urban experience—unpredictable meetings and journeys—and foregrounds what is usually deemed insignificant, trivial, everyday, as central to this film.” Like all of Waits’s characters, the ordinary and insignificant are immortalized in song and given importance; the act of “getting by” is made extraordinary. The taxi driver is a wanderer, an urban vagabond, scouring the city streets for his or her next customer and hoping for a meaningful interaction with somebody. The itinerant lives of transient taxi drivers are based on brief encounters and an absence of lasting intimacy. For Waits, taxi drivers who mostly commiserate with their own lonesome thoughts are uniquely deep characters: not only are they themselves unusual and misfit characters, but, since their days are spent weaving through the tangled grind and wheeze of the cities they occupy, they accumulate interesting encounters with eccentric and radically differing people.

Jarmusch highlights the stereotypes of each city by showing clips of architecture, design, and landscapes that typify and are exemplary of the location being depicted. The story in each city is also representative of what social experiences would be stereotypically expected to manifest in each city. Similarly, as “it is true that different cities, like different countries, make different noises,” the “mood music” composed by Waits is a combination of a repeated Alberti Bass type of patterned accompaniment and a basic melody line that is used to represent each of the cities with slight variations and re-orchestrations to resemble identifiable ethnic or nationalistic musical stereotypes. The use of the same melody and basic accompaniment for each of the settings for the scenes signifies the theme of the taxi and also works to amplify and unify the concurrence of urban, dreamer, and drifter experiences. The patron saint of wanderers, Tom Waits, encapsulates the feeling of loneliness and desperation of restless wanderers escaping reality and reaching for dreams, searching for something more to life than sitting behind the wheel of a taxi.

In Los Angeles, the city of dreams, Winona Ryder plays a grungy cabby whose modest life goals surprisingly do not include being discovered as a movie star. Ryder’s ordinary character is given the opportunity to become extraordinary when, by chance, her next fare happens to be a busy and highly influential talent agent. The meeting for Ryder is incidental, and in the end she rejects the offer the talent agent has proposed and drives off in search of other dreams. The instrumentation for the music of the scene in Los Angeles consists of a bass, cello, and piano together playing the steady patterned accompaniment and a distorted electric guitar playing the melody line. The guitar stretches out the melody line, fading in and out of the foreground, allowing for feedback and distortion as the camera scans the city’s stagnant, smoggy landscape of aging bungalows, shabby desert/ranch style architecture, kitschy restaurant mascots, and wearied strip malls. The feeling is of isolation amid the vast sea of people and broken hopes and dreams. The driving accompaniment gives a sense of restlessness and urgency typical of a drifter’s
need to keep moving. The raw guitar sound is one you might expect to find in the sound of a local California punk rock band or from a busker playing an old electric guitar through a distorted 5-watt amp under the flashing neon sign of a liquor store late at night. The clear guitar sound that crumbles into distortion captures the visual presentation of the fatigued, polluted, artificial, escapist, and somewhat jaded cityscape and citizens of Los Angeles.

The light-hearted German circus clown turned cab driver, played by Armin Mueller-Stahl, in the New York scene is a newcomer to the city, filled with an optimistic view of America. His first customer is Giancarlo Esposito, who is eager to get home to Brooklyn and who warns him of the perils and dangers of New York City and its inhabitants. The taxi driver’s sanguine optimism slowly dissolves once his fare has reached his destination and he drives away alone into the fearful and alienating hostile war zone seething with crime, vandalism, brutality, injustice, and sirens. The New York mood music contains the same instrumentation for its accompaniment as that for Los Angeles, but with the bass heard more frequently and more pronounced in the mix. The dirty electric guitar sound is replaced with a single jazzy muted trumpet playing the melody line, giving the feel of an after-hours jazz club beneath the streets of Manhattan. The trumpet is cold and harsh, reflective of the scenes of destruction, emotional detachment, and violence portrayed by Jarmusch. There is a hollow ambient reverberation to the trumpet sound, which creates a sense of smallness in a large space, as well as emphasizing the heavy weight of darkness, the danger of urban streets, and the solitude of being a stranger in a strange land.

In Paris, the taxi driver, played by Isaach De Bankolé, is frustrated by a stressful night with difficult customers and picks up a blind woman, confident she will not cause him the same grief as his previous fares. The blind woman is also a wanderer, traveling through the thick night just to experience the smell, sounds, and sensation of the city of lights and to simply feel alive and passionate. Naïve about the extent to which blindness incapacitates his customer, the taxi driver bombards her with a multitude of questions like an inquisitive schoolboy. Distracted by this strange and exciting individual, the taxi driver gets into an accident as he leaves his fare by the river. The music for the Paris scene maintains the tempo and instrumentation of the musical accompaniment used for the Los Angeles and New York scenes; however, the principle instrument here is (predictably) the accordion, an overused musical signifier of outdoor French cafes, invoking a sense of retreat to intimate spaces, sensuality, and leisure.

Roberto Benigni portrays a vivacious and flamboyant Italian taxi driver in the scene about Rome. Often alone on a late shift with few fares, this exuberant taxi driver, who fights this isolation with an active escapist imagination, picks up a priest making his way home late at night. Hungry for conversation and wishing to build a bond with someone, even if it is just fleeting, the taxi driver tries to make a real connection with the priest by exposing his deepest darkest secrets. However, upon hearing Benigni’s outrageous confessions,
the priest has a fatal heart attack, and the driver is forced to dispose of the body. This frenetic experience requires the music for Rome to be of a much thicker orchestration and significantly faster tempo than that for Los Angeles, New York, or Paris. The style is rambunctious, humorous, and carnivalesque. The same accompaniment pattern is still present, with a variety of instruments alternating playing the melody line. An abundance of percussion instruments and “toys” such as whistles, bells, and buzzers are incorporated into this lighthearted and comical musical selection, as well as a drum kit, trumpet, harmonium, and guitar, which together are suggestive of the zeal, lively exuberance, exaggerated gestures, and theatricality that can be found in stereotypical representations of Italian culture.

In the final scene, set deep in the industrial end of Helsinki, a cab driver, played by Matti Pellonpää, near the end of his dreary, mundane, and tired shift picks up three drunks, who become a captive audience for his heartbreaking tale of loss and despair. The coldness of the climate and the thick blanket of snow in the sleeping city create a dismal feeling of isolation, embodied for the wandering cab driver in the inescapable personal loss that he feels no one else can truly share or understand. Escape is unattainable in the sparse layout of the city, where the large spaces between the buildings and people represent the pressing seclusion of Helsinki. The Helsinki mood has a heavier driving bass line, and the cello is more present than in previous scenes. The sound is cold and isolated, with the melody line played first on the clarinet with a breathy tone. Later, the panpipes, muted trumpet, and accordion interweave with the melody line and add new melodic and harmonic material, creating dissonances and a desolate, isolated atmosphere.

The sounds and arrangements that Tom Waits uses in the soundtrack to *Night on Earth* complement the nighttime visuals they accompany and help to enrich and develop the narratives, atmospheres, and characters. The mostly instrumental score elicits a brooding and even disturbing atmosphere where cacophony, dissonance, and percussive clatter float through unusual time signatures, nostalgic European and gypsy waltzes, and idiosyncratic jazz. While perhaps not an album that Waits fans would be compelled to listen to over and over again, the tracks work well to heighten the emotion and aurally situate the listener within the various locales while still perpetuating the myth of escape.

**DIRTY WATER ON A SWORDFISH TROMBONE**

At the beginning of Tom Waits’s career, he gravitated toward the image and persona of a melancholy drifter who steps into the bar for a drink, sits at the piano in the back, and tells a little observational snippet of his bourbon-soaked life to anyone who will listen. Musically and lyrically, Waits primarily centered upon reportage-style chronicles of the lowlifes and outsiders of urban America from a piano stool or behind an acoustic guitar. While his wayward characters were wildly varied, their stories of redemption, dreams, and escape
were all encapsulated in a similar jazz piano-led aesthetic. As Waits became more directly involved in the arrangement and production of his music and gained increasing independence and creative control over his musical career, his instrumentation choices and musical styles became progressively more incisive, individualized, varied, and adventuresome as he broke away from his trademark piano-man sounds of his early years. His compositional style started to exploit a collage of found sounds and became more emblematic of his wandering characters, with the spontaneity of a junkyard orchestra that just happened to be where the story was taking place. Generally, as his musical style began to advance, the types of disillusioned characters and life’s flotsam that Waits wrote about remained fairly similar, perhaps a bit more grotesque, wild, or dangerous, but the situations and themes in which he placed them began to radically change from the boozy atmosphere of barrooms to nightmarish Western ghost towns, wheezing train cars with mariachi bands, dangerously exotic street corners, and elegantly composed dreamscapes. His songs began to evoke a time and a place as his creative vision encouraged him to expand his range and turn toward more a more intriguing and panoramic palette in his music.

From these more expressive and often primitively surreal settings, the denizens and drifters found a new eccentric ringmaster who, rather than sitting at the piano to sing his songs, would beat the drawers above your head, the bones in your back, or anything that would sound out a rhythm, melody, or dissonance to signify and portray his seamy characters and their stories. Just as everyday objects could become musical instruments in the hands of Waits, so did his favorite recordings “tend to be those kind of uninhibited moments in music that had no idea that they were music.” As his characters explored greater freedom of movement and dimension, so did his music, moving from swampy blues to skeletal funeral marches to ballads punctuated by chickens. The further his characters ran from home, the further Waits broke from his barfly, jazz poet image and sounds and the further he ventured into conjuring up eccentric characters, darker themes, a carnival air, foreign backdrops, and inventive new sounds. The result of this deconstruction of his creative vision and approach to music was surfacing through his incorporation of sensual instrumentation into his work and is reinforced by his view that everything is really music—words are music, every sound is music, it all depends on how it’s organized. In terms of an actor’s choices, all behavior is fair game, so why isn’t all sound considered music? I really like the physicality of music-making and the possibility of human error. As much as you rehearse and perform it, the music never really wants to stay the same. You can make it do that, but then what you’ve got to do is respect the moments when it escapes your control.

In his original conception of jazz-imbued instrumentations and genres, Waits once was the child who, when given a toy piano, would happily bang away for hours on it. Over the years, Waits has become like the child who ignores the
piano completely and plays with the box, bubble packaging, and wrapping paper, instead. This movement beyond the realm of knowing and comfort is integral to Waits’s musical development where he picks up instruments and objects he does not understand or know how to play in order to explore new ways of musical expression independent from learned techniques or performance habits. Otherwise, he feels, “[y]our hands are like dogs going to the same places they’ve been. You have to be careful when playing is no longer in the mind but in the fingers, going to happy places. You have to break them of their habits or you don’t explore, you only play what is confident and pleasing.”8 With this same spirit of discovery, he allows himself the creative freedom to stand in “a studio with instruments you’ve spent thousands of dollars renting, to walk over to the bathroom and the sound of the lid coming down on the toilet is more appealing than that seven-thousand-dollar bass drum. And you use it. You have to be aware of that.”9 Waits’s repertoire of sonic capabilities greatly expanded as everyday objects and sounds were re-examined and took on exciting new meanings when utilized in a fresh musical context.

Tom Waits’s music from his early years, from 1973’s Closing Time to 1980’s Heartattack and Vine, was generally set within the context of a cocktail jazz aesthetic. His arrangements, ranging from solo piano, solo bass, solo saxophone, folky acoustic guitar, bass and saxophone, and piano and bass to full ensemble with drum kit, were representative of the deliberate drunken-Beat-poet-vagabond persona Waits was trying to build and maintain at the time. This persona gave Waits a platform from which to perform: to be a colorful narrator for his interesting stories, rather than the subject matter. Along with his disparaging and observant humor and innate wisdom, his cigarette-smoking, bourbon-drinking showman persona (which to varying degrees reflected his actual lifestyle) inspired a cult following. A prolific composer and inspiring lyricist, Waits in this period produced a wealth of notable songs that are well constructed and filled with eccentric stories and intriguing characters. His musical choices and scat-style vocals mirrored his early seduction by the Beat poets like Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady and by jazzers like Lord Buckley and Thelonius Monk.

The Early Years Volume 1, The Early Years Volume 2, and Closing Time all take the poignant perspective of a road-wearied, heartbroken traveler who has stopped off in a bar at the side of the road to tell his stories of woe. The arrangements and instrumentation on these albums are generally quite sparse and simple, often solo piano or acoustic guitar occasionally embellished with fuller arrangements, including drums and bass. Considering the communicative power of silence and space to inform audiences, Waits often makes use of a very minimalist scoring in his music to draw attention to the characters and story being told or to create an ad hoc atmosphere as found on Small Change in the songs “Small Change,” which has only a saxophone accompaniment, or “Pasties and a G-String,” which uses only drums for accompaniment. Songs like “Poncho’s Lament,” “Had Me a Girl,” “In Between Love,” “So
“It Goes,” “Old Shoes,” “Blue Skies,” and “Hope I Don’t Fall in Love with You” are all accompanied by acoustic guitar, which creates a very intimate and personal feeling typical of the singer-songwriter genre to which Waits belonged at the time. The chord progressions and harmonies are a simple, yet deceptively appropriate counterbalance to the melodic structures and gnarled voice that overlays them. The dust on Waits’s shoes is evident in the often purposely out-of-tune guitar strings that complements the wanderer characters he is trying to depict in song. Waits has always, whether consciously or not, considered the importance of representing his characters in his music. With his earlier albums, the characters he portrayed were emblematic of the lifestyle he actually adopted, and so his cigarette-dangling persona and the characters of his songs were often woven into the same web.

With the development of his inebriated piano-man and traveling-musician image, Waits became heavily influenced by jazz music and the Beat poets, and therefore larger piano-based arrangements found their way into his music, moving him away from the solo busker feel of his earlier albums. Barflies, nighthawks, hookers, and lonely travelers all looking for something better than what they had or where they were populated his music during this bruised-piano-player period from The Heart of Saturday Night through Heartattack and Vine. He experimented with many different variations on the same theme in terms of instrumentation, arrangements, and style, which focused on jazz-based compositions realized by ensembles as small as solo piano or saxophone or as large as full orchestra, piano, drums, and bass. In performance, however, he generally either went out solo with just a piano or was accompanied by stand-up bass and drums, being more interested in communication and intimacy with the audience through his stories and songs, rather than relying on the spectacle required by big rock ‘n’ roll bands at the time. Waits revealed that his earlier writing process consisted of him sitting “in a room with a piano, the Tin Pan Alley approach,”10 and so the piano was central to many of his songs.

This intimate atmosphere is highlighted in personally emotive songs and ballads like “Lonely,” “Jitterbug Boy,” “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart,” “Burma Shave,” and “Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis,” which were accompanied only by piano. The piano sounds used by Waits are always those of a somewhat abused, slightly out-of-tune piano that one would expect to find in the corner of a bar or left out in the rain. The basic instrumental combination of piano and upright bass is utilized in such songs as “The Ghosts of Saturday Night,” “The Piano Has Been Drinking,” “I Can’t Wait to Get Off Work,” and “A Sight for Sore Eyes.” The acoustic bass adds a fullness and weight to the accompaniment, adds an additional jazz element, and allows for the sentiment of these slow ballads to emerge from a space someone less personal than the hollow solo accompaniments. The addition of saxophone, muted trumpet, or slide guitar to the piano and bass combination in the songs “Muriel,” “Rosie,” and “Shiver Me Timbers” functions to heighten the emotive potential of the descriptive and eloquent lyrics.
In collaboration with orchestral arrangers like Jerry Yester, Mike Melvoin, and Bob Alcivar, Waits incorporated lush orchestral arrangements in some of his songs. Like many string arrangements used in popular music, these added a somewhat forced sentimentality and fullness to his music, though, at times, they provided the necessary dramatic qualities of heightened sensitivity and tenderness. The subtle string arrangements used in “Martha,” “Grapefruit Moon,” “Invitation to the Blues,” “Tom Traubert’s Blues,” “Foreign Affair,” “San Diego Serenade,” “Kentucky Avenue,” and “Jersey Girl” function to augment and complement the piano and bass foundations of these songs. Used less sparingly in songs like “I Wish I Was in New Orleans,” “Please Call Me, Baby,” “Cinny’s Waltz,” “On the Nickel,” and “Ruby’s Arms” (complete with brass choir), the string arrangements are almost overwhelming and inflect a feeling of cinematic emotional expressiveness. The somewhat contrived cinematic feel of these songs is forgiven when placed in context with Waits’s version of the Broadway musical piece “Somewhere” from West Side Story, where such diegetic expression is expected. The contrast between the ornate sweetness of the strings and Waits’s harsh cigarette- and alcohol-ravaged vocal chords and his cynical observational vignettes is perhaps the only thing that prevents these arrangements from becoming too sentimental or mawkish. The strings were added to enhance the emotional depth of the music, yet it is the honesty of Waits’s voice that truly expresses the sentiments he wishes to communicate. At the extreme, “Potter’s Field” makes use of a full orchestra, upright bass, and extensive percussion section and can be considered a fully realized orchestral tone poem.

Tom Waits’s most typical choice of instrumentation up to the album Blue Valentine was piano, upright bass, and drums, often with the addition of saxophone or muted trumpet. The addition of drums and percussion on Blue Valentine gives the songs on this album a stronger rhythmic impetus, presence, and stability than the solo piano, acoustic guitar, or orchestral songs that freely played with rubato. Piano, bass, and drums arrangements are found in such songs as “Ice Cream Man,” “New Coat of Paint,” “Red Shoes by the Drugstore,” “Better off without a Wife,” “Warm Beer and Cold Women,” and “Putnam County.” Waits’s affection for the addition of muted trumpet and saxophone to this rhythmic section foundation is displayed in the songs “Virginia Avenue,” “Semi Suite,” “Depot, Depot,” “Emotional Weather Report,” “Eggs and Sausage,” “Nighthawk Postcards,” “Spare Parts I and II,” and “I Never Talk to Strangers.” This seemed to be the language through which Waits most comfortably conceived of and translated his musical ideas and constructed his songs. This small jazz ensemble was indicative of his still-present Beat poet influences and was often used in his live performances, as illustrated by the live album Nighthawks at the Diner, which is doused in these time-warped 1950s arrangements and scat singing.

The albums Blue Valentine and Heartattack and Vine contain small musical breakthroughs for Waits in that he expands his use of different musical genres, explores the possibilities of the electric guitar, allows the drummer to
use sticks instead of brushes, and creates a fuller sound with larger arrangements. The instrumentation for the title song “Blue Valentines” is composed of solo electric guitar, signaling a definite break from his heavy reliance upon piano in his compositional process. These albums begin to have more of a rock band and R&B feel, though still within the context of Waits’s earlier gritty and jagged aesthetic. With a basic instrumentation of electric guitar, organ or electric piano, bass, and drums, as found in the songs, “Heartattack and Vine,” “Downtown,” and “Jersey Girl,” Waits gained a harder edge to his sound and stepped into the role of a rock performer, rather than that of a singer-songwriter. The addition of saxophone to these electric guitar-based arrangements reinforced his jazz foundations and occurs in the songs “Romeo Is Bleeding,” “Wrong Side of the Road,” “Whistlin’ Past the Graveyard,” and “A Sweet Little Bullet from a Pretty Blue Gun.” Though these musical developments were not by any means revolutionary in terms of what was going on in the music industry at the time, they marked a definite movement into new musical territory for Waits, which would eventually lead to the much greater level of experimentation found on Swordfishtrombones.

The transition into the percussive musical styles and varied instrumentation of Swordfishtrombones alienated some of Waits’s audience who had grown fond of his piano and orchestral accompaniments from his earlier years. When questioned about this transition, he replied,

> I don’t know if I can reconstruct it really—it wasn’t religious or anything. You get to an impasse creatively at some point, and you can either ignore it or deal with it. And it’s like anything, you go down road and . . . hopefully, there’s a series of tunnels. I’d started feeling like my music was very separate from myself. My life had changed and my music had stayed pretty much its own thing. I thought I had to find a way to bring it closer. Not so much with my life as with my imagination.  

As “one thinks of identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs,” Waits submerged himself in a drunk character and a jazz idiom, however, as he grew musically and as a lyricist, he became more and more comfortable with uncertainty, asserting many different personas and delving into very disparate musical styles and genres. As he dismantled the image he had worked hard to establish, he learned to “approach each song like a character in a little one-act play. I don’t feel like I have to be the same guy in all the songs. So in each one I set the stage for myself and I try to approach it in whatever way I have to in order to be living the story. You know, method singing.”

Waits’s musical influences drifted away from the Beat generation and moved toward the innovations and DIY experimentation of the iconoclastic composer Harry Partch and collaborations with Francis Thumm, who played gramolodium with the Harry Partch Ensemble. Partch’s music was unplayable by anyone else as he created his own 43-tones-to-the-octave system and used his own homemade instruments such as the Chromelodeon, the Kithara, and many others constructed from found items, bottles, and hubcaps. While
Waits felt it was “a little arrogant to say I see a relationship between his stuff and mine,” he did note in an interview the similarities between their music in that they both used “things we hear around us all the time, built and found instruments—things that aren’t normally considered instruments: dragging a chair across the floor or hitting the side of a locker real hard with a two-by-four, a freedom bell, a brake drum with a major imperfection, a police bullhorn. It’s more interesting. You know, I don’t like straight lines. The problem is that most instruments are square and music is always round.”

As well, at this time Waits also turned his attention toward the truculent and obstinately unconventional Captain Beefheart, who had released numerous brilliantly eclectic albums and whose strange and even dissonant fusion of blues, jazz, avant-garde, and classical forms and styles encouraged Waits to also push the musical envelope. Waits’s passion for imperfection and grit began to flourish in his music as he professed a strong desire to musically step on the negative. Grind it into the gutter and put that through the projector. I always love it, it’s what Keith Richards calls the “hair in the gate” at a movie. You know when everyone’s watching a movie and all of a sudden a piece of hair catches in the projector and everyone’s going, “Wow, look at that hair.” And then Whooh! And it flies out. And that’s like, that was the most exciting moment in the film.

Lyrically, his songs have always captured the element of human detritus, but Waits added another dimension to his music by salvaging musical debris and making it integral to the expression of his art. His creative process extended into the very mechanics of sound recording, where he was able to not only expose but also proudly display the crudeness and rough edges that are essential to the vitality of his works.

His instrumentation and arrangement choices began to center around a kind of junkyard instrumentation as he embraced found elements and atmospheric influences, based upon what he felt were the particular sonic needs of the songs, rather than using predictable variations on an already established jazz idiom. Waits admitted that “I have an infatuation with melody, but also with dissonance” and that he is “attracted to things that fall outside of the practical domain of music. . . . I like hearing the orchestra tune up. That for me is the show.” His interest in unusual sound sources still inspires him: “I started bringing things into the studio that I found at the side of the road to see what they sounded like. I started wondering what would happen if we deconstructed the whole thing. I like things to sound distressed. I like to imagine what it would sound like to set fire to a piano on the beach and mic it really close and wait for the strings to pop. Or drop a piano off a building and be down there waiting for it to hit with a microphone.” Bass marimbas, brake drums, metal aunglongs, harmoniums, chairs, glass harmonicas, and parade drums, played by seasoned studio musicians like Victor Feldman, Fred Tackett, and Stephen Hodges, encapsulated the wanderer character and became the foundation of Waits’s instrumentation, a far cry from his previous
piano, bass, and drums arrangements. His orchestrations for live performances also had to be drastically changed, since it was not possible to retain the studio instrumentations and textures on stage. This re-orchestration process can be found on *Big Time*, where his band consisted of Michael Blair on drums, percussion, bongos, and brake drums, Ralph Carney on saxophones, clarinets, baritone, and horn, Greg Cohen on electric bass, bastarda, and alto horn, Mark Ribot on guitars, banjo, and trumpet, and Willie Schwarz on accordion, Hammond organ, sitar, and conga.

The characters also began to take on a different role in Tom Waits’s compositional process from 1983’s *Swordfishtrombones* on. These changes were subtle but integral, as Waits reveals: “I like characters and things that re-occur, but it’s not a real song score. The songs have a feeling of existing within the same aquarium—that’s all. There’s just a little more caulking compound involved this time.” The music became carefully crafted and particular to each of the eccentric characters inhabiting the stories being told, and every song was individual, requiring its own special attention and treatment. Darker themes began to emerge, such as death, loss, temptation, desire, and violence, matching the jarring and nocturnal musical territory the songs began to inhibit. *Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, Frank’s Wild Years, Bone Machine,* and *The Black Rider* all contain a plethora of musical styles ranging from crazed marches to lilting ballads to eerie spoken-word pieces that worked to portray the deviant, outcast, misguided, and battered characters that occupied his lyrics.

The first sounds that radiate from the *Swordfishtrombones* album are the wooden clank of a bass marimba and the brass attack of a baritone horn on the song “Underground.” The heavy and relentless thump of a large bass drum gives the feeling of a thousand feet marching along together, and the electric guitar contributes an urban metallic color to balance the exotic wooden sounds of the marimba. Waits originally saw this song as “the theme for some late night activity in the steam tunnel beneath New York City. Where allegedly there are entire communities of ladies and gentlemen living under difficult circumstances beneath the subways” or, alternately, as “an opportunity to chronicle the behavior of a mutant dwarf community and give it a feeling of a Russian march.” Either way, it depicts the clatter and clank of a perplexing world beneath your feet. “Shore Leave” is musically very simple but abounds in textures, tone colors, and mysterious musical effects, such as the screech of a metal chair on a cement floor, that tell an aural story of a lonely marine on shore leave and complement Waits’s guttural lament. The low rumble of a muted trombone gives the impression of cars passing by on a desolate, wet street, the rice in the bass drum creates sounds of waves and rain, metal aunglongs imitate the sounds of metal wind chimes or tin cans rattling in the breeze, and the wooden marimbas add a subtle element of exoticism. The title track, “Swordfishtrombone,” also tells the story of a soldier and musically possesses this similar exotic sound created by marimbas, congas, dabuki drums, and acoustic and electric bass.
For the quirky instrumental piece “Dave the Butcher,” the Hammond B-3 organ and bass boo bams work together to create a highly grinding, nightmarish carnival sound. Similarly, the other brief instrumental on Swordfishtrombones, “Just Another Sucker on the Vine,” with trumpet and harmonium, also has the wheeze and lilt of carnival music and easily lends itself to the quirky images of a center-ring performance while intoning the more precious and delicate countenances of the carnival. These instrumental pieces provide a couple relieving big top asides in an otherwise harrowing emotional journey.

“Johnsburg, Illinois” and “Soldier’s Things” mark brief encounters with the gentle melodic piano and bass combination and lyrical style in which Waits is well versed. Nestled in between the kaleidoscopic sounds of “Dave the Butcher” and the rambunctious holler and driving rhythms of “16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought-Six,” the devotional ode “Johnsburg, Illinois,” for his wife, Kathleen Brennan, is striking in its tenderness and simplicity. The melancholic “Soldier’s Things” also has the instrumentation of piano and acoustic bass, which accentuates the forlorn lyrics of this song and exudes an inescapable sentimentality. Waits’s unembellished vocals are simple and direct, with the lyrics strung together in a ragged and irregular pattern of long, short, and even incomplete phrases. This simple beauty contrasts sharply with the brazen gospel shuffle of the organ driven “Down, Down, Down,” which precedes it on the album.

The desolation of the story of a dying small town in “Town with No Cheer” is magnified by the clap of a ghostly Freedom Bell and solitary bagpipes at the beginning of the song. The instrumentation for the rest of the song consists of serene and mellifluous harmonium and synthesizer sounds. Dramatically switching styles again, the brass band, bass and snare drums, cymbals and glockenspiel of “In the Neighborhood” create an outdoor Fellini-esque parade band feel, perhaps depicting a community band marching down the street, contributing to the frustration of mundane neighborhood domesticity. The Hammond organ and acoustic bass on “Frank’s Wild Years” work to re-create the sounds of a self-delusional Las Vegas lounge entertainer recounting a quick narrative before breaking into another song. “Gin Soaked Boy” is a venture into a more heavily blues-influenced style, with prominent electric guitar sounds and heavy belligerent vocals sitting further back in the mix, mimicking earlier blues recording techniques. The urgency of “Trouble’s Braids” is amplified by its very percussive instrumentation, consisting of an African talking drum, parade bass drums, and acoustic bass. The bass plays a relentlessly frenetic line that gives the feeling of a chase or of someone fleeing and is interspersed with sharp rim shots and bass drum punctuations that increase the sensation of danger and fear. The album closes with another instrumental, called “Rainbirds,” similar in style to the piano and acoustic bass ballads but with a unique glass harmonica introduction that seems to clear away the crash and bang of the songs that preceded and gives the song a new space in which to exist. Swordfishtrombones was
an important turning point for Waits in his musical career and provided a strong and strange musical foundation on which his following album, *Rain Dogs*, could build.

Fluctuating between being whimsical and being sinister, *Rain Dogs* continues the adventure to new and exciting musical destinations with Waits’s incorporation of unusual instruments in his arrangements and his escalating reliance on percussion, drums, and theatricality. The album opens with an ominous and tattered march tempo polka called “Singapore,” fueled by drums, double bass, and trombone, and continues the development of the “mutant dwarf orchestra” sound that Waits had created on *Swordfishtrombones*. Marimbas, electric guitars, and various percussion instruments embellish the plodding accompaniment with loose, improvised melodies and interesting harmonies. The jump-rope spinoff, “Clap Hands,” is also heavily percussive and is powered by the wooden attack of marimbas and various metallic percussion instruments. The song “Diamonds and Gold” has a jagged waltz feel and utilizes an instrumentation very similar to that for “Clap Hands.” An interesting melange of sounds and colors permeates the strangely compelling “Cemetery Polka,” which combines such instruments as trombone, electric guitar, Farfisa organ, wood blocks, cymbals, accordion, double bass, and parade drums, all with their own seemingly random and independent musical lines until the unison crash on the very last note of the piece.

A dirty rumba constructed out of an assortment of hand drums, shakers, cymbals, and temple blocks provides the rhythmic foundation for “Jockey Full of Bourbon.” Like many of the songs on *Rain Dogs*, the electric guitar on this song takes on a lead rather than rhythmic role, playing distinctly individual single note melodies. “Tango Till They’re Sore” utilizes a minimalist setting of a lurching tango, played on piano, acoustic bass, and trombone, with the piano part being exemplary of Tom Waits’s incipient affinity for the strained beauty of mistakes and distractions. Similar in style, “9th and Hennepin” is a dark spoken-word piece with a disjunct and “mistake” riddled accompaniment on piano, clarinet, double bass, marimba, metal percussion, and bowed saw. A fairly straight-ahead rock ’n’ roll feel is utilized in “Big Black Mariah” with a basic accompaniment of guitar, bass, and drums. “Hang Down Your Head” is almost a folk ballad that is also structured around a straight rock ’n’ roll beat but has the addition of organ chords to create a thicker arrangement. This song also has the guitar alternating between a rhythmic and lead role, rather than just playing single-line melodies throughout.

Waits’s earlier style makes an unabashedly sentimental appearance in the song “Time,” with acoustic guitar, upright bass, and accordion providing the simple and unassuming accompaniment to his melancholy lyrics. A remarkably ornate accordion flourish introduces the title track, “Rain Dogs,” which then settles into a steady rock beat supplied by bass and drums, with the instruments trombone, guitar, accordion, and marimba trading off accompaniment and solo roles. The guitar begins by providing melodic material with the marimba, and then both instruments shift to a heavy emphasis on
the backbeat. The trombone enters with very melodic material and then plods along on the downbeats, opposing the guitar and marimba. The accordion, after providing simple chordal support, enters again with the richly embellished style heard at the beginning of the track. The energetic big-band instrumental “Midtown,” performed by The Uptown Horns, consists of screeching alto saxophones, tenor saxophone, trumpet, trombone, and rhythm section and is incredibly cinematic and “film noirish” in style, though surprisingly not out of place in the eclectic collection of songs that form this album. “Gun Street Girl” has a rural blues feel that could be found in the shade of a farmhouse porch, produced by the sounds of a banjo, sparse acoustic bass, drums, and metallic roadside percussion.

Waits fully acknowledges and submits to the influence of fairly straight-ahead rock ’n’ roll sounds and rhythms in “Big Black Mariah,” “Hang Down Your Head,” “Walking Spanish,” “Downtown Train,” “Blind Love,” and the upbeat “Union Square,” which features Keith Richards (of the Rolling Stones) on guitar. This attention to rock forms and progressions is also indicative of Waits’s musical development; he now conceived of songs in terms of a set ensemble or band and worked with the creative contributions of many different performers in the recording studio. A rural feel is also found in the country ballad shuffle of “Blind Love” which also has Keith Richards on slide guitar and backing vocals. The Uptown Horns make their second appearance on the album as the backing for the testimonial song “Anywhere I Lay My Head” and close the album with a slow chordal accompaniment that eventually breaks into a Dixieland swing. Rain Dogs took Waits further into uncharted musical territory; he “still found the exoticism offered by the music and ideas of Harry Partch liberating, and allied with his own dramatic musical developments, he really was setting sail on seas unknown.”

The album Frank’s Wild Years, released in 1987, following the staged production in Chicago in 1986, continues in the same direction of theatrical eclecticism found on Swordfishtrombones and Rain Dogs. Waits’s work on Frank’s Wild Years was his first attempt at writing an operetta or musical, working extensively with theatrical styles, or creating the basis for a full theatrical production that extends beyond the realm of a purely aural experience. While the songs worked well within the context of the play, in the recording studio Waits had to adjust the instrumentations and arrangements in an effort to make the songs more visual so that they would still make sense when removed from their theatrical settings. With the strange amalgamation of carnival sounds, gospel melodies, cabaret schmaltz, and barrelhouse blues, and the introduction of instruments and effects like the optigan (optical organ), mellotron (precursor to the modern digital sampler), prepared piano (a piano that has had its sound altered by placing objects between or on the strings, hammers, or dampers), megaphone, and rooster, Tom Waits experimented with new compositional and musical styles in combination with established theatrical conventions.
Music, Instrumentation, and Voice

The alto horn, tenor saxophone, guitar, bass, and drums instrumentation of “Hang On St. Christopher” is indicative of the basic ensemble that Tom Waits manipulates throughout Frank’s Wild Years. On this song and a few others on the album, Waits sings through a bullhorn to bend and tamper with his voice. The jazzy style of “Straight to the Top (Rhumba),” which maintains the same instrumentation as “Hang On St. Christopher” with the addition of a fervent conga part, is interspersed with audience noises and unusual soundscapes from an optigan. This rhumba version is radically different from the sleazy lounge-lizardry that permeates the Vegas version that occurs later in the album, with its Sinatra-esque vocal stylings, cocktail piano, tenor saxophone, bass, and drums. “Blow Wind Blow” is a comparatively sparse arrangement with bullhorn vocals, pump organ, alto horn, banjo, and glockenspiel that come together to form the soundtrack to a disturbing reverie. The song “Temptation” falls into a heavy rhythmic groove with the prominent acoustic bass and percussion foundation, providing an appropriate backing for the raspy edge of Waits’s falsetto vocals. Multiple horn lines follow and reinforce the melodic patterns of the bass, as well as playing short backing riffs, and the guitar lines interweave throughout to create a seductive and evocative musical texture.

“Innocent When You Dream (Barroom)” is a simple, melodic, drinking anthem sung by a group of commiserating drinkers before closing time and has a subdued accompaniment of pump organ, violin, and bass, broken only by bright major triad shots on the piano. The reprise of this song at the end of the album has a similar arrangement, with the coarse grainy sound of an old 78 and only a single vocal line. The instruments all have a different timbre on this version: the piano is a little out of tune, having the honky tonk sound of an old mistreated upright, the sour wheeze of the pump organ is much louder in the mix, and the bass is more submerged into the other sounds. The character Frank O’Brien began his journey with the barroom version of “Innocent When You Dream,” and the 78 reprise serves as an epilogue to his travels and exhausting emotional trials. His departure is further outlined in the boisterous “I’ll Be Gone,” which has a ponderous dance-like feel and is introduced and occasionally accompanied by a rooster. The strong rhythmic accordion part propels this song and adds an energetic impulse, which reflects the sense of adventure depicted by the lyrics. The rest of the instrumentation consists of baritone horn blasts and sweet melodies, as well as relentless marimba and guitar parts.

The sparse arrangement of guitars, bass, and the occasional sound effect on “Yesterday Is Here” creates the feeling of a soundtrack to a western movie in a scene where the main character is riding out of town, heading out on an adventure. “Please Wake Me Up” is a peculiar lullaby set to the carnivalesque wheeze of a mellotron, the strange sound effects of an optigan, the grunts and growls of a deviant baritone horn, and the whisper of an acoustic bass. Similarly, “Frank’s Theme” also comes across as a lullaby and has the thinnest accompaniment on the album, with just the pump organ shaping
the dreamscape of this song. A brilliant accordion flourish opens the song “More Than Rain,” which continues with the juxtaposition of many different sounds and performance styles, such as the lyrical accordion, guitar, and optigan melodies set against the cacophonous and grating baritone horn part. Orchestral chimes and prepared piano are also interspersed in this curious arrangement.

“Way Down in the Hole” is a gospel number that describes a crazed evangelist’s attempt to recruit Frank. The arrangement consists of rhythmic saxophone shots, bass, and percussion throughout the song and features a brief electric guitar solo. Frank’s experience of New York is captured in the nightmarish “I’ll Take New York,” complete with adoring fans, deranged pump organ and saxophone, and somewhat more reliable drums and bass in the distance. An Eastern flavor emerges from the rhythms and melodies established in “Telephone Call from Istanbul” by the plucked banjo, bass, and drums, which are eventually reinforced by the screaming Farfisa organ that enters just before the end of the song. Possessing a guitar sound similar to Waits’s popular “Downtown Train,” “Cold Cold Ground” is a song of reminiscence and wishing for the unattainable. The modest rhythmic guitar part and repetitive bass line are impressively offset by the virtuosic performance on the accordion by David Hidalgo from Los Lobos. “Train Song” is also a slow revelatory ballad cradled in the gentle, primarily chordal accompaniment of piano, pump organ, accordion, alto horn, and bass. Frank’s Wild Years is a unique work that veers from sublime to outrageous as it chronicles the pressures of modern life on one desperate man.

In 1988, Tom Waits released a film and an album titled Big Time, which presented a live performance that Waits described as a “musicotheatrical experience played in dreamtime” and its soundtrack. While the setting for the recording, visually and sonically, might have been a seamy barroom in any large city, it was actually recorded live in five different cities: Los Angeles, San Francisco, Dublin, Stockholm, and Berlin. Most of the songs had been previously released on Tom Waits’s three preceding albums, Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, and Frank’s Wild Years, and were recorded live to 24 track or simply cassette, with the exception of two songs, “Strange Weather” and “Falling Down,” which were previously unreleased studio recordings. With the limitations imposed by a set live orchestra, many of the rousing versions of songs on this live album are vastly different in feel from their original studio conceptions. Waits’s bullish roar and captivating delivery are backed by a powerful and highly energetic ensemble that seamlessly transforms from song to song to support and amplify his vibrant musical display of his many different characters and their narratives.

Almost five years after Frank’s Wild Years was released in 1987, Waits ended his musical hiatus and gathered together 16 hellish, bone-rattling tracks that would form the austere album Bone Machine. Though dark and ominous, Bone Machine is not ultimately or absolutely macabre, as it fluctuates at times between being musically whimsical and displaying a lyrical humorousness. The
increased experimentation and use of found instruments, copious percussion, and junkyard orchestration allowed Waits’s music to envelop the notion of the wanderer, as now his songs began to sound like they had been performed at the location of the story, with the music banged out on whatever strikeable object happened to be around, rather than being carefully crafted and prearranged to fit a certain style or genre. Musically, Waits balanced his screeches and howls with an abundance of unconventional percussion parts and heavy bass lines that effectively reflected the brutal images of violence, death, murder, suicide, and Judgment Day that permeate the songs from this album. His tactile compositional style progressed even further in terms of embedding his characters and their stories in the landscape of his music, allowing his lyrics and narratives to dictate and shape the musical accompaniment. Waits cultivated and refined his narrative storytelling abilities so that they extended beyond the lyrical domain, penetrating and informing his musical choices and formulating his musical language, which would become as emotionally electrifying as his voice and lyrics. Miles removed from the style of Waits’s romanticized beatnik early years, every groan, crash, and rattle worked to further the fateful narratives and evoke the desired atmosphere.

“Earth Died Screaming” sets the tone for the rest of the album with its intriguing percussion-oriented clash and clang. The instrumentation includes electric and acoustic bass (featuring Les Claypool from Primus), guitar, and band members hitting things outside with sticks, which creates the aural effect of rattling bones amid the onset of chaos and ruin. A doleful chamberlin part takes over at the end of the song as the bones and percussion fade away into oblivion. This is the first time Waits used the chamberlin, which he said is “stunning, really, I have like 70 voices on the instrument, from horses to rain, laughter, thunder, seven or eight different trains, and then all the standard orchestral instruments. It’s a good alternative if you don’t like the sound of more conventional state-of-the-art instruments—sometimes it’s like they’ve had the air sucked out of them.” Mortality is pondered in the somber dirge “Dirt in the Ground,” with the harsh lyrics overlaying the uncomplicated accompaniment of a muddy sounding piano and bass, highlighted by the reedy sighs of bass clarinet, alto saxophone, and tenor saxophone. Waits’s raucous percussive style is captured in the uproarious ode “Such a Scream,” which primarily consists of drums (featuring Brain from Primus), additional tumultuous percussion, saxophone, and distorted guitar supporting his disheveled howl. “All Stripped Down” is powered by piercing maracas, distorted guitar, and bass. The distorted guitar also follows along with Waits’s backing vocals, emphasizing the megaphone chant of “all stripped down” and helping to contrast his varied vocal qualities and his shrieking falsetto. Piano, guitar, modest percussion, and bass blend sonically in the bitter ballad “Who Are You,” which has a rich and warm mood that presented a marked contrast with the previous songs on the album.

An assortment of clunky percussion and the haunting sounds of the chamberlin produce the suicidal soundscape of the eerie spoken-word piece titled
“The Ocean Doesn’t Want Me” The evangelical whoop “Jesus Gonna Be Here,” is an incongruons gospel-style blues conveyed by upright bass and a street-corner guitar sound. “A Little Rain” and “Whistle Down the Wind” are stirring, almost Kurt Weill-esque ballads of longing and regret, effectively imparted by the inundating pedal steel guitar that sweeps over the unadorned piano and acoustic bass. The themes of madness and brutality pervade “In the Colosseum” and are supported by megaphone vocals, abrasive drums, chamberlin effects, and the unusual sounds of a clattering, metallic, crucifix-shaped sound sculpture called a conundrum. For Waits, the conundrum is really quite therapeutic, as he claims to “have a lot of violent impulses. It gets channeled into music. I like to play drums when I’m angry. At home I have a metal instrument called a conundrum with a lot of things hanging off it that I’ve found—metal objects—and I like playing it with a hammer.”

The pretentious boasts of the character in “Goin’ Out West” sit well in its aggressive rock ‘n’ roll arrangement, fashioned primarily from the impetus and steady grind of the drums and bass, with the guitar sounds varying from being heavily distorted to possessing the pulsating twang of surf pop. In contrast to the urban wail of “Goin Out West,” a very rural mood is suggested by the plucked banjo and clunky percussion of the small tragedy of “Murder in the Red Barn.” The cinematic feel of an outlaw’s theme in a spaghetti western is produced by a basic country shuffle and the guitar, bass, and drums instrumentation of “Black Wings,” which chronicles the rumors surrounding a mysterious bandit. Acoustic and electric guitar, as well as upright bass in a straight-ahead rock rhythm, define the upbeat, rambunctious, and rebellious spirit of the anthem “I Don’t Want to Grow Up.” Keith Richards also makes a guest appearance on guitar and vocals on Bone Machine in the final song, “That Feel.” An ultimate celebration of individuality and the wanderer, “That Feel” has a basic array of guitar, bass, and drums that unobtrusively supports the songs’ poignant lyrics and impassioned vocals and deftly brings the surprisingly disparate album to a close.

The Black Rider was Tom Waits’s second rock opera. Its dark and brooding story line revels in the beauty of dissonance and the sour wheeze of a bizarre carnival orchestra, informed by Robert Wilson’s esoteric exploration of German expressionism. The music was originally performed in Hamburg by the “Devil’s Rubato Band,” an ensemble of musicians brought together from diverse backgrounds and musical experiences; its members ranged from players with strict classical training to wholly untrained street buskers. The “Rubato West” musicians from San Francisco, like the “Devil’s Rubato Band,” took a very crude approach to the music, at times abandoning the scores altogether in order to achieve the moods and sounds Tom Waits wanted to create on the studio recording.

The music from The Black Rider stretches across a diffuse and decadent musical canvas that encompasses terrifying themes of insanity and bloody images of death and yet also depicts fragile emotional journeys. The music is generally heavily percussive and indicative of specific scenes or moods, as
exemplified by the sonically pictorial “Gospel Train,” and was conceived in a theatrical setting, which required it to function diegetically, adding depth and meaning to onstage action, intensifying the mood, and assisting with character development. The carnival-inspired pieces like “Lucky Day Overture,” “The Black Rider,” “Russian Dance,” and “Carnival” utilize fairly large orchestrations, including saxophone, strings, French horn, trombone, clarinet, bassoon, banjo, organ, chamberlin, guitar, bass, and percussion. The ballads tend toward thinner orchestrations such as those found in the songs “November,” which opens with the quivering beauty of a lone singing saw joined by piano, bass, accordion, and banjo; “The Briar and the Rose,” which is accompanied primarily by organ, with the addition of bass, clarinet, and then viola on each new verse; and “The Last Rose of Summer,” which has the sparse orchestration of chamberlin, organ, and bass. Waits’s lingering fondness for jazz idioms surfaces in the songs like “I’ll Shoot the Moon” and “Flash Pan Hunter” (with a spaghetti western instrumental break), but they appear with a dark and fantastical mood. The Black Rider embodies the torturous laments and regrets of broken souls with the rhythm of a skeletal drum, the dissonant melodies of piercing shrieks, and the slippery seductive sheen of the devil.

Although he did a few guest appearances and made some soundtrack contributions, Waits did not release another album until 1999. Musically, that album, Mule Variations, is conglomeration of Waits’s different stylistic explorations, from field hollers, tortured blues, blistery jazz, disarming odes, to late-1990s rock. In addition to the percussive clank and corrosive rattle at which Waits became adept in Bone Machine, Mule Variations possesses many maudlin ballads and a new bluesy soundscape he aptly described as “sururalism,” which combines surreal and rural elements. Continuing to expand his eclectic instrumental combinations, Waits imbued Mule Variations with unidentifiable sounds so often obscured and distorted that their origin is unintelligible, and he even went so far as to wade into the technological domain of sampling and programming.

The industrial abrasion of “Big in Japan” starts the album off with a gritty rock bang and staggering groove backed by Primus. The instrumentation is typical of any rock band, with guitar, bass, and drums and the occasional saxophone and trumpet riffs. Waits’s signature bullhorn croak and more aggressive rock sounds complement the bragging of a superficial and unsubstantial icon who has found momentary fame and cult stardom in Japan. “Lowside of the Road” is a dusty blues ramble outlined by guitar and African drums called Chumbus and Dousegoni. Optigan and programming effects, the clatter of a vibraslap, and the snarl of a tightly muted trumpet infuse the slow drawl of the lyrics. “Get Behind the Mule” is a bluesy dirt road groove played on guitar, bass, percussion, and harmonica, befitting the sururalist theme of this album. The title phrase even originates from something the guitar great Robert Johnson’s parents told their shiftless son: “You got to get behind the mule in the morning and plow.”
With shaker percussion, bass, and guitars, the parlor ballad “Hold On” stylistically retreats to the familiar Waitsian shuffle and sound of sentimental songs like “Downtown Train.” Permeated by an undisguised humanity, the compassionate and tender ballads “House Where Nobody Lives,” “Georgia Lee,” “Picture in a Frame,” and “Take It with Me” all have the basic instrumentation of a warm bass and an antiquated-sounding acoustic piano bracing the indelible incision of Waits’s poignant lyrics and gnarling vocals. The lonely lament “House Where Nobody Lives” is a slow waltz laden with lead guitar stylings over the gentle piano and bass lilt. The piano and bass accompaniment of “Picture in a Frame” is inflected by the gentle chordal lines of the alto and baritone saxophone in the second half of the song. Similarly, a violin and a second bright high-pitched piano sound are added to enhance the mood of the touching eulogy “Georgia Lee.” The unabashed devotion of “Take It with Me” is enhanced by Waits’s own lo-fi production style, which does not strive to mask the verity of the instrument or the humanity of the player, as the pedals on the piano thump and creak throughout the piece, creating a palatable sense of intimacy. The simple, affecting blues of “Pony” is played on guitar, pump organ, Dobro (resonator guitar, often popular in bluegrass music), and harmonica, producing a rural mood that is expressive of a lost and bruised character haunted by loneliness.

The gritty, rusty blues racket of “Cold Water” is created by electric guitar, bass, drums, and field holler-style vocals, capturing the visceral experience of a vagabond who continually gets into mischief while riding the rails. Random garbled percussion, radio static, metallic clinks and shivers, wooden taps, reeds, and turntables provide the disconcerting and esoteric soundscape that underscores the dark spoken-word piece “What’s He Building?” By the time the minimalist, surrealist blues tones of “Chocolate Jesus” are heard on *Mule Variations*, the present and the past are irrevocably intertwined and all musical elements are blended together, with acoustic guitars, bass, and harmonica sounding as timelessly expressive as the electric guitars, percussion, samples, turntables, and programming found on the songs “Black Market Baby,” “Eyeball Kid,” and “Filipino Box Spring Hog.” Only Tom Waits would decide to make a leap into the technological domain in the recording studio and then employ a DJ to add things like vintage turntable static to songs like “Black Market Baby” and background gospel vocals and gamelan samples to “Eyeball Kid.” The riveting blues explosion of the blustering “Filipino Box Spring Hog” has the largest and most clamorous arrangement on the album; it consists of drums, percussion, bass, guitars, trumpet, harmonica, programming, turntable, and Waits’s vivacious stalwart bark. “Come On Up to the House” also has a full-bodied orchestration composed of drums, bass, guitar, piano, alto and baritone saxophone, and harmonica. This song is a soulful welcome to all the wanderers, strangers, and misfits who inhabit Waits’s lyrics and narratives. Marking a return to the “form many had thought missing from the apocalyptic mix which Waits had been fashioning for much of the preceding 15 years,” *Mule Variations* closes with a feeling of optimism and the restoration of terribly wizened humanity.
After establishing this decidedly accessible “sururallist” rock band-type sound for *Mule Variations*, Waits again fell into the pattern of moving away from what was expected of him and finding new challenges and obstacles to overcome in his creative process. Still pursuing his fascination with unusual sounds, textures, and instruments, Waits would include only five songs that utilized the electric guitar in his next two theater music releases, *Alice* (the dream) and *Blood Money* (the nightmare): “Everything You Can Think” and “Table Top Joe” from *Alice* and “God’s Away on Business,” “Knife Chase,” and “Starving in the Belly of a Whale” from *Blood Money*. Waits challenged himself to experiment with new sounds:

> The electric guitar thing is so overused. They show up on everything, it almost seems like it’s the guiding force of popular music. Without it I wonder what people’s music would sound like. So, it was like tying one hand behind your back just for the helluva it. See how you do. See if you can electrify some of these other instruments, or get them to be just as expressive. I mean, there’s a reason guitar is in everything—it’s portable, it’s powerful, it’s potent and it comes in so many forms, and it’s simple to play. I still love it, but we tried to omit it on these records to see what will happen.24

Still fond of the grit and grime of his crude recording techniques, Waits explained the appearance of a particular instrument he captured in the studio while recording *Alice* and *Blood Money* as he rolled up his trouser leg and exposed a small silver buckle on his black motorcycle boot:

> Well, during most of the songs I was tapping my foot and there was a lot of room mics in the studio, and so when we listens back to all the songs my wife’s going; “What the hell is that?! That tsk tsk tsk . . .” We couldn’t figure it out. Finally she said, “Dammit it’s those boots. I told you not to wear those boots. It’s on everything!” And she got so upset! We tried to get rid of it and couldn’t, so finally we just had to call it the mouse tambourine.25

The eclectic collection of songs on *Alice* and *Blood Money* range from sling-shot howls to steam whistle waltzes to dreamy esoteric ballads to abrasive carnival fare.

Although both albums contemplate dark themes such as repression, mental illness, despair, and the descent into madness, they also offer several tender ballads such as “The Part You Throw Away” and “Coney Island Baby” on *Blood Money* and “Flower’s Grave” and “No One Knows I’m Gone” from *Alice*. “Yeah, I like to hear a beautiful melody telling me something terrible,” Waits admits. “Kurt Weill was the master of that. ‘Mack the Knife’ has a beautiful melody, but he’s talking about this terrible crime. And that’s so out there. It’s really revolting and revolutionary and nobody knew what to make of that. It changed popular music.”26 The simultaneous release of *Alice* and *Blood Money* is particularly interesting, as their inherent contrasts highlight the dichotomy between Waits’s instinct for beautiful heartfelt ballads and his desire to “unbuckle those pretty melodies, cleave them into parts like
a butcher, rearrange the parts into like some grotesque new beast and then leave it in the sun to rot.” Alice perhaps features Waits’s more traditional collaborative songwriting style, with his fragile and maudlin melodies and sonic menagerie working collaboratively, whereas Blood Money exposes the more cobbled-together, discordant, and perverse side of his creative process, with all the elements of his experiments blending together only in the fallout.

The delicate jazz-tinged music on Alice is graceful and intoxicating and generally evades the harsh carnival clank and groan in which Waits has been submerged since Swordfishtrombones. The haunting songs are a collection of tormented lullabies, dark and beautiful, woven together with themes of suffering and obsessive-compulsive disorders. The opening ballad, “Alice,” harks back to Waits’s Asylum era with a jazz ensemble-inspired arrangement and texture that include drums played with brushes, prominent mournful saxophone lines, and gentle melodic support from a muted trumpet. The wheeze and throbbing Waltz lilt of “Everything You Can Think” is brimming with the unusual instruments, such as the mellotron (an early synthesizer), chamberlin (a presynthesizer keyboard that taps into analog tape loops of prerecorded material), Stroh violin (which has a metal cone attached to its bridge for amplification), and the percussive four-foot-long Indonesian seed pods (with seeds the size of grapefruits) that fill the sonic landscape throughout Alice and Blood Money. The sepia-toned parlor-music stylings of “Flower’s Grave,” “I’m Still Here,” and “Barcarolle” form delicate laments of lost opportunities, which flow freely with dysfunctional lovelorn characters and sentiments. On “Flower’s Grave,” the tender string ensemble, swooping clarinet, warm upright bass, and classic Waits on piano and pump organ create a reflective and contemplative mood. Similarly fragile and transparent is the bittersweet “No One Knows I’m Gone,” which descends into a haze of despair with its sparse layering of pump organ, bass, and string section (including the Stroh violin), culminating in a woeful final minor chord.

The percussion-laden “Kommiezuspadt” departs from the opiate haze of the preceding ballads that open the album and again features an eclectic assortment of odd instruments, stomps, growls, scrapers, wild horns, and the driving carnivalesque rhythms of the pod, oil drums, frame drums, and assorted percussion. This song also feels like a fever dream with Waits screeching German-sounding words (he admits that “actually there are a few words in there that have real meaning but the rest of it is just pure gibberish. But a lot of people when they hear it they say: ‘Gee, I didn’t know you spoke Romanian.’ Or ‘I didn’t know you spoke the odd dialect of Finland.’ I have been known to tell them that I do speak those languages, but truthfully, I don’t.”) This technique of deconstructing words fits well with Waits’s fondness for disassembling, manipulating, and Frankensteining together his arrangements, song structures, and instrument and genre choices.

“Poor Edward” is a shadowy rumination about a man who is driven insane by his deformity, which happens to be that he literally has the full face of a woman on the back of his head. Easily a metaphor for any kind of obsession
or compulsion that may be impossible to control, the song unfurls in a smoky cloud of wistful strings and a waltz-infused piano accompaniment. Continuing the theme of malformation, “Table Top Joe” is an upbeat and quirky jazz shuffle that is at the opposite end of the atmospheric spectrum from the rueful ballads that proceed it, as it lightheartedly tells the story of a man born without a body who uses his deformity to his advantage to become a successful cabaret performer.

Slipping effortlessly back to a sparse string ensemble and pump organ arrangement, the conflict resolution-themed nocturne “Lost in the Harbor” relies on the Stroh violin for its heightened sentimentality. In the middle of the song, the strings play a short topsy-turvy minor ninth-based passage that does not fit with the rest of the song and that feels like a bit of the suppressed madness seeping through. Pizzicato strings, bass, and percussive marimba, a single repeated melody line on the piano, and the unsettling swirl and screech of the circular violin (a vibrating circular steel plate that is stroked with a violin bow) create the thorny plod of “We’re All Mad Here.” The spoken-word “Watch Her Disappear” is accompanied only by pump organ and plucked cello, with a melodic violin making an appearance halfway through the piece. Overall, this incidental piece has the effect of being a two-minute aside on the otherwise pensive album. Similarly, “Reeperbahn” follows the serrated aesthetic of “Kommienezuspadt” and “We’re All Mad Here” with its Eastern European flavor, moderate march tempo, and the monosyllabic gang vocal verse “Lai, lai, lai,” which is a further study into Waits’s use of random lyrical jabber. “Fish and Bird” echoes the melody of West Side Story’s “Somewhere (A Place for Us)” in parts of Waits’s vocal line, which is accompanied by a thick rolling waltz accompaniment of pump organ, bass, cello, violin, trumpet, baritone, and clarinet, along with the twinkle of toy glockenspiel. The album closes with the chilling instrumental “Fawn,” which features a haunting gossamer violin melody supported by a harp-like accompaniment, with bass, marimba, piano, and bass clarinet outlining the chord changes. The dark and subtle beauty of “Fawn” is reflective of the overall meandering and melancholic journey on which Alice takes the listener. The feelings of overwhelming suffering and longing are embodied in the album’s series of poetic chamber nocturnes, in which many disparate elements are juxtaposed to create a dreamlike effect.

Blood Money disrupts this reverie with its sinister fits and clanks and dour subject matter. The album does not necessarily work as a linear narrative that would allow the listener to pick out the story of Woyzeck from the record alone, but it does contain many striking lyrical observations that transcend the album’s theatrical origins. Brimming with vivid portraits, compelling characters, and disturbing emotions, Blood Money is richly complex, with the contrasts of Waits’s beautiful melodies, quirky instrumentation, and emphysema-style vocal delivery used to portray the morbid themes and troubled characters. Many of the unusual instruments found on Alice, such as the giant Indonesian seed pods, chamberlin, and Stroh violin, are used again
on *Blood Money*, with the exception of the ethereal string section. The atmosphere of the surreal is accented, however, by the addition of an unwieldy and fantastical vintage pneumatic calliope from 1929. The 57-whistle calliope is an old circus instrument that imparts a carnival sheen to the album. As Waits describes the process:

> Playing a calliope is an experience. There’s an old expression, “Never let your daughter marry a calliope player” Because they’re all out of their minds. Because the calliope is so flaming loud. Louder than a bagpipe. In the old days, they used them to announce the arrival of the circus because you could literally hear it three miles away. Imagine something you could hear three miles away, and know you’re right in front of it, in a studio . . . playing it like a piano, and your face is red, your hair is sticking up, you’re sweating. You could scream and nobody could hear you. It’s probably the most visceral music experience I’ve ever had. And when you’re done, you feel like you probably should go to the doctor.29

This visceral experience is fitting for an album filled with haunting earthbound imagery and noir cabaret instrumentation.

*Blood Money* opens with the dirty dirges “Misery Is the River of the World” and “Everything Goes to Hell,” which set the tone for a bleak exploration of hopelessness. “Misery Is the River of the World” features the kaleidoscopic wheeze of the calliope for the first time and is driven by a dark bass clarinet melody and the pulsating clatter of the heavy oompah march of the marimba, bells, and seed pod and the brassy swells of the gong. Angry and impassioned, the syncopated sincopa or samba-esque rhythms of the bongos, timpani, and bass in “Everything Goes to Hell” align with the jagged baritone saxophone line to depict the themes of duplicity, adultery, and jealousy.

In the midst of all things sinister and sarcastic comes the hiss and crackle of antique phonograph static in “Coney Island Baby,” which brings a warm and comfortable aura to the old-time waltz band sound of the piano, chamberlin, strings, sax, and trumpet ensemble. This sweetly romantic song feels like a memory, and the ending even echoes a piano snippet from the pervasive “Innocent When You Dream.” Maintaining the moment of tender repose created by “Coney Island Baby,” “All the World Is Green” follows with another bass-, cello-, and marimba-propelled ballad with poignant clarinet interludes sprinkled throughout the song. Another tragic ballad found later on the album is the aptly titled “Lullaby.” The arpeggiated acoustic guitar complete with the squeak of Waits’s fingers as they move over the strings, the placid cello underscoring, and the singular delicacy of the Stroh violin impart a bit of humanity to the dark descent of the tormented Woyzeck character.

Back to the bone-clattering style reminiscent of *Bone Machine*, “God’s Away on Business” is percussively heavy with drums, log drums, and seed pod, along with the heavy trudge of the tuba, bass, and bass clarinet. The song abounds with fatalism and pessimism and reflects Waits’s dismal view of the state of the world. He feels that it is like “the whole world’s on fire right
now. We’re going downhill fast. It makes you wonder about what you’re doing and whether is has anything to do with the rest of the world. It’s a time for great men to step forward. I think we’re all waiting for men of vision and passion to come forward and sit around a table and solve these problems.”

Moving in a different direction, the bluesy trapse of “Another Man’s Vine” is composed of piano, bass, marimba and a prominent horn section with tenor and alto sax and baritone horn. The minor blues chords and blues-inflected vocal line impart a weary sense of resignation to the acerbic and bitter lyrics. The edgy aural assault of the potent instrumental “Knife Chase” is led by a thick and heavily marked horn section and features Casey Waits on the drums. The muted trumpet nuances and the dissonant, seemingly randomly placed punctuations of the electric guitar and spy-chase piano phrases makes the piece feel like a strange, raucous crossbreed of the noirish “Pink Panther” and “Peter Gunn” big-band themes. The calamitous “Knife Chase” embodies the lurid carnival sound that underlies the themes of depravity, rage, and murder on the album. Similarly, the stark brutality and rage of “Starving in the Belly of the Whale” carry on the same sense of mental instability, with the wail of the electric guitar, sax, and incessant bass clarinet counterpoint accompanied by the cacophonic emphasis of percussion, floor toms, piano, bass, and string section.

The melancholic clarinet melody strains against the flamenco-inspired pizzicato violin, cello, bass, and acoustic guitar in “The Part You Throw Away.” The despondency of the narrative is evident in the lyrics and in the slow lilt of the musical backing. The icy violin and the bloody lyrics that speak of murder by moonlight chill the slow piano score of “Woe.” The meter of this one-minute-long fragment changes from phrase to phrase, simply following the expressive vocal line. The last decaying violin note fades into the deranged gasp and pant of the calliope and the trumpet disharmony of the following ominous instrumental “Calliope,” which closes with a demonic cackle from Waits. The final song on the album is “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” which sounds like a cabaret dancehall shuffle complete with calliope, pump organ, acoustic guitar, bass, clarinet, Stroh violin, trumpet, and marimba. The rancid carnival atmosphere of Blood Money screeches and roars through the murder and rage of its tormented Kafka-esque characters and their bleak nihilistic worldviews, hitting the listener with a disturbing and deeply visceral impact.

Always idiosyncratic, someone whose listeners have prepared themselves for a junkyard type of orchestration, Waits, of course, put out an album full of electric guitar and heavy percussion and even banished the piano from his next album, Real Gone. When questioned about the absence of the piano on Real Gone, Waits claimed that it was unintentional and that he had “moved the piano into the studio, and we never touched it. We put drinks on it. I put my coat on it. Before you knew it, I couldn’t even see it. It just became an end table.” Raw, rustic, rural, and immediate (the piano is a more indoor instrument), Real Gone demonstrates Waits’s distaste for repeating things and signaled his return to writing for his own voice rather than for other singers,
as he had done for his much more meticulous collaborations with Robert Wilson. While Alice, Blood Money, and The Black Rider are all more powerful works within their theatrical context, Real Gone is more than a soundtrack; it is the show. Moving away from the fussy, highly orchestrated, European parlor-style songs of Alice and Blood Money, Waits looked for something that was more organic, more instinctive, something that would compel you to move your body.

While his new music is not a radical departure from the type of experimentation and techniques he has employed in the past, it does delve deeper into the territory of rhythm and tackles the same old problems with a new approach. The album certainly has new sounds on it, but it is not filled with an eclectic menagerie of left-wing sound sources like some of his previous works. Waits explained his compositional process for this collection of songs: “most of it was written a cappella. I started with these mouth rhythms, making my own cycles and playing along with them. That’s fairly new. Sometimes when you just do sounds into the tape recorder, you don’t realize it, but you’re channelling something, like incantations or talking in tongues.” Disdainful of the mechanical perfection achieved by looping these effects, Waits recorded these crude tracks of vocal percussion in their entirety, as you would play a linear drum part, a process he claimed he would do “until [his] throat was raw—Ook Kakkk—sweating, eyes all bugged out, hair sticking up, in the bathroom with a little four track, singing into the microphone at night while everyone’s asleep.” Once a basic rhythmic structure was concocted from these tapes, Waits brought in some familiar faces to the studio, including his son Casey on turntables and percussion, guitarist Marc Ribot, bassist Larry Taylor, and percussionist Bryan Mantia to create the song forms and develop the raw chaotic sound that pervade Real Gone. Vintage microphones and tape were overloaded and instruments and musicians pushed to their limits or out of their comfort zones in order to achieve the distressed sound Waits wanted to capture. The biggest thrill for him, however, was layering his singing voice over the mouth percussion tracks he had made earlier. He describes it this way: “When I do it, and then sing over it, it’s like harmonizing with yourself in a way. There’s already a rapport. . . . The voice seems to sound different when there are all these other vocal things around it. We got at a whole different energy in the rhythm too.” Real Gone, whether referring to the Beat phrase for “crazy” or to all the characters that are either leaving or dying, is filled with vivid songs steeped in allusions to death, decline, and experience that undulate through dustbowl sadness, bellowing roars, and frenzied rhythmic transformations.

The first sounds on the album are Casey Waits’s skittish turntable work and Tom Waits’s boom-chicka-pop mouth percussions, clearly alerting listeners that this album is going to take them somewhere electric and somewhere new. “Top of the Hill,” like many of the songs on Real Gone, is vaguely reminiscent of Waits’s work on Bone Machine or Blood Money or even Rain Dogs, but the heavy rhythmic groove, energetic electric guitar lines, and unidentifiable
background noises, along with Waits’s almost rap-style vocalism, layered over the grunts, growls, and booms of his mouth percussion, clearly introduce his new danceable sound. The swaggering “Hoist That Rag” dabbles in the realm of a sort of mutant R&B that Waits described as “cubist funk,” which involves the deconstruction of funk and its reassembling in a new order, with pieces missing or added. Rhythmically intense, the imperial “Hoist That Rag” is dominated by the lacerating electric guitar and the mechanical groove of the heavy percussion. The epic 10-minute long “Sins of My Father” is sonically less abrasive, but the scathing lyrics, whether interpreted as a universal observation or as a commentary on the current political regime, tell of the desire to rectify or amend the past. Through the hypnotic rock-steady processional of the music, pointed lyrics like “the star spangled glitter of his one good eye” and “everyone knows that the game was fixed” hint at Waits’s new political worldview and resonate with a topical exigency. Banjo, twangy electric guitar, and Waits’s signature braying vocals add to the barnyard soundscape defined by the subdued percussion and the slight reggae sway of the bass.

With the abrasive distortion cramped drive of “Shake It,” the listener is pushed back out to the dance floor with another vigorous cubist funk/R&B groove that trolls about in the dark mind of a convict. One of the most experimental and dissonant songs on the album, falling in stride with disorienting songs like “Kommienezuspadt” from Alice, the kinetic “Shake It” pushes the envelope of musicality and features Les Claypool on bass, wild percussion clanks and clatters, persistent distorted guitar riffs, and Waits’s almost unintelligible guttural growls. The intimidating caveat of “Don’t Go into the Barn” melds a number of different musical styles, and the evangelical fervor of Waits’s screaming for salvation feels as if it would be at home on a collection of Nick Cave’s murder ballads with its theme of death. In contrast to the cacophony of the jagged primal blues of the songs preceding it, the mournful rural reggae of “How’s It Gonna End” incorporates Waits’s sad-eyed balladry with his unadorned soft-spoken vocals, offbeat plucked banjo, warm upright bass, and ghostly background vocals. Heading back to the rhythmic territory of “Shake It,” “Metropolitan Glide” is inspired by a niche genre of rock ’n’ roll, the instructional dance song craze. This may be a rarity today, but when Waits “was a kid, it seemed that every single that came out was an instructional dance song. Like ‘The Locomotion,’ ‘The Jerk,’ ‘The Peppermint Twist,’ ‘The Grind,’ ‘The Mess Around’—there were a million of them.”35 Forever looking to the pop-culture past for relics that can be salvaged, dismantled, and reused, Waits brings a bygone era to the surface with his background imitation of James Brown’s “are you ready?” yelps and R&B rhythms in “Metropolitan Glide.” Casey Waits makes another appearance on the turntables, alongside Waits’s mouth percussion and his disturbing emphysema-like wheeze, which closes the song.

Like the parlor songs of Alice, “Dead and Lovely” has a traditional song structure and a rich warm instrumentation, including a subtle snare drum played with brushes to provide a jazz shuffle, upright bass, offbeat pulses by
the acoustic guitar, and the jazz-tinged clean electric guitar leads. The eerie spoken-word reverie of “Circus” derives its strange poignancy from the phonograph static, the music box twinkle of the bells, and the quirky chamberlin. Drums play a disoriented beat that randomly shifts and skips along, and all the tracks on the songs move along independently as if they were all part of a jumbled radio signal or the sonic collage of an outdoor carnival. “Trampled Rose” follows with the desperate longing of Waits’s vocals over the African/Latin rhythmic fusion of the bass, guitar, and percussion and the Appalachian feel of the cigar-box banjo. The simple guitar and bass arrangement for the tender “Green Grass” reflects the many characters on this album that exist in a place just out of reach, tangled in a web of decay and love lost. The industrial blues-induced clangor of “Baby Gonna Leave Me” and “Clang Boom Steam” are perhaps, along with “Shake It,” the most dissonant and noisy pieces on the album. “Make It Rain” maintains this industrial feel but also has a Latin/Cuban impetus to the bass, electric guitar, and drums.

The classic “Day after Tomorrow” has garnered the most attention by far of all the songs on Real Gone. The sparsest song on the album, with only acoustic guitar and vocals, it is the barbed subject matter of the lyrics that gives this achingly affecting song its heavy emotional impact. Containing obvious anti-war sentiments, “Day after Tomorrow” is a rare foray into political subject matter for Waits, who by no means is turning into a political activist but feels that he has to be able to write about what goes on around him, including political current events. Yet, in order to maintain a lasting resonance for his songs, even though a certain president, a certain war, a certain headline may inspire them, Waits tries to keep his songwriting universal as well:

Well, that’s the trick isn’t it? Not to make things too personal. It’s the art of it. If you’re going to write about something that’s current, then when it’s no longer current, the song will have no value. How do you photograph your driveway and make it seem like the road of life? Why would people buy pictures of people they don’t know? You have to shape it, make it recognizable. If you’re going to write a song about the war, you better make it about war itself, not just about some story in the newspaper. Well, that’s just my way. It’s not the way.36

A final hidden track follows, which is Waits’s quintessential human beatbox experiment to date, an a cappella track that probably would be titled “chicka-boom” since that is the only word that is repeated over and over, with a series of word fragments and vocal iterations in the background.

Arguably the most rhythmic album Waits has released since Rain Dogs, Real Gone may also be the most inaccessible and dissonant. The characters that fill his songs are still familiar; brokenhearted, despondent, or murderous circus freaks, drifters, and dreamers. However, as his themes have grown to be more universal and less like “slice of life” reportages, his characterizations have become more keen, directed, and bracing. In addition to identifying with hip-hop’s cut-and-paste aesthetic, Waits has created an elliptical process;
he recycles ideas, genres, instruments, and characters and takes what is old, forgotten, or insignificant and transmogrifies it into something newly relevant and engaging.

This process of recycling and reinvention is evident in the concept behind Waits’s massive 3-CD, 56-song compendium, Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, & Bastards, which encapsulates more than three decades of beautiful to brutal noisemaking, covering almost every genre of American song tradition. Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan wanted the project “to be like emptying our pockets on the table after an evening of gambling, burglary, and cow tipping. We enjoy strange couplings, that’s how we go together. We wanted Orphans to be like a shortwave radio show where the past is sequenced with the future, consisting of things you find on the ground, in this world and no world, or maybe the next world. Whatever you imagine that to be.”

Including 30 new songs and an assortment of rarities and one-off projects, Orphans is organized and subtitled into three thematically and/or stylistically linked albums. Waits thought that it “would make for easier listening if I put them in categories. It’s a combination platter, rare and new. Some of it is only a few months old, and some of it is like the dough you have left over so you can make another pie.” The assemblage of old and new, songs written in turmoil, songs written while locked up in an office with an impending deadline, songs spanning every facet of his nomadic canon, made the compilation process for Waits like rounding up chickens at the beach. It’s not like you go into a vault and check out what you need. Most of it was lost or buried under the house. Some of the tapes I had to pay ransom for to a plumber in Russia. You fall into the vat. We started to write just to climb out of the vat. Then you start listening and sorting and start writing in response to what you hear. And more recording. And then you get bit by a spider, go down the gopher hole, and make a whole different record. That was the process pretty much the last three years.

Brawlers starts the collection with a melange of rockabilly, riotous blues, Beefheartian-influenced yelps and yodels, and raw cranky rock. Bawlers veers toward bitter poison-soaked ballads, romantic songs of innocence and tender truths, and windswept, despairing laments of betrayal. Bastards is laden with peculiar off-kilter instrumentals, experimental carnival atmospheres, insanity-driven reminiscences, and all the uncategorizable flotsam and jetsam of Waits’s dark side. Throughout all three discs, the theme of transience and hope for something better makes these Orphans all worthy of finding a home.

Brawlers, filled with the dirt-grit vocals and concoctions of jailhouse and barroom romps for which Waits is perhaps most known, opens with the searing danceable beats of “Lie to Me.” The “Telephone Call from Istanbul” esque drums and shuffling upright bass lines create an energetic rockabilly pulse for the alternately clean and distorted electric guitar lines and Waits’s hiccuppung vocal inflections. The blend of staccato pedal steel and ramshackle horns sets the tones for the grungy blues, whiskey shuffles, and rumble and
The plangent sentimentality of the pathos-filled travelogue “Bottom of the World” sways with the whisky-infused stagger of a lost hobo. Heavily layered with rich, warm guitar sounds, ranging from twangy banjo to luxurious acoustic to open-body electric, “Bottom of the World” embodies the fractured country waltz of a road-weary traveler who has nowhere left to go. Waits’s mouth percussion and booming bass drums provide the rhythmic backbeat to the dark delta blues of “Lucinda” and “All the Time.” Harmonica pierces “Lucinda” on a couple of occasions, and the bass and guitar gently outline chord changes in the far background, providing mostly an atmospheric layer of sound. “All the Time” has a boogie-woogie bass line and much more prominent and fierce guitar work. The gospel proclamation of Waits’s cover of the Lead Belly tune “Ain’t Goin’ Down to the Well” has a strong Mississippi Delta blues feel to it, stemming from the back-porch harmonica, street-corner guitar and banjo picking, boogie-woogie upright bass, and tambourine/shaker percussion. Keeping in the same style, the next tune, “Lord I’ve Been Changed,” is a traditional gospel song arranged by Waits and Kathleen with guitar and bass, handclaps, percussion, and rich down-home-style backing vocals. Similar in style to the blues feel of “Ain’t Goin’ Down to the Well,” the harmonica-driven tune “Putting on the Dog” features bass clarinet, piano, drums, hand and found percussion, guitar, bass, and an almost sexy groove.

Perhaps superseding “Day after Tomorrow” as Waits’s most politically charged song is the seven-minute epic dissertation “Road to Peace,” which is a lurching blues that comments explicitly on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the story of a young suicide bomber. His angry commentary on the insanity and futility of the anatomy of war is not the kind of song Waits usually sings, and he acknowledges that “this song ain’t about taking sides, it’s an indictment of both sides. I tried to be as equitable as possible. I don’t really know what a song like that can achieve, but I was compelled to write it. I don’t know if any genuine meaningful change could ever result from a song. It’s kind of like throwing peanuts at a gorilla.”

The repetitive walking upright bass line and repetitive drums and guitar backing are suggestive of a pseudo-Middle Eastern traditional folk dance tune stabbed with screeches of electric guitar.
The next song is a Ramones cover that was originally released on the tribute album, *We’re a Happy Family*, and unapologetically tears and stomps it up in a deliriously rowdy style that would make the Ramones proud. “Walk Away,” which was previously released on the *Dead Man Walking* soundtrack, is a dark, postmodern Appalachian blues with rhythmic hand claps in the place of drums, a choir of somber clarinets and bass clarinets playing long tones, upright bass, and finger-picking guitar. “Sea of Love” is Waits’s moody and temperamental take on the Phil Phillips cover that Waits had previously released on the *Sea of Love* soundtrack recording. Slide guitar, supple single-string picked arpeggios on guitar, amplified harmonica bales, and a basic rural blues tonality form the basis for “Buzz Fledderjohn.” The *Brawlers* album closes with the Waits/Chuck E. Weiss tune “Rains on Me,” which was previously released on the album *Free the West Memphis 3.* “Rains on Me” is a hypnotic guttural field holler with finger-picking guitar, drums, and bass.

Where *Brawlers* is packed with abrasive blues stomps, primal field hollers, and pugnacious rawkers that feature hard-edged, guitar-driven rock and blues that reinforce the grating qualities of Waits’s voice, the second disc in the collection, *Bawlers*, is filled with soothing, bittersweet, broken-down ballads and touching, yet oddly familiar, cabaret songs that coddle his melodic croon. The album opens with a minute-long allegorical lullaby called “Bend Down the Branches,” which was originally released on *For the Kids*, an album containing renditions of children’s songs by various artists. It is delicate and sweet, with string and horn counterpoint and cymbal swells, reminiscent of the parlor songs of *Alice*. Piano, clarinet, trombone, banjo, and brushed snare drum provide the gentle waltz accompaniment for the bitter romanticism of the AM radio jazz-shaded “You Can Never Hold Back Spring.” “Long Way Home” was originally released in 2001 on the *Big Bad Love* soundtrack and again, in 2004, by Norah Jones on her album *Feels Like Home*. Waits’s version is stark and evokes a sense of humanity and a landscape of broken dreams through the musically sparse arrangement of upright bass, plucked guitar, minimal percussion, and accordion filling up the background with warm chords. The mellow trombone and the vocal duet near the end of the song only heighten the sentimental mood of the song.

Following Waits’s lure to sonic recycling, “Widow’s Grove” begins with a folk melody borrowed from the traditional Irish tune “The Rose of Tralee.” A compelling and melancholy murder-themed waltz, “Widow’s Grove” is filled with deceptively lovely strings and swaying accordion backed by drums played with brushes, quivering mandolin, and heavy downbeats emphasized by the upright bass. Dusted throughout the song is an icy violin tremolo that is simply chilling against the warmth of the rest of the instrumentation. Found previously on the *End of Violence* and, later, the *Shrek 2* soundtrack, “Little Drop of Poison” is a deliciously stealthy and caustic klezmer-influenced tango that asserts a touch of mischief and adds a little to the spice of life. With an instrumentation that could be straight off *Swordfishtrombones*, “Little Drop of Poison” is composed of a soaring singing saw melody and the wooden
The Words and Music of Tom Waits

clunk of the bass marimba, reedy clarinet, tick-tock percussion, and upright bass. The umber-hued, heart-wrenching beauty and ramshackle grandeur of “Shiny Things” is created by the sound of a single melody line plucked by a banjo, arpeggiated piano, and forlorn clarinet.

Previously released on the Pollock soundtrack, “World Keeps on Turning” begins with piano and upright bass embellished with a high piano melody line to spin an expression of loss and doubt. The mood is serene and filled with late-night despair enhanced by chime of lonely bells and a plucked banjo that appears halfway through the song. In the song “Tell It to Me,” Waits’s voice is uncharacteristically clear and high and falls into a country duet with the gorgeous pedal steel slide guitar. Fret noise from the acoustic guitar and the sounds of tapping feet add to the intimacy and emotional impact of the song. The Celtic waltz of the poignant and rapturous “Never Let Go” is made up of piano, accordion, bass, lush strings and horns, military-style snares, and tambourines. The simple acoustic guitar and bass accompaniment of the wistful “Fannin Street” creates a stunning lament of regret and warning that borrows its title from a Lead Belly song. The grim mordancy of “Fannin Street” originally appeared on the John P. Hammond recording Wicked Grin, produced by Waits in 2001.

The gauzy Teddy Edwards cover “Little Man” harks back to Waits’s early style of closing-time barroom ballads, with jazzy piano, sax, drums played with brushes, and upright bass. Following the same style and instrumentation as “Little Man,” with the addition of acoustic guitar, is the devastatingly resigned “It’s Over.” “If I Have to Go” is originally from the theatrical score to Frank’s Wild Years, although it did not appear on the album released by the studio. Simple piano guides the long, flowing melody line of the tender vocals and provides the melancholic mood for the piece. The Lead Belly cover “Goodnight Irene” comes across as a barroom sing-along, complete with caterwauling drunken choir, croaking accordion, and waltz piano. The lachrymose lament “The Fall of Troy” was fittingly previously released on the Dead Man Walking soundtrack. Piano, clarinet, horns, guitar, and bass form a vignette of unadulterated eloquence and heartache. A full horn section and marching-band snare drums give “Take Care of All My Children” a community-band feel similar to that in “In the Neighborhood.” The breathtaking biblical redemption tale of “Down There by the Train,” played on piano and bass, is a powerful, roof-raising gospel train song that drips of loneliness and regret. The second Ramones cover in the anthology, “Danny Says,” overflows with dreamy accordion and hazy acoustic guitar and modulates through a number of key centers, which make the piece feel unsettled and inconsistent. The nursery-rhyme fable of “Jayne’s Blue Wish” (also from the Big Bad Love soundtrack) creaks and squeaks with fret noise and the rocking of the guitar player. The lazy guitar and bass accompaniment and the expressive trumpet interlude are poignant in their pursuit of pure emotion. Waits’s interpretation of the pop standard “Young at Heart,” popularized by Frank Sinatra, is teeming with slide guitar and
has an unexpected whistle solo. This quirky cover closes the album with a soothing sentiment of a promise of a better tomorrow. The arrangements and instrumentations of Bawlers are subtler and more sensitive than those on Brawlers to accompany the tragic experiences and fleeting memories of the bereft and abandoned characters that populate Waits’s alternately wan and impassioned ballads.

The next disc in the triptych swerves toward the avant-garde, the idiosyncratic, the unclassifiable, and the errantly obscure. Bastards collects all of the songs that do not fit into the neat compartments of bluesy rock songs or ballads. It contains the songs that exist somewhere between his most theatrical works, his factoid-riddled spoken-word monologues, his demented covers, his acidic carnival atmospheres, and his a capella mouth percussion experiments. Opening with the theatrical “What Keeps Mankind Alive,” from Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht’s Three Penny Opera, sets the mood for creative experiments in controlled chaos. Fully orchestrated with accordion, banjo, wheezing horns, muted brass, pizzicato strings, and clattering percussion, the song creates a dark and bone-rattling mood. The Woyzeck-based “Children’s Story” balances Waits’s disturbing bedtime tale and the lovely single melody line of the accordion, demonstrating his dark, deadpan sense of humor. With text by Bukowski, the spoken-word “Nirvana” also utilizes this same instrumentation but manages to convey an openhearted sense of wonder instead. The Disney nightmare “Heigh Ho” has a broken down feel that is a series of noisy outbursts from a demented orchestra playing to the extremes of range, strange persistent percussion, and the incessant growl of the amplified harmonica.

“Army Ants” is another spoken-word piece that is basically a creepy nature documentary composed of vivid descriptions of less-than-pleasant insect behavior layered over the counterpoint of violin, cello, and bass. The apocalyptic dread of “Books of Moses” is a cover written by the psychedelic blues pioneer Skip Spence and exemplifies Waits’s gospel-inspired bone shakers and stripped-down, percussion-based blues numbers. Harmonica, Waits’s human beatboxing, and electric guitar form the quick instrumental “Bone Chain.” The traditional “Two Sisters” is arranged simply with just a solo fiddle and Waits’s vocals. “First Kiss” is another gothic spoken-word piece with strange ambient sound effects and plucked strings and percussion. “Dog Door” is the result of a collaboration with Sparklehorse that ensnares Waits’s shrieky falsetto and arsenal of vocal dexterity in a net of tape loops, samples, and vintage synth effects. “Redrum” is a lurching instrumental that follows in a similar style of tape loops and effects as found on “Dog Door.” The lyrics of the forlorn piano hymn of “Home I’ll Never Be” are adapted from Jack Kerouac. The antiquated sound of “Poor Little Lamb” is produced by the unique timbre of the chamberlin and the pump organ. The jazzy balladry of “Altar Boy” was originally intended for Alice. The piece opens and concludes with church bells and is otherwise indicative of Waits’s smoky piano-based jazz-ensemble aesthetic. “The Pontiac” is simply a spoken-word piece that
is accompanied only by the sounds of street traffic and the occasional car horn. “Spidey’s Wild Ride” follows as a series of fits and starts; an a cappella experiment that embraces Waits’s unhinged mouth rhythms and voracious beatboxing. Waits’s cover of Daniel Johnston’s “King Kong” starts in the same beatbox, a capella style as “Spidey’s Wild Ride” and gradually adds layers of heavy bass, fierce electric guitar, and background hollers. The final official song of Bastards, “On the Road,” is the second song on the album that is based on text by Jack Kerouac. His words pay homage to highway life and are layered overtop of the twang of the banjo, rollicking bass, scorching electric guitar, and amplified gritty harmonica.

Despite the fact that Orphans was promoted as a collection of outtakes, oddballs, and rarities, it contains all the elements of Waits’s different styles. By thematically grouping his tunes, he ended up creating a set that caters to different factions of his diverse audience. Beyond the scope of the categorization of his songs used for Orphans, an examination of Waits’s career reveals numerous contradictions: from his jazz crooner era to his traditional blues-roots influences to his fascination with deconstruction to his penchant for vintage instruments and sounds to his keen interest in modern sounds and technologies. Over the years, Waits has drawn from a vast expanse of American and European song idioms: gypsy, folk, jazz, blues, country, klezmer, polkas, waltzes, vaudeville, hip-hop, torch songs, spoken word, beat poetry, cabaret—all lacquered with a veneer that can only be labeled Waitsian.

Production quality has always been a concern for Tom Waits. For the majority of his earlier albums, Waits recorded directly to analog two-track with no overdubbing in order to capture the aural quality of a live performance. As well, Waits wished to distance himself and his albums from the extensive and laborious studio production work that was characteristic of recordings produced in Los Angeles at that time. As an example of this desire, Nighthawks at the Diner was recorded live before a studio audience, giving this album a very intimate and authentic performance quality. With Waits’s experimentation from Swordfishtrombones to the present, his songs have become individually developed entities that are quite distinct from one another, no longer the completely formed, shrink-wrapped packages that were once created in the studio. This change in Waits’s composition process is particularly visible in his later works, from Rain Dogs on; his songs are conceived, composed, manipulated, honed, torn up, stripped down, and pasted back together asymmetrically, no longer a simple assemblage of chords and words. Bone Machine and The Black Rider furthered the attention to sound detail, as well as the tactile and concrete quality of performance and production qualities that surfaced during the making of Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, and Frank’s Wild Years. As a result of this progression in Waits’s production and compositional styles, the characters and scenes of his songs became even more deeply embedded in the actual realm of the recordings themselves, a process that functioned to shape and influence their development. Waits has never looked for musical quality to be enhanced by technique or technology but instead values his
converted chicken-ranch recording studio, junkyard orchestrations, “real” room sounds, and the unplannable accidents (roosters’ crowing being caught on an outdoor recording, squeaky piano benches, metal chairs on a cement floor, mouse tambourines). On the songs “Picture in a Frame” and “Take It with Me,” from *Mule Variations*, the piano pedals creak throughout, which only adds to the emotional truth, communicative potential, and realistic aesthetic of the pieces. As well, rather than adding effects to his mixes later in the recording process, Wait declares himself “one of those guys who like to get it now. If you’re looking for a certain sound or a certain color, it feels like it belongs to you more if you killed it and ate it—rather than purchased it and pulled it out of a box. I still feel compelled to bang on things in a room until I hear the sound I want, then the sound becomes your own, rather than something you can obtain for a nominal service charge.”

From *The Early Years to Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, & Bastards*, characters and narrative have always influenced Tom Waits’s choices of musical style, sound, and instrumentation. Waits is a musical craftsman and a master storyteller with an uncompromising and eclectic vision. His amazing lyrical gift allows his songs and characters to range from being literal to strangely surreal and symbolic and from dealing with harsh reality to experiencing the fantastical aberrations of the subconscious with equal facility and virtuosity. Over the years, Waits’s characters less and less mirrored the persona of their creator as Waits began to inhabit their being and their dreams instead, crawling into their epidermal shell and dancing around in their bones. Waits’s music is corporeal in itself; rather than being merely an extension or conductor of Waits’s intentions, it is endowed with an inner logic, innate rhythm, and pulse that echo the breath of the living. Musically, for Waits, this transformation and process was reflected in increasing experimentation and innovation with varied instrumentation, recording techniques, and textures, which resulted in sounds that were truly indicative of the characters and stories, contained within his songs.

**A Voice from the Gutter**

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of Tom Waits’s music is his voice: impossibly deep, tobacco stained, and marinated in whiskey. Amid all the obscure instruments and astounding arrangements conjured up by Waits, nothing is as remarkable as his voice, which can tirelessly leap from suturing a tender love song to maniacal howling and screaming to his signature abrasive mouth rhythms. The vocal qualities that other artists would perhaps dismiss as ruined sounds or terrible mistakes coalesce into beautifully misshapen forms, which provide the foundations for Waits’s vocal language. His trademark gravel growl from his early albums developed over the years into a much more flexible instrument that he manipulated and specifically tailored to suit each individual song, character, or emotion. He quickly discovered that, when used as an instrument to express character and emotion, his vocal
range is vast. To maximize the potential of developing his voice and range, Waits doesn’t “always write with an instrument, I usually write a capella. It’s more like drawing in the air with your fingers. It’s closest to the choreography of a bee. You’re freer. You have no frets to constrict you, there are no frets on your voice, and that’s a good feeling.” Always unmistakably his own (though Waits at times claims his voice is merely his imitation of Ray Charles), Waits pushes his voice to its extremes and makes the ordinary extraordinary, as he does with his characters and narratives. However, even more intriguing and distinctive than his vocal qualities is his highly cultivated narrative voice, which allows him to masterfully and convincingly assume a plethora of character roles throughout his music. His voice encapsulates and conveys simultaneously a deep human and inhuman expanse of emotion and reaches out to a general human condition.

One’s voice is often very distinctive and unique to an individual. As a musician, Waits is very protective of his voice and what it is used to represent. He continually battles to keep himself and his music disassociated from the advertising industry, but, unfortunately, his innate ability to invoke mood and emotion makes his music highly appealing to the advertising industry. Part of the image that he has cultivated over the years includes an explicit aversion to product endorsement, and he is disdainful of musicians who allow their music to be used as advertising jingles. Comparing himself to others who do permit advertisers to make use of their music for commercial purposes, Waits remarked:

> It’s amazing, when I look at these artists. I find it unbelievable that they finally broke into the fascinating and lucrative world of advertising after years on the road, making albums and living in crummy apartments; finally advertising opened up and gave them a chance to do what they really wanted to do, which was salute and support a major American product, and have that name blinking over their head as they sing. I think it’s wonderful what advertising has done, giving them these opportunities to be spokesmen for Chevrolet, Pepsi, etc.43

Though established performers may defend corporate sponsorship as necessary to offset expensive touring costs and to keep tickets prices down, Waits sees accepting that kind of money as an undignified sacrifice of his independence and adamantly refuses to allow his image or music to be used to bolster a product’s sales. When the Dallas-based advertising agency Tracy-Locke and a Denton musician named Stephen Carter appropriated the image and sound of Waits for a “SalsaRio Doritos” advertising campaign, in 1988, he was infuriated and filed a suit against Frito-Lay for voice misappropriation and false endorsement. As Simon Frith indicates in *Performing Rites*:

> Even when treating the voice as an instrument, in short, we come up against the fact that it stands for the person more directly than any other musical device. Expression with the voice is taken to be more direct than expression on guitar or drum set, more revealing—which is why when drums and guitars
are heard as directly expressive they are then heard as “voices.” And this argument has legal sanction. Lawyers in cases of musical theft assume that a voice is a personal property, that it can be “stolen” in a way that other instrumental noises cannot (James Brown’s vocal swoop is recognizably his immediately; a guitarist has to prove that a melodic riff, a composition rather than a sound, is unique). The most interesting legal rulings in this context concern soundalikes, cases in which the voices used (“Bette Midler,” “Tom Waits”) weren’t actually theirs, and yet because they were recognizably “the same” could nevertheless be adjudged to invade the stars’ “privacy,” to steal their “personality.” To recognize a voice, the courts ruled, is to recognize a person.44

For Waits, this meant winning his case in court and being awarded $2.5 million in damages and finally gaining financial independence. History repeated itself in 2004 when Waits filed a successful lawsuit against the Spanish advertising agency Tandem Campmany Guasch for using a imitation of “Innocent When You Dream,” complete with an impersonation of Waits’s vocals, for a Volkswagen-Audi commercial in Spain. Again, in 2005, after Waits declined to participate in an ad for General Motors, the German advertising agency Adam Opel AG went ahead and released a series of European ads with a soundalike, much to Waits’s chagrin and their expense. The irony of these situations is that, by getting involved in these and other future litigations, he makes more money protesting the use of his “voice” than he would have made had he given such advertising companies the proper permissions.

Tom Waits embraces the extremes of his vocal attributes, morphing with facility from a lupine growl and devil-horned carnival bark to strained melodic sweetness to the screaming of a freakish high falsetto (which debuted on “Shore Leave” from Swordfishtrombones) to pensive whispers to the percussive distortion of his human beatbox (which debuted on “Top of the Hill” from Real Gone). Tom Moon comments on Waits’s range, which he feels “is a broad-spectrum assault weapon: Sometimes when he sings, extreme high harmonics resembling the squeaks of a churchmouse are audible, way in the ether. Running beneath them is a sawtooth snarl in the upper-midrange that sounds like paint being scraped from a ceiling. Along with that comes a touch of battery-acid bray, then down low, in the bass range, the formless howl of a marine animal.”45 These vocal qualities, which would have the potential to sound unnatural and degenerate when used by other contemporary rock or pop singers, find perfectly natural domiciles in the character and versatile style of Waits. Like the pleasingly “bad” vocal qualities used by singer-songwriters like Bob Dylan and Neil Young to convey political messages, Waits uses his voice as a tool to communicate his stories, rather than using it as a means to showcase himself as a singer. When asked by Musician magazine whether at the beginning of his career he was concerned that his voice did not have the qualities of a classic singer, Waits scoffed and replied, “In terms of what was going on at the time? ‘Are you gonna fit in? Are you gonna be the only guy at the party with your shirt on inside out?’ I was never embarrassed, but I’m liking it more now. Learning how to make it do
different things.” By challenging the idea of culturally accepted “natural” voices and having a blatant disregard for pop music ideals, Waits has taken vocal performance to a new level, exploring the notion of an embodied voice that signifies a person and is given an identity and individuality. Waits’s voice has changed and developed over the years, along with his persona and musical styles, and, therefore, as Simon Frith indicates:

The voice, in short, may or may not be a key to someone’s identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we’re not, deceive people, lie. We use the voice, that is, not just to assess a person, but also, even more systematically, to assess that person’s sincerity: the voice and how it is used (as well as words and how they are used) become a measure of someone’s truthfulness.

Because of his ravaged chords, Waits comes across as being incredibly sincere just because all of his lyrics receive the abusive treatment of his voice and listeners must look beyond pretty fronts in order to find the absorptive beauty of his music and lyrics.

Tom Waits’s voice is integral to the development and theatrical presentation of his characters. By having a transmutable voice ravaged by the abuse of alcohol and cigarettes, he imparts an element of authenticity and intimacy to his lyrics. As listeners, we feel we can trust that he has been a part of his stories, that he is one of these characters or knows them intimately himself. Such personal disclosures and poignant parables may not have the same impact when coming from a golden-throated crooner. From Swordfishtrombones on, Waits veered away from a confessional style of songwriting that allowed him only to comment on the situation, characters, and narrative of each song and toward a style that articulated astonishingly well-woven metaphors, bizarre allusions, and carnivalesque imagery. His lyrics became increasingly indistinct, and, instead of carefully describing the glitter of every raindrop on a windshield, he allowed for more space, more room for the listener’s imagination to fill in the gaps. He was no longer exclusively the drunk in a bar hunched over the piano, telling his jazzy tales of woe, misfortune, and loss, but became immersed in his songs and transformed into a vociferous world traveler barking, bellowing, and whooping out his stories from street corners, train stations, and circus tents to those who cared to listen.

Zygmunt Bauman proposes that while the “modern ‘problem of identity’” was how to construct an identity and keep it solid and stable, the “postmodern ‘problem of identity’ is primarily how to avoid fixation and keep the options open.” For Waits, his early years involved the establishment and maintenance of a real, definitive, and unwavering persona. During the time of his move to Island Records, Waits abandoned this modernist concept of identity construction, and, as Bauman suggests, adopted a postmodern model of identity construction that involved recycling, abandoning, discovering, manipulating, and superimposing many different personas throughout his personal life, performances, lyrics, and musical styles. As David Smay observes:
he’s not telling a story so much as he’s giving you stories. The way he uses language, the density of allusion and use of obsolete argot, his ear for dialogue and his gift for rhythm, the space between images, the evocative specificity of the image create strata of metaphors. As each metaphor overlaps the next, they comprise incomplete narratives. You don’t get snippets of stories, you get three-quarters of one story that overlaps with one-sixth of another story overlaying five-eighths of a different story.49

While his harsh vocal quality may simultaneously attract and repel listeners, it functions to draw them in beyond the sound of the voice singing, to query the impact and signification of the lyrics. Waits’s voice takes the listener on a journey and imparts definite character associations that underscore all of his songs. He consciously unravels and employs disparate characters, attitudes, and perspectives, which each require a different vocal treatment, from the cracked croon of “Take It with Me,” from Mule Variations, to the unearthly falsetto howl of “Dog Door,” from Orphans, to the stentorian bark of “Underground,” from Swordfishtrombones, to the warm purr of “Coney Island Baby” from Blood Money. In addition to his unique voice, characters, and perspectives, Waits also has a very individualized style of musical phrasing—similar to the way the cadence of actor Christopher Walken is immediately recognizable. It has been often noted that, when trying to reproduce Waits’s material, singers find that the phrasing makes perfect sense when he is performing it but that somehow it is elusive and difficult to mimic. It may be difficult to get all the words in or to copy Waits’s peculiar pacing and contours. As Melora Koepke noticed, there is

an ambling, tempo-defying slowness runs throughout his singing on the new songs. Recognizing, perhaps, that his voice is the ultimate manifestation of the word “jalopy” he lurches and putters and sputters along, and only in the albums mannered moments (the parlor song “Dead And Lovely”) does he suspend the feeling of constant motion. Also more evident this time is a Louis Armstrongian tick, an appraising, murmuring curl that provides some phrases with world-weary finishing punctuation. Maybe he always had Satch in his sights, but now he’s located the gravitas to pull it off.50

Waits also relates the stories of many vastly different characters through perspectives as divergent as that of a pregnant hooker in Minneapolis, a lonely soldier overseas, and a one-eyed ostrich trainer at the circus.

Tom Waits’s music and complex persona function on so many different levels, like the title Swordfishtrombones, which demarcates both elevation and elongation and begs the question of what is being heard, the voice of Waits or a character voice or persona that he has constructed in the narrative? Who is speaking, Tom Waits as a person, his identity as a composer, his performance persona, his fabricated character, his conscience, his character’s conscience, or the personality the listener has formulated for Waits from a music review published last week? The very concept of the modern invention of identity
The Words and Music of Tom Waits acknowledges that it “could exist only as a problem; it was a problem, and thus ready to be born precisely because of that experience of under-determination and free-floatingness which came to be articulated ex post facto as ‘disembodiedment.’” Waits reconciled this dilemma by moving beyond his identity as a drunk to establish a rich and often unclassifiable repertoire of personas; he also maintains a sense of intimacy between his voice and the lives and events of his characters. Simon Frith acknowledges the existence of this complexity of voice and identity by showing that there is, first of all, the character presented as the protagonist of the song, its singer and narrator, the implied person controlling the plot, with an attitude and tone of voice; but there may also be a “quoted” character, the person whom the song is about (and singers, like lecturers have their own mannered ways of indicating quote marks). On top of this there is the character of the singer as star, what we know about them, or are lead to believe about them through their packaging and publicity, and then, further, an understanding of the singer as a person, what we like to imagine they are really like, what is revealed, in the end, by their voice.

This notion of voice complexity is essential to Tom Waits as a singer, musician, composer, storyteller, and person. He is conscious of expression and perspective, vividly aware of the communicative process that transpires in his compositional and performance practices. Waits’s personality reverberates throughout all of his songs, characters, and stories, so that each one is unmistakably of his own authorial voice. His language usage and character construction gives the feeling that he is personally aware of the seamy underground worlds and of the despondent wanderers of whom he writes and to whom he gives a voice. When questioned in an interview about the control of voice, as in the ability to communicate, Waits replied:

You always have to work on your voice. Once you feel as though you have one, whatever you tackle will come under the spell of what you are trying to do. You want to be able to make turns and fly upside down—but not by mistake. You want it to be a conscious decision, and to do it well. You don’t want somebody to say, “Well, he went for the bank there and lost control and he went right into the mountain and thirty-seven people died.” You want ’em to say, “Well, he decided to take his hands off the controls and sacrifice the entire plane and its passengers. And I must say it was a spectacular flight. The explosion set off sparks that could be seen all the way to Oxnard. Remarkable.” I think you have to work on yourself more than you work on the music. Then whatever you’re aiming at you’ll be able to hit between the eyes.

Sonically, Waits’s gargoyle voice has the unique power of taking simple heart-tugging sentiments and maudlin lyrics and filling them with a strange melancholic beauty and richness that might sound trite or mawkish if sung by any other artist. Narratively, he is an exceptional storyteller who surrenders himself to the portrayal of his characters and their stories. The concept of
communicative voice can be linked to Waits’s fascination with shoes, which, when turned over, can reveal a documentation of someone’s life travels. When this pattern of wear becomes repetitious, the old shoes are discarded and a new pair acquired that will, one hopes, wear down in a different design. Similarly, Waits’s evolving physical and communicative voice has undergone this same process of discarding old patterns and attempting to find something new and exciting.

Waits’s scabrous guttural growl explicitly reveals the ravages of a real life and the experience of real suffering, a life and knowledge that extends beyond the end of a microphone and a spotlight. His lacerated vocal chords imbue and transgress his music with a level of truth, musically, emotionally, and personally, truth that does not hide behind a mask of pure, beautiful tone. Waits is a commendable showman and performer, adding another dimension to his authorial voice, which must include elements of “Tom Waits the performer” in addition to the layers of voices already present. With his early bourbon-drenched barfly image, he truly lived the destitute, vagabond persona that was essential to his music and performances, but, as his music became steeped more heavily in dreamscapes and imagination, he explored a different, more surreal realm of his characters and of the character Tom Waits. He no longer was the lonely, drunk piano player acting out the character of the lonely, drunk piano player with a “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart” and an “Invitation to the Blues.” As he admitted in an interview:

In some way, acting and working in films has helped me in terms of being able to write and record and play different characters in songs without feeling like it compromises my own personality of whatever. That I can be different things in the studio, that I can separate myself from the song. Before, I felt like this song is me, and I have to be in the song. I’m trying to get away from feeling that way, and to let the songs have their own anatomy; their own itinerary; their own outfits.54

Waits recognized that he did not have to live out his persona on every level and that his persona did not have to infiltrate all aspects of his music and performances. His voice no longer exclusively represented the drunken persona associated with Tom Waits but became a deeper extension of himself as a singer, delving into the lives, experiences, and dreams of numerous strange and diverse characters. He no longer focused on assembling a singular identity but fell into the “hub of postmodern life strategy,”55 which involved the rejection of identity building and focused upon not being defined and restricted by such formulaic constructions. Waits discovered the possibilities embodied in narrative separation and distance, and also in masquerade, with the idea that the undisguised self possessed the potential to both rest quietly beneath a seamless veneer and to erupt through the cracks. His voice became a device through which his characters found a narrative voice and a means of expression; his voice came to represent freedom and the possibility of wider bands of communication, rather than confining
him to an articulation defined by a particular real or fabricated persona or character.

With the movement away from a canvas of barrooms and strip joints, Waits’s songs began to assert their own identity. Musically, he has worked to meet the needs of each individual song, rather than try to fit them into his established jazzy, piano-based mold. As his songs became increasingly individualized and independent entities, with each requiring different handling, so, too, did his character construction evolve narratively, vocally, and through performance. Even with a character as obvious as Frank O’Brien from *Frank’s Wild Years*, there is an overwhelming complex of voices embedded in the music: that of the despondent accordion player with great ambitions, that of Tom Waits the prolific composer, that of Tom Waits the performer, that of Tom Waits’s representation of his father, that of Tom Waits the celebrity image and cult icon.

Waits constantly redefines and reinvents the relationships, intentions, and consequences of the “voices” in his songs, himself as composer, and himself as performer. He has developed a very specific and colorful proper-noun language through which he communicates different aspects of his identity and his art. A provocative and precise lyricist whose penetrating words extend their meaning and depth far beyond the boundaries of his songs, his lyrics such as “I miss your broken-china voice,” “My body’s at home / But my heart’s in the wind / Where the clouds are like headlines / On a new front page sky,” “in a Hong Kong drizzle on Cuban heels / I rowed down the gutter to the Blood Bank / and I’d left all my papers on the Ticonderoga,” “And the princess squeezes grape juice / On a torrid bloody kiss,” “I smoked my friends / Down to the filter,” “and a crow turns into a girl on the other side of the world,” ooze a uniquely Waitsian voice and sentimentality, even without vocalization.

At the other end of the spectrum, as demonstrated on *Real Gone* and *Orphans*, Waits’s creative process is riddled with the appearance of his subvocalization technique in which he makes “a lot of sounds that don’t have any meaning, an slowly they form into words, and the words form into meaning. I start from inside, just kind of hollering out odd-shaped sounds as a musical ingredient.” As Waits’s began to experiment with using his voice more as a percussion instrument rather than following a linear melodic line, he played with syncopation and counterpoint. Eventually, he just began making sounds for the sake of making sounds. Before you have words you just make sounds. In fact as soon as you make any kind of sound, you’ve got music, really. In the beginning there was the word. So you’ve got this kind of [begins to chant] deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, deshaggabon, you’ve got something right there. Right there. you’ve got something. Whatever the hell a deshaggabon is. I don’t know and I don’t give a crap.57

Motivated by a restless muse, Waits is compelled to change things and to deviate from what is expected—having redefined for himself what makes
a musical instrument, what makes an interesting character, what makes an interesting narrative, Waits is deconstructing language and moving toward a place where sounds come first and have to be applied slowly to something in order to become meaningful. It is a bit of a de-evolution for Waits, moving from a compositional style that contained highly metaphorical and allusive language to a place where words are not imbued with specific meaning but have a vital musical component to each syllable.

Always searching for something new, always trying to move from where he is, Waits is a musical transient and an enduring artist who can still surprise and intrigue his audience four decades into his career. While never a superstar or the flavor of the week, he is a craftsman of solid eclectic art whose longevity can be attributed only to his challenging and thought-provoking work. Through the potency of his voice, Waits gives the often misunderstood misfits and marginalized derelicts of society a voice where otherwise there would be deafening silence. In addition to his immeasurable and provocative physical voice, his myriad narrative voices give strength and power to the wide vista of his music, and, like a one-man theater show, Tom Waits takes on a whole range of characters to catalogue the American unconscious.

THE BLACK BOX

An interesting component to Tom Waits’s multifaceted musical career is his foray into the realm of film and theater. This type of compositional and collaborative work requires a strong discipline and attention to detail that is very different from writing for himself, where he does not have the same time, budget, or style or looming opening-night deadlines. The strict nine-to-five schedule he kept while working on One from the Heart would appear tame next to his experiences in the grueling rehearsal halls of theater. As he remarked, “Y’know, there’s a reason they call theater the fabulous invalid. . . . Sitting in a dark theater from 8:30 in the morning till midnight every day, for weeks. Boy, you realize then what they mean by work.”58 As well, while Waits moved away from working for the approval of a label or manager or looking for commercial success with his personal albums, his greater involvement in film and theater work actually meant that he was forced into situations that required him to seek the approval from directors on these projects or to at least work in a highly collaborative style.

Waits’s first major project in film scoring was with Francis Ford Coppola. At this point in his career, he thought that “directors were genies with wings, you know,”59 and he admired the leadership and strong vision of people like Coppola, indie filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, and theatrical maverick Robert Wilson. Waits’s biggest challenge in working on One from the Heart was tearing apart his songs and reworking musical themes into hundreds of little sound cue snippets that would be interjected throughout the movie. Where there was structure and precision to his experience in working in film, his theater experiences were much more chaotic. While his experience with Steppenwolf Theatre on the production of Frank’s Wild Years was highly informative and
The Words and Music of Tom Waits

Instructional, he quickly discovered that “[a] week before they open, most play or operas are just drek, complete pandemonium. You want to shoot yourself and then quit, or quit and then shoot yourself. Somehow, miraculously, the night before it opens, everything starts to feel more like a clock or ferris wheel. A certain calibration takes place, and it starts to tick. But you have to wait so long and look at all these ruins.” Developing the character of Frank into a fully realized play did not work as well as perhaps Kathleen Brennan and Tom Waits had hoped. Despite the engaging poetry, poignant music, large, talented cast, and extravagant set and lighting design, the overall structure of the play was generally panned as sophomoric and obvious in its content. The style and depth of Waits’s character and narrative development give resounding breadth to his songwriting, but perhaps this same whimsy and turbulence need more focus in order to be successfully executed as a full-scale theatrical production. The emotionally and financially draining experience left Waits a bit jaded about continuing to create his own theatrical works, but it did not discourage him from future collaborations as a composer.

When Robert Wilson approached Waits to write the libretto and music for his upcoming project The Black Rider, Waits declined the role of playwright but did agree to compose the music and lyrics. While working on The Black Rider with Wilson, Waits encountered the same exhausting and grueling theater schedule, which he describes this way: “you’re dealing with a lot of sleep deprivation, because you’re working long hours with bad coffee and no food, no windows, in a strange country, with jetlag.” As a leader in imagistic theater, Wilson brought to the project minimalist sensibilities that derive an enormous amount of emotional impact from the architectural pictures and dramatic lighting he creates on stage. As a leader in grit, poetry, freak shows, and romantic richness, Waits is an interesting counterpoint to Wilson’s stark formality. Waits noted that, as a highly visual artist, Wilson “doesn’t really like words. I think he thinks of words as like tacks on the bedroom floor in the middle of the night when you’re trying to make it to the bathroom.”

This is not to say that Wilson is insensitive to language but rather that he appreciates the poetry of the edges of language: the silences, the long animalistic screeches and caterwauls, the stutters, the word fragments. Even while in the creation process, Waits explains how, if Wilson wanted music for a particular scene, “he does the music, on a microphone. He just starts making sounds—he goes ‘Bk-bksh, meee-owr! Whooo-eee, plow-plow-plow-plow, koo-tee-koo, bleerm, bleerm!’” Similarly, Waits would deconstruct language in his later works with his mouth rhythms, nonsensical syllables, and sound patterns and even credits his work with Wilson as inspiration for his human beatboxing on Real Gone.

It is interesting to note that Waits never released cast recordings of the scores to his theatrical works but always chose to record them in his own voice. Waits’s motivation for choosing to record the songs is his own voice rather than use the range and variety of a plethora of character voices stems
Music, Instrumentation, and Voice 61

from the fact that he feels that “[w]riting songs for other people is just mortifying at times. You stand by and watch other people completely butcher them. Sometimes they’re completely elevated. But I figured I could improve on most of them.”64 For Waits, emotional expression, point of reference, and nuance far outweigh vocal technique, and he values his ability to accurately convey the message and emotion of his narratives. The precision he brought to his performances in the studio and the influence he had there were preferable to the unpredictability of live performances and to the lack of control he had when other people performed his songs. As well, in a studio situation, Waits explains, “with an album you fix it—you can wait until it’s exactly like you want it and then freeze it in time—but doing a piece of theater is almost like putting a circle of rocks right here and then coming back in two weeks, expecting them to all be in the same place.”65 The other challenge for Waits is that when he teaches others to sing his songs, he has to accept the fact that “as you leave everyone goes, ‘I hate the way that f**ker made me sing that song. He’s gone now, so I am going to do it as I want.’”66 This perhaps makes Waits’s recordings of his theatrical scores without the actual performers’ voices the most satisfying type of payback. Waits is a strong enough composer and narrative craftsman that he is able to write songs that find a voice for other people or that allow his narrative voice to be transferred to other performers, as the countless number of cover recordings of his songs also attests.

Arguably the ideal situation for Waits would be for Wilson to create an imagistic world for Waits in which he could perform his songs himself. The production of Woyzeck had a demonic monkey puppet with the prerecorded voice of Waits, which is probably the only performer to accurately capture the spirit and emotional telegraphing that Waits desires. Waits’s music is deeply rooted in physicality, expression, and understanding as he aspires to bring a holistic condition to his music. His compositional work in theater and film allows viewers to connect to the images they are viewing in a visceral manner and encourages them to receive the story.
Tom’s Wanderers: Character and Narrative in the Music of Tom Waits

Throughout Tom Waits’s musical career, he has gathered an interesting assortment of characters in his songs; he indexes the lost dreams and the disappearing consolations of life from the doorway of a dive, a five-and-dime, a greasy diner, a gravel road, or a rundown tattoo parlor with a gallery of pimps, prostitutes, waitresses, drunks, carnies, and hobos, across the street from a bus or train station. He explains:

I’ve always loved songs of adventure, murder ballads, songs about shipwrecks and terrible acts of depravity and heroism. Erotic tales of seductions, songs of romance, wild courage, and mystery. Everyone has tried at one time or another to live inside a song. Songs where people die for love. Songs of people on the run. Songs of ghost ships or bank robberies. I’ve always wanted to live inside songs and never come back. Songs that are recipes for superstition or unexplained disappearances.¹

Interesting characters and a strong narrative vein are essential elements of Waits’s music and are the intrinsic threads that run through all of his works. He also possesses a lavish gift of sentiment that is used in recognition of lowlife figures and outcasts. His songs reek of cluttered Americana, Tin Pan Alley, harrowing blues, wheezy polkas, crippled funeral marches, showcase ballads, crumpled dollar bills, hookers in torn fishnet stockings, deserted train stations, eggs sliding into the bacon in the frying pan, and everything beautifully sad. Waits exposes the desperation and disillusionment that fester beneath the plastic-coated façade of life in America, where heightened visions of prosperity and happiness eventually fall subservient to a prosaic reality.
Throughout Waits’s music, the pervasive theme is the grand topos of transience. In some way, his characters are wanderers who roam throughout the world, dreaming and escaping. No one stays rooted for long; they are moving from one point in their lives to another, driven away by heartbreak or violence or simply motivated by the promise of someone or someplace or something better. His characters are dreamers, travelers, people who have regrets about not leaving, people going through pivotal changes, people who have regrets for having gone too far. They are lonely, they are afraid, they are running away, and they all desire the impossibility of their dreams. Like Bauman’s pilgrims, Waits’s wanderers are shown to feel that “the truth is elsewhere; the true place is always some distance, some time away” and that the “distance between the true world and this world here and now is made of the mismatch between what is to be achieved and what has been.” They are all transmutable, metamorphosing, living in unstable or unknown places, without knowing where their next meal will come from or where home is. Some of his characters are not wanderers in the physical sense of one who travels from place to place but are emotional transients on personal journeys, searching for happiness within themselves and with their interactions with others. Other characters may not actually be wanderers themselves but may be the ones left behind—the abandoned girlfriends, stifled husbands, devastated parents, or casual acquaintances—but their lives are forever affected by their relationships and contacts with these transitory characters. Waits makes himself out to be an outsider and an eccentric drifter much like the desolate and eccentric characters woven into his songs, so that the persona he presents in his secondhand suit and hobo’s roar is practically indistinguishable from those he fabricates.

Waits’s characters are all linked to travel, whether they are constantly on the move like sailors and soldiers or circus acts, or vagabonds on the street who call this doorway home for the night, or heartbroken diner waitresses who can only dream of adventure. As well, emotionally, Waits’s characters are often wanderers who are escaping pain, moving on, leaving love, facing confrontation, falling into desperation, losing someone, loving someone, or being left behind in this big blue world. Waits’s protagonists are the dregs of society, the mutants, the forgotten misfits overflowing with stories of the sights they have seen, the stories they are living, and the stories they are dreaming. For the wanderer, ideas of home, family, and security are generally nebulous, often a source of longing and nostalgia, and for many of his transients, they are still dreams after a lifetime of wandering and escapism.

It has been said on many occasions that Waits has an unusual fascination with shoes. This obsession with footwear can extend to his characters, who are as intriguing as the rows of used shoes at a secondhand thrift store, where these questions arise: who wore these shoes, were they tall, were they blond, where did they ruin the heels, did they walk with a limp, where have those shoes been? Each one is different, each one tells a unique story, each one is reflection of the wearer, and each one is an enigma. In addition, his songs
recount the divergent characters that have stood under the same streetlight or the many different streetlights that one character has seen or the characters that are using the streetlight for target practice.

The juxtaposition of vastly different places and people finds a very natural place in Waits’s lyrics, as well as in the inventive instrumentation and found instruments he employs. He reveals the bitter underbelly of the world in which we live, and he looks compassionately at the derelicts of society, elevating them to a higher level within his songs. As Waits describes himself, “I’m an old softie. Most songwriters are probably writing one or two songs over and over again in one way or another. Kathleen said that with me, it’s either Grand Weepers or Grim Reapers. Yeah, I run hot and cold. I like melody, and I like dissonance. I guess maybe it’s an alcoholic personality. I get mad, and I cry.”3 Waits is seduced by tarnish rather than tinsel and is capable of finding more beauty in the gutter than most people would find on top of a rainbow. A derelict poet motif runs shamelessly through his songs, and the themes of the transience and escape permeate all of his characters. With his love of dime-store kitsch, his fascination with and repulsion by American pop culture, and his morbid pathos, Waits is the bohemian’s boho, a willing and consummate surrogate for vagabond dreamers.

**NIGHTHAWKS AND TIRE TRAMPS**

Throughout Tom Waits’s life, Jack Kerouac’s Beat classic, *On the Road*, has served as an important thematic touchstone. In particular, the lifestyles of Kerouac’s rubber tramp characters, who live from gas tank to gas tank and from town to town, and his particular use of language have provided Waits with a framework for his own characters and language. Highways are symbolic of many different freedoms and liberations for every individual who encounters them, whether as part of a spirit-revitalizing journey or as a necessary escape from mercilessly fatiguing constraints. For these wanderers, “only the streets make sense, not the houses—houses tempt one to rest and relax, to forget about the destination,” and they live their lives comfortable with their homelessness.4 Highways are highly conducive to the evanescent spirit of transients and vagabonds and are often places where lonely souls can be brought together for brief moments of interaction or crowded minds can be given the space they require to refocus and meditate. Highways are places of movement; they are designed only to facilitate travel from one place to the next and thus offer endless possibilities to the wanderer.

Highways and roadside diners are also the places where strangers meet and concoct their stories and where everyone to has the potential to take off on their own road trip and find someplace more conducive to their dreams, be it on foot, by car, or by bus. Tom Waits pays tribute to Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady in his song “Jack & Neal: California Here I Come,” from *Foreign Affairs*, which tells the tale of a wild road trip to California. Looking for stories and adventure, the characters head out on the road, with Jack “sittin’
poker faced with bullets backed with bitches” and Neal “hunched at the wheel puttin’ everyone in stitches.” The image of a big American gas guzzler wildly roaring and weaving down the highway with its passengers exploiting life, mooning other cars, chewing on cigars, listening to Wilson Pickett and Charlie Parker, buying drugs, and dreaming under a Harlem moon is contrasted with the desolate picture of this same lonely highway observed in the imagery of a parking lot after the last car pulls away and tombstone gas pumps. The hopes and excitement the road to California promises are intensified when the passengers see a falling star and just feel that they will be in California soon. These characters exhibit the freedom, lack of inhibition, and thrills associated with Waits’s road trips as they head out on an active quest for stimulation and chaos.

The man in “Old Shoes (& Picture Postcards)” (Closing Time) feels trapped by a relationship that has lost its magic. It is difficult for him to leave because he has waited until the relationship has progressed to a very complicated state, but, for him, the truth of the situation and his misery are still very clear as he concedes that he cries when he sees his girl smile, and he knows her tears cannot bind him anymore. As he says, “So goodbye, so long, the road calls me, dear,” he demonstrates that he is a road rambler at heart and needs to be unconstrained and self-reliant, with no arduous commitments. He recognizes that his very nature resists being restrained or settled, and he withdraws from the stranglehold of being locked in one place as he says “farewell to the girl with the sun in her eyes.” In “So Long I’ll See Ya” from The Early Years Volume 1, the main character, Tommy, is also frustrated with his home situation, where his mother and father are consumed by domesticity “[a]nd nobody knows what is going on.” As a result, Tommy develops “those so long I’ll see you ’cause my Buick’s outside waiting blues.” He is drawn to the road for its proffered independence and intrepid adventure, and so leaving this dull home life behind is easy for him. The protagonist in “Baby Gonna Leave Me,” from Real Gone, is the one who is left behind as his “baby went and left [him] in a ’49 Ford.” The theme of abandonment runs thick throughout this song, with detailed, sentimental images of the toiletries that his girl left behind, the protagonist’s ripped-out heart, the wind rushing through meadows, and his dog, which never returned home. Everyone and everything that he cares about is leaving him, and all he is able to do is wallow in self-pity and stand by the window waiting for the moon to rise.

An important “traveler” convention found in Waits’s early years is that of the truck driver whose entire existence is based on living off of the highway and his truck. In “Nighthawk Postcards,” from Nighthawks at the Diner, Waits depicts the hazardous life of truck drivers; frequently “they’re hibal-lin’ with bankrupt brakes, over driven, / underpaid, over fed, a day late and a dollar short.” For most truck drivers, home becomes a flat place at the side of the road or a parking lot somewhere. “Semi Suite” (The Heart of Saturday Night) highlights the difficulties of maintaining a relationship with a trucker. This story is told from the perspective of the trucker’s wife, who
hates the itinerant lifestyle of her truck-driving husband, who is never around and repeatedly threatens that to leave and never come back as he heads out on the road. She desperately yearns for more but feels powerless to forsake this lifestyle she knows or to change the course of her life. Instead, she surrenders herself to the anguish of being involved with a 12-hour layover man as she lies through her pain and frustration and stays with him simply because she does not have the courage to accept the truth of her situation and leave. In contrast to exploring “the land of self-creation” and freedom found on the road, this woman feels caught in a place where the “horizon was tightly packed with huts, barns, copses, groves and church towers. Here, wherever one moved, one was in a place, and being in place meant staying put, doing what the place needed to be done.”\(^5\) This woman is bound to and defined by a single place that encompasses her entire being and determines her actions. Her husband, as a truck driver constantly on the move, is not defined by a particular place but can perpetually renew his identity as different surroundings and people materialize around him on his travels. She feels ensnared and embittered when he tells her that she is always on his mind or that she is the only one who will ever be able to understand “his complicated soul” and deeply resents his incessant desertion of her for the road, so that she is left to suffocate at home while he heads out on the road to “the only place a man can breathe” and where he is able to clarify and collect his thoughts. He distances himself from the mundane disturbances of family life as he finds comfort in the anonymity of the highway. She finds her life passing by; she has lost track of the number of times she has packed and unpacked her belongings, following him around. Loving and waiting for her truck-driving man is asphyxiating her own happiness, and she is resigned to the fact that when she hears his engines pulling up to the house, she will forever be the woman looking through the window in the kitchen, always waiting by the phone for whenever he calls.

The same appeal for life on the highways resonates in the song “Long Way Home” (Orphans—Bawlers), where the main character shows his repulsion for the domestic responsibilities of providing food and shelter for his family and reveals that he would trade it all in a heartbeat for the allure of life on the road. However, unlike the truck driver in “Semi Suite,” this wanderer is apologetic about his attraction to the road as he asks for forgiveness for the fact that he always takes “the long way home.” While he realizes that the love of his woman is the only thing he has ever known and admits that he loves her more than anything, he recognizes that he will not change and the desire for transience is just something about his nature that he cannot control. However, although he is a wanderer, he is not a loner; he does not wish to abandon his loved one but instead asks her to “[c]ome with me, together we can take the long way home.” This song illuminates the romanticism of life on the road and shows a different side of the wanderer as someone who wants to “go out past the party lights” with a partner with whom to seek out adventure, rather than simply someone seeking to escape a stagnant relationship.
The road rambler in “Diamonds on My Windshield” (The Heart of Saturday Night) escapes the drone of a congested city late one rainy night for a highway drive to clear his mind. This song gives an account of the sights and sounds encountered on a late-night freeway drive, such as the competition between drivers who vie for the fast lane, the raindrops on his windshield, which look like “tears from heaven,” and a drenched hitchhiker who must be “wishing he was home in a Wisconsin bed.” Maneuvering through the metropolitan landscape distracts the driver from his other worries as he focuses on the task of driving and finds temporary escape from the daily grind of his life. Similar to the truckers, he finds on the road an introspective space to gather his thoughts once the radio’s gone off the air and the forced silence gives him time to think. Like Edmond Jabé’s notion that “you do not go into the desert to find identity, but to lose it, to lose your personality, to become anonymous. . . . And then something extraordinary happens: you hear silence speak,” this highway driver allows himself to become distanced from the boundaries and problems of existence in a dense cityscape. Rejuvenated after a night of “blazing through this midnight jungle,” he heads for the warmth and comfort of home.

Another song about freeway flying is the song “Ol’ 55,” from Closing Time, in which character in this song just has to be on his way after spending a night at a lover’s place. The protagonist heads out to the embrace of his car and, feeling the serenity of the steering wheel in his hands, he drives “away slowly, feeling so holy, God knows [he] was feeling alive.” This song is imbued with freeway imagery of trucks passing, flashing lights, and the feeling of comfort from being encircled by “freeway cars and trucks” as he heads down the road to an undetermined destination. A variety of metaphorical roadside images is used throughout the song “Top of the Hill” (Real Gone), in which a hitchhiker is making his way through this world. The song could be literally interpreted as being about a hitchhiker who is down on his luck and looking for someone to “[s]top and get me on the ride up,” or it can seen to contain a more abstract meaning about someone who has hit his lowest low as he ponders the meaning of life and the desperation of existence and now is headed straight to the top. Trying to determine what motivates people, the main character uses another driving metaphor to ask, “What’s your throttle made of / Is it money or bone?” Themes of redemption and apocalypse are buried throughout the song in vehicular and roadside images.

As well, where there are roads, there are inevitably crossroads, and Tom Waits’s characters are confronted with challenges and temptations on their journeys to somewhere better. The character Frank in “Hang On St. Christopher,” from Frank’s Wild Years, asks St. Christopher, the patron saint of safe travel, to “hang on through the smoke and the oil” as he heads out on a harrowing journey of escape. The reckless behavior of Frank and his need for protection on the road are shown when he tells St. Christopher to hang onto him and to get him safely to Reno, where he believes great opportunities await him. This song is a testament to the improvident actions of Frank
during his escapades and his turn towards the devil’s embrace as he uses the encouragement of booze to turn his “mad dog loose.” Warning St. Christopher that tonight the devil will be riding with them, Frank is volatile and highly self-destructive, and his madness begins to overtake his daily routine of living his life as he challenges his mortality with reckless driving and irresponsible behavior, which is a prescient whisper of his unavoidable collision with reality.

The highway tragedy of “Burma Shave” (Foreign Affairs) opens with severe images of the small, dying town of Marysville as seen from the car window of a juvenile delinquent who is just passing through. At the side of the road he stops for a young female hitchhiker, who is also following the road to whatever place it will take her. After their initial meeting, it is established that both characters are wanderers on a rebellious journey who have turned to the road to seek out their dreams and aspirations. They are both looking for emancipation from the complexities of life in the mythical Burma Shave, whose signs, which directed them down the highway, are actually clever advertisements for an American brand of shaving cream. The gum-popping, back-arching, barrette-wearing young girl enlightens the stranger sitting next to her about her reasons for leaving the small town of Marysville, which to her is nothing more that a bump in the road where everyone has got one foot in the grave. For the girl, Burma Shave is a dream compared to the cruel reality of Marysville, where she cannot bear “the sting of going to bed with every dream that dies here every morning” any longer. For the outlaw driver who is jumping his parole, Burma Shave presents itself as an intoxicating haven and a place where he can be free from his past transgressions. The elation of escape runs rampant as they count the grain elevators disappearing behind them in the rear-view mirror. The celebratory images of chasing dreams down the road to Burma Shave are underscored by the usual highway dangers of drinking and speeding, where a fatal challenge to have another swig of booze and pass a car is both made and met. Inevitably, the road that seemed to lead to liberation becomes their demise as they become irreversibly entangled in the twisted machine that steals every hope, dream, and carefully saved wishbone from them on their way to the promised land of Burma Shave. With the last line of this song, “they say that dreams are growing wild just this side of Burma Shave,” Waits reinforces the fact that, just as the road to Burma Shave is laden with dreams and hopes, reality can still pass on the driver’s side.

**Rain Dogs**

Tom Waits transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary and gives his itinerant and renegade characters a venerable quality. He is essentially a patron saint of losers and underdogs, all those people who believe deliverance and salvation can be found in a bottle of bourbon or in a rusty tin can. Waits observes and represents, in a very affecting and profound manner,
those characters who have been rejected by a society that demands a certain brand of success and shuns failure. Rain dogs are the individuals who cannot be constrained and are determined “[n]ot to get tied to the place. Not to wed one’s life to one vocation only. Not to swear consistency and loyalty to anything and anybody. Not to control the future, but to refuse to mortgage it: to take care that the consequences of the game do not outlive the game itself, and to renounce responsibility for such.” Waits’s vagabonds live in the present, unbound by the dictates of time, place, trajectory, or legislation. Independent and autonomous, these characters are often seen as threats to societal order, since they have no itinerary, no set destination, and no place of belonging. In modern society, transient inclinations are escalating, as places of belonging and the notions of stability are dwindling in a rapidly advancing society unwilling to commit to earlier generational ideals of security and permanence in an increasingly uncertain and unsettled world. Runaways, rain dogs, and vagabonds possess the core characteristic of a natural inquisitiveness about the world beyond their doorstep, a quality that permeates virtually all of Waits’s characters, whether they are leaving home for the first time or have experienced a lifetime of travels.

The portrayal of lowlife malaise is found in the lyrical sobriety of much of Tom Waits’s music. Waits named his vagabonds “rain dogs” after the phenomenon he experienced while living in lower Manhattan, where, after rainstorms, “the rain washes memories from the sidewalks” (“Red Shoes by the Drugstore”) and all the touchstones and territorial markings left by the dogs are erased, leaving them lost, perplexed, and unable to find their way back home. These are the stranded characters, those lost and confused, whom Waits gathers in his arms and to whose tales of woe he listens so carefully. The places where these characters once found comfort no longer exist or cannot be found, and now their lives are fueled by frustration and unpredictability. In the context of Waits’s songs, rain dogs are also the disorderly people who never pay taxes, who do not wear underwear, much less suits, and who head out on the road in search of inspiration. The song “Rain Dogs” (Rain Dogs) captures the spirit of these drifters who huddle together in a doorway and pass around a bottle of rum as they find comfort in the booze and one another. Vanquished together, the rain dogs proclaim, “Oh, how we danced and we swallowed the night,” and the joy of their camaraderie inspires them to hope and dream even with the dour realization that they’ll never be able to find their way back home now that their trail has been forever erased by the unforgiving rain. These vagabonds find themselves wandering throughout their lives “not because of the reluctance or difficulty of settling down, but because of the scarcity of settled places” and have grown to cherish this sense of displacement that they recognize in each other.

The stoic march “Underground” (Swordfishtrombones) reveals the unseen terrain of vagabond life that exists in the underbelly of cities in the sewer systems and steam tunnels. Unbeknownst to the people and boots that tread above them, these poverty-stricken tramps are awake while the rest of the
world sleeps and have created a whole community down “below the mine shaft roads.” The people who live in this dark underworld wander through the basements of cities where “the roots hang down” and escape the caustic world above ground by retreating to their Cimmerian abode. These vagrants do not infiltrate the orderly world in which modern society exists and thrives; instead, they occupy a fragmented and discontinuous space where they experience isolation and detachment and are left to create their own bonds of solidarity and selfhood.

In contrast to the darkness of “Underground,” “Cold Water” (*Mule Variations*) is a field holler about a scrappy tramp who recounts his daily sights and sounds to anyone within earshot. He is a penniless hobo, a harmless nuisance, who shuffles along his daily path, shooed away by people who see him as trouble or a threat. Even though he barely has the means to sustain himself, with ingenuity, he stands and watches television from the window of a furniture store for a moment of entertainment. His home each night is a flat piece of ground where the dirt is his pillow or a cool and still graveyard, peaceful and serene. He recognizes the human frailty of “them fellows with the cardboard signs” who are doing what they can to scrounge up a few coins and empathizes with the plight of the pregnant women and war veterans that he sees begging on the freeway in order to get by, but he does not feel this bleakness himself, for he believes his freedom is priceless and is all that he needs to survive. This character was born to wander, and, with the old dog that he has found, he lives out every day with a new place to lay down his head each night.

Leaving is always easier than staying behind, since planes, trains, boats, cars, and buses “characteristically evoke a common attitude of blue” in those who are left behind waving goodbye. The girl left behind by her nomadic boyfriend in the song “Foreign Affair” (*Foreign Affairs*) feels these sentiments as she fears he may never return. The romanticism and inconvenience of being a wandering traveler able to partake in exciting foreign affairs are incredibly appealing because one knows that whatever happens “will only be parlayed into a memory.” “Foreign Affair” describes the wanderlust-riddled obsession of vagabond globetrotters for the pursuit of somewhere or something better. Many vagabond travelers are searching for something or someone that they do not necessarily hope to find. Often such people do not want to actually find the object of their desires, since “the obsession’s in the chasing and not the apprehending” and the truest contentment is found in the thrill of unknowing and uncertainty, rather than the placidity of possession. Similarly, in “Had Me a Girl,” from *The Early Years Volume 1*, a sexually promiscuous wanderer who is feeling blue travels all over the globe to escape his string of failed love affairs and to search out new love in new places. Guilt- and consequence-free, he reels off his list of affairs with girls in Los Angeles, San Diego, Tallahassee, England, New York, North Dakota, Chula Vista, France, and Toledo, with not one romantic encounter developing into something meaningful or enduring—except, perhaps, for the girl from North Carolina, of whom he admits, “She’s still on my mind.”
In “Small Change” (*Small Change*), a murdered transient in New York becomes just a statistic in the night, since everyone seems to be immune to and unaffected by violent deaths, as nobody even flinches at the scene and instead opportunism runs rampant for newsmen, sales people, and raconteurs. Everyone is simply inconvenienced rather than aggrieved by the death of this city-street wanderer, as no one even closes his eyes, and rather than investigate the scene, the cops are joking to each other “about some whore house in Seattle.” Waits builds a personality and humanism to accompany the body lying on the sidewalk on 42nd Street, with fine details about the racing form in his pocket and the five-dollar bill crumpled in his hand. The vagabond is exposed as a real person with hopes and dreams who was just trying to get through the day, except that, unfortunately, on that day, “small change got rained on with his own .38” and he is left with a gumball machine headstone. The deplorable vulturism and opportunism of people is illustrated when the vagabond’s watch, ring, pork pie Stetson hat, and anything else he had of worth are stripped from his body and Small Change is left with nothing but a pool of blood that is hosed down the gutter. The insignificance of the lives of vagrants also extends into the song “Murder in the Red Barn,” from *Bone Machine*, in which police blame a suspicious murder on a drifter picked randomly from a group of gypsy wanderers who sleep beneath a nearby bridge and whose lives are seemingly expendable, rather than on some upstanding member of their small community.

Set on Fifth Street in downtown Los Angeles, “On the Nickel,” from *Heartattack and Vine*, is a lugubrious reminder that no matter how far down someone falls or for how long one has been on skid row, everyone began life somewhere as some mother’s child, the mothers who wonder “what becomes of all the little boys, who never comb their hair” and end up running away from home. This song is dedicated to all the homeless, downtrodden vagrants caught in a place “where a royal flush can never beat a pair” and who were once the assured little boys who confidently ran away from home, only to realize that “the world just keeps getting bigger, once you get out on your own,” meanwhile having lost everything they ever owned or knew.

Including these destitute characters living on the nickel, everyone has experienced or at least knows where the “lowside of the road” can be found. The lowside of the road can refer to many things, perhaps literally a ditch, the place you get stuck making that U-turn, the place you roll to when you are forced off the road, but it also denotes the lowest point of desperation in any human condition. In the primal blues of “Lowside of the Road” (*Mule Variations*), there is no place further down to fall than “on a black elevator” that is headed down. The characters are forsaken by a baffling world in which horses whip the riders, dice laugh at the throwers, and the clappers have been ripped out of all the bells. As every obstacle these characters try to overcome rises up against them, they find themselves ending up in the lowside of the road. The slow blues saunter of this song relates the true desperation of the lowside of the road, where the ground groans as loudly as the broken souls
who fall down upon it. Similarly, the disconsolate wanderer from “Rains on Me” (Orphans—Brawlers) cannot seem to overcome his bad luck and misfortune as he laments, “This is how the world will be” since “[e]verywhere I go it rains on me.” Following the laws of attraction, by reinforcing, through his beliefs and thoughts, the notion that he is perpetually ill fated, he finds that the universe provides him with the hard luck he predicts for himself. He cannot see that it is his actions of getting drunk and staying out all day and his constant fixation with drugs that causes his cycles of adversity and unfavorable results. This same desperation and hopelessness are reflected in the bemoaning of the character in “Make It Rain” (Real Gone), who feels he cannot escape from his situation in life; he believes he was born to trouble and fate and is caught in a promise outside his control from which he cannot flee. Betrayed by a girl and by his best friend, he has no shame in admitting his pain and loneliness and even tries to reconcile his belief in the “[m]ercy of the world again” but retreats to his own dark discontent, where he is consoled by forces of nature beyond his control (wind and thunder), rather than taking an introspective look at the cause of his frustration and disenchantment.

The ardent and heartfelt emotion of a drifter who feels he has seen everything, been everywhere, and done everything in the whole wide world and who has reached the end of his road is evoked in the song “Pony,” from Mule Variations. Now, after a lifetime filled with exodus and turning away from his past, this wanderer wonders whether his pony can find the way back home. He started his travels full of wanderlust and rapture when he left home, but now, after years of being alone and living “on nothing but dreams and train smoke” and losing all sense of the passage of time, he finds himself left “full of hollow on Maxwell Street.” After his lifetime of adventures riding the rails with old blind Darby, dancing with Ida Jane, building roadside fires, working for free in a saw mill, and racing with burnt-face Jake, he is left with this disarming longing for his home, which ends with a dream for domesticity in which he sits in a comforting family kitchen with a old dog curled up at his feet. This song is of particular interest in that it shows the character of the road-wearied wanderer who has traveled across the globe, exhausting his quest for adventure, and who wants to finally go home with a warm embrace for the life he had known once before.

Similarly, the character in the song “Back in the Good Old World (Gypsy),” from the Night on Earth soundtrack, has also wandered as far as his heart will take him and, over the years, has seen the world crumble around him. He recounts his fading innocence as he remembers sadly that when he was a boy “the moon was a pearl the sun a yellow gold,” but now as a man “the wind blew cold the hills were upside down.” After a lifetime of seeking out a new life and ending up with only a sprinkling of flowers on his grave, he ruefully realizes that now that he has been running away from the only place he wanted to be and longingly reminisces about his life back in the good old world.
“Anywhere I Lay My Head” (*Rain Dogs*) is the powerful attestation of one vagabond who has been everywhere and seen everything and whose heartbreak is depicted in the compelling lines where he declares that he does not need the love or support of anyone, because he has “learned to be alone.” He is a lonely, desperate traveler whose world has been turned upside down. For this wayfarer, life necessitates transience, with the place that he lays his head to sleep at night becoming his home, even if only for a few hours. He has spent his life as a venturesome hobo who once had amazing adventures and set the Thames on fire, but he now realizes that he must let his past go and confront life’s challenges, rather than continually searching for escape. This song is his tarnished affirmation of the choices he has made, now that he is aware of what he has left behind. The once-unfettered vagabond now feels the world is mocking his lowly position in life and, as the wind blows cold, his regrets and disappointment surface. In a similar manner, “That Feel” (*Bone Machine*) is also a powerful attestation of individuality and the strength of the human essence. This feeling of personal freedom and autonomy incites Waits’s vagabonds and wanderers to stay true to themselves, to keep moving forward to experience the world, and to follow that sensation wherever it may guide them. Despite everything that happens or how much is lost, there is still something in life that is bigger than any one meaning or significance that is attributed to it. “That Feel” may be a feeling of personal worth and autonomy, it may be spiritual, it may be universal or it may be highly personalized, but it is what drives each person to face every new day because it has the strength to endure being thrown out in the rain, tossed off a bridge, or chopped to bits, and it “always comes and finds you” and “it will always hear you cry.”

Characters that are drawn to an itinerant road subculture to escape a stifling nonexistence are also a part of vagabond culture. In “A Little Rain,” from *Bone Machine*, characters take chances and value the experience of hardship and suffering in the belief that “a little rain never hurt no one” and that the reward is in the trouble it took to accomplish the goal. One man sets out on an excursion simply because he believes “you must risk something that matters.” A 15-year-old girl who has never seen the ocean is hungry for life experiences and discoveries as she goes off with a vagabond in order to see the world. She even says goodbye to her mother, for she is not leaving to run away from something but is on a quest for adventure and discovery. The young girl, “Georgia Lee” (*Mule Variations*), also keeps running away but, unfortunately, she is simply too young to be out on the street by herself and encounters danger and malevolence while in search of escape. A loved one who had done the best that she could in raising and providing for Georgia is desperate enough to blame her murder on God and asks, “Why wasn’t God there for Georgia Lee?” The young girl’s innocence and need for rebellion provoked her attention-seeking escapades, in which she would hide but want someone to find her. Unfortunately, this time she was not found in time to be taken back into someone’s teary warm embrace, and now there are “wild flowers on a cross by the road.”
A woman in the song “Hold On,” from *Mule Variations*, cannot stand the constant observation and judgment in her small hometown, where the townsfolk made the notion “if you live it up, you won’t live it down” a constant reality. So, without so much as a backward glance, she leaves Monte Rio and heads out to California with the philosophy that she must take control over her destiny and break free from the judgment of the people around her. She believes that in order to find happiness, she needs to turn her life upside down and devour life, rather than letting it direct her. Smothered by her small-town life, she has become terribly aware that, when there is nothing left there that she cares about, her life becomes meaningless unless she takes chances and is bold in her actions to bring passion and excitement into her life. Even when “it’s cold and there’s no music” and her home seems so far away, she finds the resilience and the strength to survive within her, and, with that level of belief and commitment, she is confident that her dreams are possible.

The poignant “Kentucky Avenue,” from *Blue Valentine*, shows two children painfully aware of their predicaments, dreaming of making it to New Orleans. This song is filled with typical childhood curiosity, gleeful romps, mischievous antics, and wild imaginations that allow the children to chase after fire trucks, go down to the hobo jungle, kill rattlesnakes, smash windows, slash tires, and steal berries that they mash on their faces. However, one of the children can only dream of being able to partake in these diversions as she is confined to a wheelchair and is forced to observe life, rather than truly be fully submerged in it. Her devoted companion gives her dreams of running, jumping, playing, and breaking free from her wheelchair. With naive hope trying to displace a painful reality, he creates a wonderful fantasy of liberation and miracles in which he tells her they will affix to her shoulders wings made from the spokes of her wheelchair and magpie wings that will free her from her metal confines. Even though the day may never come on which they will be able to sneak up on rooftops together, for this sweet childhood moment they can passionately imagine that together they will “hop that freight train in the hall” and make it “to New Orleans in the fall.” For these two dreamers, their hopeful natures, shadowed by a painful truth, perhaps reflect the lesser-known definition of rain dogs—the atmospheric phenomenon of little patches of rainbows that are supposed to presage rain.

**THE PIANIST HAS BEEN DRINKING**

Tom Waits’s career first grew out of his melancholy, bourbon-soaked worldview and his tales of skid row and its denizens, were delivered in a voice that sounded like it had been eroded by oceans of cheap booze, late nights, and harsh cigarettes. The character of the drunken barfly engulfed Waits’s onstage persona and invaded his life offstage, causing him to succumb to the cult of self-myth. Drinking simply percolates with complicated issues of escapism, offering temporary solutions to overwhelming problems. The
stories of Waits and of his disheveled characters become dangerously similar, as, for many, alcohol becomes a futile substitute or catalyst for freedom, intimacy, and courage. Waits’s characters turn to drinking as a way to escape the difficult truths of their existence and to abandon their troubles and worries in a bourbon-drenched imagined reality; they can jump on a train and run away even when there is no train station for miles around. His drunks can also be viewed as flawed vagabonds and wanderers whose only destinations are the blurred landscapes of bars and taverns.

The drunken piano player in “The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)” (Small Change) is surrounded by nonsensical images and situations that he imagines, such as “the juke box has to take a leak” and “the carpet needs a haircut.” This character’s wandering occurs in the midst of an alcoholic haze in which his world and the people that fill it suddenly become much more interesting, or at least strangely exaggerated, like the Sumo wrestler bouncer, the lightman who is blind in one eye and can’t see out of the other, and the piano tuner who has a hearing aid and who showed up with his mother. This song’s musical importance lies in the fact that, like most of Waits’s drinking songs, the piano is the primary accompaniment for these inebriated testimonials of rambling hoboesque piano players who head from bar to bar playing for drinks. For Waits, “The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)” is perhaps as jokingly autobiographical as he got; as at the time of the release of Small Change, he was still avidly cultivating his romanticized “slumped in the gutter with a bottle of whiskey and book of poetry” image for audiences, interviewers, and even himself. Many of Waits’s drinking songs emanate from his earlier years, when he was fully submerged in his barroom jazz-poet image, which included his gnarled posture, stuck-together clothes, three-day stubble, and finger-snapping, head-hanging, chain-smoking delivery from the bench of a piano in the back of a bar.

The image of the lugubrious, drunken piano player sharing his rhapsodies of irretrievable loss with strangers is created in the vignette “The One That Got Away,” from Small Change, where the character Andre is sitting at the piano selling songs for a dollar despite that fact that he could have been famous, but things didn’t work out and now he has turned to the comforting arms of booze and whisky and is “learning songs about the one that got away.” This song collects characters who have been abandoned by their dreams or lovers or sideswiped by grief or anguish and who are left with seemingly insurmountable circumstances of regret. “Fumblin’ with the Blues” (The Heart of Saturday Night) is another example of a song about a lonely drunk remedying his loneliness and self-pity with alcohol, so much so that all the bartenders know his name. The character here is left alone as the women in his life take his love and then leave him alone. He is frustrated by his inability to effectively redirect his life, as, for himself and for everyone else, falling in love is easy and uncomplicated, “but it’s standin’ up that’s so hard” for him to do. Another shade of the drunk emotional wanderer is depicted in the track “The Heart of Saturday Night,” from the album of the
same name. Here, a character caught in a dull, dead-end job, recalling the joy he feels on Saturday nights, attempts “to wipe out every trace / of all the other days in the week” and escape the drudgery of his life, while hoping that tonight will eclipse all the nights that have come before. Behind the wheel of his Oldsmobile, he goes cruising down the streets with money in his pockets, a girl by his side, and the crack of pool balls in his ears, hoping to find “the heart of Saturday night.” However, disappointment is inevitable for this character, who is trying to re-create the nights of adventure and thrills that came before with his relentless search for happiness and excitement.

The distorted perception of a drunk who romanticizes situations is found in the song “I Hope That I Don’t Fall in Love with You,” from Closing Time. This lonesome wanderer is on an emotional quest for love and companionship and looks for personal fortitude in a pint of beer. He has been disappointed and hurt by relationships many times before and is wary of any sort of emotional attachment because “falling in love just makes [him] blue.” As the night and drinking progress, he sees a girl who is sitting alone in the crowded bar and wrestles with his “old tom-cat feelings,” wondering whether to offer her a chair or to bum a cigarette. He turns to alcohol to provide the courage he needs to actively pursue this girl, whom he perceives to be just as lonely as he is, and, after he has had a few beers, he can clearly hear her calling out for him. However, the night that he carefully envisioned and calculated out in his mind never is realized as it is closing time, the music is fading out, and he becomes painfully aware that the girl is nowhere in sight and the chair next to him will stay empty. While focusing on circumventing his loneliness and insecurities with an inundation of booze, he has let opportunities for a real relationship and connection slip away unclaimed.

The wandering drunk in “I Wish I Was in New Orleans (in the Ninth Ward),” from Small Change, feels that returning to life in a familiar city will dramatically improve his happiness. He has a strong desire to return to New Orleans, where he can already envision the camaraderie of “a bottle and my friends and me” and where life would be as simple and pleasurable as having a few drinks, shooting pool, and listening to jazz with his companions. This lonely character, perhaps now drinking alone, is nostalgic for the times spent with all of his old friends and wants to return to the place that supports the ideals of free-flowing fellowship and easy living that he remembers once finding in New Orleans. In contrast, the character from “Drunk on the Moon” (The Heart of Saturday Night) is completely content with where his alcoholic journey has taken him and does not want anyone to “try and change [his] tune.” His insobriety has given him a sense of release, as he has “hawked all [his] yesterdays,” and is simply enjoying a wild night out. The hardships of his life have been momentarily misplaced as he sees a silver slipper moon that is pouring champagne stars, and this drunk’s expressive poetic utterances surface on his walk home from a night out.

The diner waitress in “Invitation to the Blues,” from Small Change, is miserable because of her broken dreams and her unsuccessful romantic relationship,
which leads her to a difficult struggle with alcohol and “an open invitation to the blues.” She is an emotional wanderer who tries to control her happiness by looking for a better life and leaving failing relationships, but inevitably her efforts fail. This character again turns to the comfort and solace of booze in order to deal with the heartbreak of another callous lover, a sugar daddy who “probably left her for a socialite,” and to counter the devastating effects of his crude behavior. As a diner waitress in a tired old bus station, she has only fleeting daily encounters; she has learned not to take a chance on interacting too closely with people holding a suitcase and a ticket out of town. The song “Blue Valentines” (*Blue Valentine*) also illustrates how a character haunted by a failed relationship is dependent upon “a lot of whiskey to make these nightmares go away.” He is a wanderer looking for escape from his past and is always on the run, but, like “a pebble in [his] shoe,” the ghost of a past love constantly haunts him. As seen in this song, troubled relationships may seem to be temporarily subdued by alcoholic anamorphosis, but the next morning, when the situations have not been rectified or the problems resolved, the destructive pattern of negative social consequence simply repeats.

An alcoholic’s desperation to find his next drink and to have somebody to listen to his woes is captured in the song “Virginia Avenue,” from *Closing Time*. This dipsomaniac is frustrated because it is nearly two in the morning and all of the bars are closing. This character is idiosyncratic of many of Waits’s drunks, whom one can imagine stumbling from bar to bar as they close down for the night, only to wait outside for the hour when they will open again the next day. This individual is a wanderer in that he has no place to call home, he lives from town to town and drink to drink, hoping that alcohol will help him escape from “the crazy lizards inside of [his] brain.” This vagabond drunk also dreams that “there’s got to be someplace that’s better than this”; with nothing left to lose, he impulsively jumps on a bus or train every time his depression and chagrin become unendurable or he has seen all of the sights of the town or he is confronted with the formidable task of contending with the people he has left behind. For this character, drinking becomes the only reliable anesthetic left once the bus tickets have run dry.

The altered reality that drunks actively seek out with alcohol consumption is depicted in the song “‘Til the Money Runs Out” (*Heartattack and Vine*), in which the character marvels at “this strange beverage that falls out from the sky.” Faced with daily violence and crime (his friend had 27 stitches in his head, and his watch was stolen), this character resorts to emotional escape “with a pint of green Chartreuse,” which merely takes him to a place where everything seems turned upside down and nothing seems to be quite right as “you buy the Sunday paper on a Saturday night.” Perhaps the extreme measures a drunk will go to for booze are exposed in this song when the character “sold a quart of blood and bought a half pint of scotch.”

Drinking to forget is a common theme found in the piano bar songs of Waits, with an example being “Warm Beer and Cold Women” (*Nighthawks at the Diner*), in which a man is stumbling from bar to bar. Feeling out of
place in every bar that he manages to stumble into, this wanderer is looking for a meaningful interaction with someone who will listen to his problems. Instead, he finds himself meeting a bunch of strangers and repeatedly reliving the same experiences everywhere he takes himself. Surrounded by “platinum blondes and tobacco brunettes,” he is drinking to forget his lot in life and is feeling lost and alone in the crowded room of the “last ditch attempt saloon.” The only thing he can hope for is that the booze will numb his heartache and pain and transport him to somewhere more forgiving and welcoming. A man in the song “Muriel” (Foreign Affairs) has also resorted to whiskey to escape the haunting memory of a girl that follows him wherever he goes, even after he has unsuccessfully left town countless times trying to find a place where she would not be. For him, without Muriel, it seems as if everything has closed down and “there’s one more burned out lamppost on main street down where [they] used to stroll.” Tormented by this failed relationship, he keeps wandering to the next establishment and to buy “another cheap cigar,” only to continue to see her ghost every night. His rational conduct is guided by a succession of small daily occurrences controlled by the past trauma of losing Muriel. Alcohol temporarily cuts “the present off at both ends, to sever the present from history, to abolish time in any other form but a flat collection or an arbitrary sequence of present moments,”9 and this allows the character to find a moment of comfort in this fragmented obscurity. This concept of a continual present is a powerful motivator for all of Waits’s wanderers, who want to live life without consequence or commitment and who wish to escape complicated relationships and emotions.

Similarly, the maudlin sentiments of a heartbroken man who has lost his girl to another man and who is drowning his sorrows in his libation of choice, a bottle of cheap scotch, are disclosed in the song “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart” (Small Change). This song is the epitome of the intoxicated rationalizations of a character who believes he does not have an alcohol problem, “cept when [he] can’t get a drink,” and is unable to handle or deal with emotional pain without the numbing effects of booze. He is unable to stop drinking, even though he realizes that drinking does not take away the pain and suffering caused by his heartbreak and only serves to “substantiate the rumors” that circulate. The two characters in “This One’s from the Heart” (One from the Heart) also cannot handle the pain of being left behind but cannot figure out how move past their disintegrated relationship. Both are trying to move on with their lives and chase after their individual dreams and desires, which were being smothered when they were together. However, as the wandering instinct to pursue these goals takes over for one of them, the person left behind downs “a double sympathy” in order to prepare for another anguished night alone just “wait[ing] by the phone.”

For some of Waits’s characters, like those found in “Putnam County” (Nighthawks at the Diner), who are unable to flee their predicaments and stale situations, bars provide a haven from the everyday domestic and familial responsibilities, such as the chaos of broken toilets, ringing telephones,
field-trip permission slips and porcelain knickknacks. Instead of heading straight home after work, the men of Putnam County all gather at the local tavern, which is swamped until 2 A.M., when the waitresses began putting the chairs on the tables. Avoiding the obligations awaiting them at home, the men find pleasurable liberation in drinking together and harmlessly flirting with the girls and making up stories about their lives, the places that they have been, and the things they have accomplished. Nights of drinking, boasting, and bragging, asserting their masculinity, and making up stories of their past adventures are important for these men, who need at least to take their minds on a journey, even though, in reality, their responsibilities render such opportunities for dream chasing virtually nonexistent. Drinking is a way of bringing the world they cannot explore to them, essentially “leaving home without becoming homeless.”

The drudgery of working-class life for the men in this small town is endured through the cheer of booze and casual conversation with their neighbors in “the little joint winking in the dark warm narcotic American night / beneath a pin cushion sky.”

For many of Waits’s characters, avoiding reality and escaping from emotional hardships is accomplished through drinking. Alcohol gives these characters a momentary feeling of freedom, courage, or happiness, but it is only fleeting until it is replenished with another drink. In addition to physical wandering and traveling, alcohol allows Waits’s characters to embark on emotional, mental, and imaginative journeys in order to escape the problems that seem to coincide with their sobriety. Waits’s own onstage and offstage persona for six albums with Asylum Records was that of a maudlin barfly, his home a piano bench in a crowded bar, and his music often reflective of the staggering gait of a drunk. When his new wife, Kathleen Brennan, pushed him to get sober, Waits was fearful, not knowing if his opus was the result of the liquor talking and wondering, “Am I genuinely eccentric? Or am I just wearing a funny hat.”

Sober for more than 20 years, Waits shifted direction away from the inebriated barfly to the abstract and avant-garde, a move that has resulted in his greatest commercial success and critical acclaim.

**Black Market Babies**

Subject to the common Hollywood malaise, Tom Waits takes an interest in dark alleyways, the wounded American psyche, and the women with blonde hair, dark eyes, and red lips who hope to be movie stars and never make it. He embraces the women with the broken dreams, wearing torn fishnets and red high heels, and shows the desperation in the choices they have made and the fears from which they flee in his compassionate narratives. Where the streets and highways provide freedom, comfort, and endless possibility for some characters, for others, the streets “may prove to be obstacles rather than help, obstacles rather than thoroughfares. They may misguide, divert from the straight path, lead astray.” Waits’s streetwalkers chase after glamorous dreams and try to escape mundane daily life, but they find that the places...
where they had hoped their dreams awaited them are largely unwelcoming and hostile. Rather than establishing some stability, exploring new opportunities, and developing a strong sense of self, these characters try to build identities but find that they repeatedly disintegrate as their failed attempts to realize their dreams forces them to live from one moment to the next. These women turn to prostitution as a means of survival when their dreams have failed them and they have no place to call home but a dingy hotel room or a lonely street corner.

The diversion and escape strippers provide for lonely voyeurs is described in “Pasties and a G-String,” from *Small Change*. Here a drunk tramp heads to the comforting embrace of a strip club, which offers a “little sompin that cha can’t get at home.” The strip clubs, with their promise of hot burlesque, fishnet stockings, spike heel shoes, snakeskin, pasties, g-strings, and dreamy live nude girls, offer a sanctuary complete with drinks and unending visual pleasure to distract souls troubled by their daily life struggles. The strippers are so good that they can make “a dead man cum,” and they are reduced to an assemblage of body parts: cleavage, thighs, hips, and cherry-red lips. For the purpose of the men who return every night for the porno floorshow, the girls are always “creamy and sugared” and totally submissive. The objectification of women and the lack of dimension attributed to their personalities give their audience the opportunity to experience control and power in their own lives, where beyond the walls of the strip club they may have none.

In the song “Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis” (*Blue Valentine*), the character Charley is reading a letter from a hooker who has become pregnant and has begun to straighten out her life, even claiming she quit doing drugs and stopped drinking whisky and has a trombone-playing husband who works at the track and takes her out dancing every Saturday night. She draws for Charley a picture of security, commitment, and tenderness in her relationship with this man who loves her even though she is pregnant with somebody else’s child and who even gave her a ring that belonged to his mother. She reminisces affectionately about Charley and the times they spent together, saying that she thinks of him every time she passes a gas station “on account of all the grease / [he] used to wear in his hair.” She has a history of running away from pain and adversity, and, after her lifetime of trouble, agony, and misfortune, she tells Charley that she thinks she’s happy for the first time since her accident and yearns for the things that she once took for granted in the past, like all the money they wasted on dope and her friends and family back in Omaha. She has constructed intricate fantasies of what she wishes her life could be like, and through her letter to Charley these illusions and dreams materialize for her momentarily, if only for a page. But, once the letter and her delusions have reached an end, she realizes that she is not where she wants to be, and the harsh reality of her life crashes back in, forcing her to admit that she doesn’t have a trombone-playing husband, that she needs to borrow money to pay her lawyer for the trouble she is in, and that she will be soon be eligible for parole “come valentines day.” She is a wanderer without
a home whose daily encounters include crime and prostitution and whose only temporary consolation is her elaborate fabrication of a happy existence, which she invents with a pen and paper. Similarly, the woman in the song “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (*Blood Money*) is a transient in relationships; her inability to commit has resulted in her being ultimately alone as she admits that only strangers sleep in her bed and that her favorite word is goodbye. Marked by the color red and always playing “Russian Roulette in [her] head,” she appears in the song as an existential reflection of the wretchedness of her plight; she is not sure where she how she will be judged or situated—“[h]ow far from the gutter; how far from the pew.” In order to protect her emotional self, she continually moves on, keeping her heart and emotions protected and always remembering to forget.

The dangers of living as a streetwalker are expounded in the violent urban narrative of “$29.00,” from *Blue Valentine*. A little black girl in a red dress is walking the streets with a broken shoe and is told that back home people are still up at night worrying about their little girl and hoping she will make it back safe. She has run away from her life in Chicago to Los Angeles, where the situation is actually much worse when you are in a strange and unfriendly town with only “$29.00 and an alligator purse” and the streets are much less compassionate than back home. She is young, naïve, and unfamiliar with her surroundings, and she is an easy target for duplicitous predators. Her innocence and trust endanger her, as she is so eager to trust in the goodness of the people she meets in this foreign city that it is easy for a seemingly kind and sensitive stranger to make himself feel like a old family friend with simply niceties, coincidences, and commonalities. However, when it is time to turn left and he heads in the opposite direction, she is left powerless over her situation, even though, by running away, she thought she was finally taking control of her life. He takes advantage of her naïveté, tells her she was lucky to run into him, makes her feel in control and confident in her decision to leave Chicago, and builds her trust in him and the streets of Los Angeles. Unfortunately, “he ain’t no good Samaritan,” and “he’ll make sure he’s reimbursed” for a lot more than everything she had in her purse. In this city of glittery dreams, punctuated by the sound of epilogue sirens and wannabe movie-star Los Angeles cops, the little black girl in the red dress who left Chicago looking for somewhere better is now fortunate to be alive, as, in the end, “she only lost a 1/2 pint of blood / $29.00 and an alligator purse.”

The violence and danger of the streets are also represented in “Heartattack and Vine,” from *Heartattack and Vine*, which seems to be the street corner that collects the fallen and downtrodden who have no place else to go. Everyone here is so absolutely bound up in the madness of addiction, crime, or prostitution that it feels as if “there ain’t no devil, there’s just god when he’s drunk.” Prostitution runs rampant on the corner of Heartattack and Vine, pulling innocent new girls into its malignant snares daily, as you would “bet she’s still a virgin, but it’s only twenty five ‘til nine.” A destructive cycle is created as young girls flock to the city looking for adventure and success, do
not find it, and then find themselves, out of desperation, involved in prostitu-
tion, which is inevitably followed by drinking, drugs, or other addictions to
remedy the effects of the prostitution. Many of the young girls chasing after
their dreams might have been better off in Iowa suppressing their wander-
ing impulses, rather than ending up “crawling down Cahuenga on a pair of
broken legs.” While “Dead and Lovely” (*Real Gone*) does not talk specifi-
cally about a streetwalker, it does tell the story of a middle-class girl who,
like the young girls swarming to Hollywood, “thought she could stand up
in the deep end.” In order to get what she thought she wanted, she creates
a new identity and life story, only to be deceived by a man with a “bullet proof
smile” and pockets full of money, who at first spoils her with lavish trinkets
and makes everything seem possible. Things quickly sour as she learns that
everything has its price and realizes that she is in fact the bauble, the orna-
ment, the piece of jewelry on his arm and that he will never give but always
makes sure he gets what he wants. Deluded by a dangerous man who knew
everyone’s secrets, she falls victim to his violence and lies forevermore “dead
and lovely.”

The story of the runaway streetwalker is found again in “A Sweet Little
Bullet from a Pretty Blue Gun” (*Blue Valentine*), where a young girl with
sweet wishes and dreams is standing out in the rain after her exodus from
Nebraska, to which she feels she can never return. She is a wide-eyed and
innocent dreamer, flocking to the sacred Hollywood sign and desiring some-
thing more from life. However, she is sadly disillusioned as she realizes that
Hollywood is not very sympathetic toward sweet young girls with big dreams
but no money, no job, and no way to make it back home. She soon feels she
would “rather die before [she] wake[s]” and throw her dreams out into the
street where the “rain will make ’em grow,” rather than face another tortur-
ous Hollywood day. This girl’s tale of woe is not unlike a thousand that came
before, as the night clerk at the Gilbert Hotel has been privy to every hard-
luck story out there countless times, and her hopelessness perpetually grows
as every day the city continues to swindle young girls out of their hopes,
wishes, and dreams. The precarious situations encountered by this street-
walker are exemplified in the warning given to alert her to the iniquitous and
reprobate intentions of the sinister men who come out after dark. She is also
warned against pretending that the shots she hears outside her window are
anything but real gunshots, as “that ain’t no cherry bomb” and the “4th of
July’s all done,” and dismissing the reality of the life-threatening danger that
faces her and all the other young girls who hope to make it in Hollywood.

In contrast to the lost innocence and shattered dreams of the “little black
girl in the red dress” or the “young girl with sweet little wishes,” the woman
in “Black Market Baby” (*Mule Variations*) has no illusions about her life
and feels no remorse or guilt for her actions, as she is fully in control of her
chosen licentiousness. She is a hooker who has amnesia in her kiss to keep
her empowered and free from any emotional liability. There is a simple man
with a lantern, coal stove, skillet, hound, and warm bed who has made the
mistake of falling in love with this woman, who is his “Black Market Baby” and someone that he sees as a diamond, but he also knows she “wants to stay coal.” Even though he devotes himself to her, strangers and sailors still ring her doorbell, and, just like “a moth mistakes a light bulb / For the moon and goes to hell,” he struggles with the knowledge that his love will not be able to change her or influence her decisions. He also is unable to find a way to end his devotion to her, even though his heart is all too aware of the fact that she will never commit to him. This woman is an emotional wanderer who relies on brief, superficial encounters with other drifters for her living and therefore avoids commitment in order to maintain the power and detachment she would lose in surrendering her heart to someone. Similarly, the “wild rose” in “Low Down” (Orphans—Brawlers) is unapologetic about her actions and is “a crooked sheriff in a real straight town.” She is a swindler, a rebel, and a cheat and is not afraid to use the power of her sexuality to get what she wants. Though her actions might be contemptible (“She’ll steal it from you, sell it right back to you again”), she knows who she is and is unfettered by her rough and “lowdown” reputation. Raising the stakes even higher is the murderous jealousy of the woman in “Widow’s Grove” (Orphans—Brawlers), who is quietly irate that her inebriated husband spent the evening dancing with other women and falling into their warm embraces; in particular, he waltzed much too slowly with the girl from Widow’s Grove. Cold and calculating, she played coy and unknowing as she swept him away from the party still with an icy drink in his hand, which sparkled and danced in the moonlight. Again, she carefully executed her plan; she “hid in the elm and raised the bough, that hung even with [his] neck” and chased him down to the lake, where she drowned him and left him to moan “too drunk to wake.” Complacent in her own righteousness, she displays no remorse for her actions even when, in his last moments, his “mouth was full and wet” and she mercilessly “swallowed all [his] reckless fate.”

Waits’s vividly imagistic songwriting reveals a real sense of humanity toward and in his characters, such as the hookers and streetwalkers who wander the city streets in hopes of someday finding happiness and security. Their stories of pain, danger, escapism, and disillusion are given a sympathetic voice in Waits’s detailed lyrics. Their lives are depicted from emotionally charged perspectives that scrutinize situations and people from the ground up and display compassion toward their difficult choices, rather than passing critical judgment.

THE ONLY KIND OF LOVE

Annihilated relationships, shattered hearts, lonely nights, and wandering souls condition the emotional journeys of Waits’s songs, providing the motivation for the impassioned actions of his characters. They are generally not lucky in love and are often haunted by the memories of a lost love, either deeply embittered by betrayal or deception or remorseful for the behavior
that caused the destruction of their relationships. In the pursuit of love, his characters are often left lonely in crowded rooms, forever scouring the earth for something that may never be or someone whom they once held dear. Love offers escape from dejection and solitude for some characters; for others, love is a torturous ordeal to be avoided. Waits’s characters exist in a postmodern world where relationships and interpersonal exchanges are superficial and fleeting and ideals about commitment and permanence have long been abandoned. In such a chaotic state of human relations, stability is rare, for “romance can no longer be equated with permanence” and “one can hardly ‘hook on’ an identity to relationships which themselves are irreparably ‘unhooked.’” Waits’s characters vary from identity builders dreaming of security and longevity in their relationships to wanderers who seek to break down encompassing restrictions, rules, and consequences with an unquenchable desire for distance and independence.

Regret for a love lost is poignantly displayed in the song “Martha” (Closing Time), in which a character is reminiscing about the days of roses, poetry, and a foolish young love, which was passionate and impetuous; all they had was each other. At the time, they lived in the moment; the mistakes or choices they made seemed inconsequential, and they simply ignored all their troubles and sorrows and “saved them for a rainy day.” Now, 40 years later, when this wandering spirit is caught in a safe and lackluster marriage, the man tracks down the phone number of this past love. He laments losing sight of her in his impulsive youth, where the need to assert his independence, to repudiate commitment, and to chase after his dreams overshadowed his need for a caring relationship. This enterprising character required fragmentation and detachment in order to collect his innumerable life experiences. Commitment at that time in his life carried too many consequences, just as “the once-vaunted ‘cultural capital’ tends to turn in no time into cultural liability.” As the years pass, the thrills and passion of youth and wandering subside, and they both settle down, filling the void of detachment and finding someone to make them feel secure. Perhaps feeling some compunction for abandoning “quiet evenings trembling close to yout,” the character can not help wondering if this woman will even recognize his voice as he belatedly expresses his true feelings: “And Martha, Martha, I love you can’t you see?” Similarly, one of the characters in “The One That Got Away,” from Small Change, bemoans letting a girl slip through his fingers, along with his “equilibrium, [his] car keys and [his] pride.” For this character, the girl perhaps embodies the spirit of the wanderer by moving on with her life and pursuing her goals, as he is left behind with an emotional struggle in her place. To make her seem tangible again, he has her name tattooed on his body and warns the artist to spell her name correctly, as “she’s the one that got away.”

The song “Please Call Me, Baby” (The Early Years Volume 2) also has a main character who has been left by a girl and who is reexamining their deteriorating relationship, in which the two of them were constantly fighting. He feels true remorse and admits that he is by no means perfect; in fact, he
is often selfish, cruel, and blind and is fearful that if he were to exorcise his devils, his “angels may leave too.” He wishes for a second chance now that he is understands that all people say and do crazy and hurtful things when they are wounded. He knows that there has to be more to life than this caustic bickering and sadly wishes that his girlfriend would call from wherever she may be in the hope that he could make amends. In life, love is “so different than it is in your dreams,” and he debates between escaping this difficult situation and staying to prevent his imminent loneliness. Similarly, the character in “Poncho’s Lament” (The Early Years Volume 1) is also not necessarily a wanderer himself but has been deeply affected by someone who has wandered through his life. He feels torn by his contradictory emotions; he is glad that his girlfriend has left him because of their differences, but he still wishes that she would come back to him, as he is struggling to deal with the emptiness of being alone. Admittedly a “lousy liar,” he is unable to move on or maintain a nonchalant front, and he is troubled by the memories of someone he once held very dear: “the stairs sound so lonely without [her],” and he is “too choked up inside to speak.”

The song “San Diego Serenade” (The Heart of Saturday Night) shows the heartache of a character who has left and lost his love and who belatedly realizes all the things that he took for granted, such as her heart, “until someone tried to steal it away.” His need for transience obscured his vision of the love that he had, and, once the devil appeared, he became aware of the angels that were overlooked. He never knew how much he needed her until he was left alone, he “never felt [his] heartstrings until [he] nearly went insane,” and he regrets letting go of a love that he never fully appreciated or consciously experienced while the love light was still shining. Now all of his memories are fading, and he is left to mourn the fact that it is no longer possible to go back and reclaim them. A similar character who “ain’t as bad as they make [him] out to be” is found in the song “Saving All My Love for You,” from Heartattack and Vine. Originally drawn to a responsibility-free lifestyle of girls, prostitutes, and bars, he now wishes he could take everything back in order to have his love near again. He continues to distract himself with superficial pleasures and distractions, but “it’s too early for the circus, it’s too late for the bars,” and he is left alone to reflect upon the consequences of his actions.

Longing for the girl who “became [his] inspiration, oh but what a cost,” the character in “Grapefruit Moon” (Closing Time) finds himself desolate, lonely, and lost, with everything reminding him of his love for her. His grief is so expansive and encompassing that, like “the grapefruit moon, one star shining,” it is “more than [he] can hide” and “all that [he] can see.” A doleful drunk in “Muriel” (Foreign Affairs) is haunted by the image of Muriel, whom he sees “in a penny arcade with [her] hair tied back / and the diamond twinkle in [her] eye.” He tries to escape from his sadness by repeatedly leaving town “to hide from [her] memory,” but her memory follows no matter where he goes. Simply expressed in the song “I Want You” (The Early Years
Tom's Wanderers 87

Volume 2) is the truthful sentiment that would abolish the despair of love, the wandering, the search for meaningful companionship, if only the words “I want you” could translate seamlessly into life. All this character wants is to unconditionally love and to be loved in return.

A spurned lover makes a melancholy plea for affection in “Rosie” (Closing Time) to the girl who is gone; all that she left was a melody.” This song is another example of the narrator’s being affected by the actions of a wanderer as he blames Rosie for leaving him and for his sadness. He embarks on an emotional journey to search his soul for the answers to the questions “Rosie, why do you evade? Rosie, how can I persuade?,” knowing only that he has loved her since the day he was born. Another lover is scorned and rejected in the sorrowful song “Lonely,” also from Closing Time. This discarded lover tries to make sense of the situation and to figure out where everything fell apart, since he thought that he “knew all that there was to.” Again, the girl who has left is seen as the wanderer, since “Melanie Jane, won’t feel the pain” as she moves on with her life. Meanwhile, his senses are assaulted by the bleakness of relentless loneliness, for his love for her has not diminished.

In “Emotional Weather Report” (Nighthawks at the Diner), a despondent character chronicles his cheerless solitude and crestfallen spirit after his girlfriend left him “and put the vice grips on [his] mental health,” leaving him with a broken heart. He hopes that she will return, but he is prepared to deal rationally with his precarious emotions and to mend his scarred heart, as he realistically knows that the chances of her coming back to him are low and “precipitation is expected.” The main character in “2:19” (Orphans—Brawlers) has lost everything in a flood in which his barn was buried beneath a landslide of mud, leaving him with nothing but broken hopes and dreams. While he admits to treating his girl badly, he still does not want to see her leave and doesn’t know how to stop her from “leaving on the 2:19.” While he has always been puzzled by the twists and turns of maintaining a relationship, his view of the relationship was subjective; he simply accepted conflict, and struggle was just a part of what they needed to go through. However, his girlfriend did not see it that way, and, in the end, the loud roar of the train covers the words that he wanted to say. As she fades into the distance, he is still unsure of the emotional impetus behind her departure, as he asks, “Was that a raindrop in the corner of your eye?” and “Were you drying your nails or waving goodbye?” In “Blue Skies” (The Early Years Volume 2), the character is looking for a reason to get out of bed after his wife has walked out on him and their family without a word and left him distraught and helpless. Unable to take care of himself and provide for his family, he implores the blue skies over his head to “[g]ive [him] another woman to take her place.” His feelings of loss are different from those of the previous characters because he is mourning the loss of a caregiver and a means of support, rather than a specific emotional attachment to this woman, and now he just wants someone to take care of him and to reinstate the domestic security to which he was accustomed.
Running away to escape the painful memories of a unidirectional relationship is the subject of “Looks Like I’m Up Shit Creek Again” (The Early Years Volume 1). This character fell in love with a girl who only apathetically returned his affection. She would pick and choose when to release her affections and would love him one day and then the next day unabashedly be with someone new. He is confounded by the contradiction of his situation because, although he feels that he has no reason to stay, his heart cannot face the possibility of leaving her behind. The quest for the comforting arms of love rather than indifference prevails, and he wanders “on this dusty highway” in pursuit of “someone who loves [him] not in vain.” The protagonist in “Trampled Rose” (Real Gone) also battles circumstances in which his affections are not returned. He is dejected and disconsolate after he finds the rose he has given to his beloved lying in the dirty street, trampled with all the spent “fireworks and leaves.” In “Blind Love” (Rain Dogs), the heartbroken character tries to escape from his “stone blind love” and his dejection at being alone in a lifestyle satiated with “hotels and whiskey and sad luck dames” and in which he does not even bother to learn anyone’s name. He tries to escape his sorrows, but, like the character in “Looks Like I’m Up Shit Creek Again,” he is standing at the train station but cannot take that last step onto the train; he finds it too difficult to abandon the possibility that somehow things might reverse themselves. In the meantime, as every night falls and gloom creeps in, the only way he can find her is to close his eyes and encourage his imagination to search for her memory with his blind love.

The powerful duet between the characters Woyzeck and Marie in “All the World Is Green” (Blood Money) depicts the undying love and fragile sanity of Woyzeck and the scorned guilt of his unfaithful wife, Marie. Woyzeck professes his love for his beautiful wife, Marie, but his deep-rooted jealousy surfaces throughout the song, along with his search for dignity, both of which come with unthinkable costs. Marie accepts responsibility for her wrongdoings but looks to Woyzeck for understanding and compassion as “The questions begs the answer / Can you forgive me somehow?” As a soldier, Woyzeck was a transient who moved with the military and was a victim of pharmacological and psychological abuse from his commanding officers, as well as being tortured by his flirtatious and unfaithful wife. All he wishes is to subdue his inner demons and turn back time to a time when everything was seemingly lovely; however, his madness foreshadows his actions with the words “It’s a love you’d kill for” and “The dew will settle on our grave.” Woyzeck’s distrust and resentment grows in the song “Another Man’s Vine” (Blood Money), in which Woyzeck’s life in the military causes him to leave his young wife alone at home and question whether or not she will remain faithful while he is so far away. Lonely because of her abandonment by her husband, Marie looks for affection elsewhere, as she feels “the sun is on the other side.” Soon enough, another man takes advantage of Woyzeck’s absence; he “see[s] a red rose” and must have it, even though it is “Blooming on another man’s vine.” As time passes, the affections of his wife decrease
and are redirected toward someone new, evident by the fact that somewhere along the way she stops writing letters and no longer bothers to read the letters that Woyzeck sends to her. The theme of infidelity is repeated, but differently, in “Lie to Me” (Orphans—Brawlers), in which the main character is excited by the fact that his woman has “got another jockey at home” and just wants to be a temporary lover until her real man shows up again. He is not interested in emotional attachment, has “no use for the truth,” and is looking for a fantasy relationship filled with escapism and heightened tension and in which the woman will just lie to him and then “move on.”

Stalked by an old girlfriend who sends him “blue valentines” to remind him of his past transgressions and to mark the anniversary of someone that he once was, the character in the song “Blue Valentines” (Blue Valentine) cannot seem to escape this woman, even though he tries to remain inconspicuous and just disappear. He is hounded by his past wrongdoings in this blundered relationship, and his conscience does not allow him to rid himself of the guilt he feels “or get these bloodstains off [his] hands.” Her relentless persecution makes him feel that he always needs to be on the run, looking over his shoulder, checking in the rear-view mirror, and changing his name. Unfortunately, there is no escaping his broken promises or the ghosts of her memory, which constantly follow him. He is unable to explain why he tortures himself by hanging onto the guilt and the painful memories when he knows that it would be much healthier to move on with a blind heart, rather than drown himself in a well of whiskey and cut his “bleedin heart out every night.”

The deeply cynical and embittered “Who Are You,” from Bone Machine, depicts a character bruised by someone who has tangled him in a web of lies, which he indiscriminately believed, and reveals his acrimonious sentiments toward this person and her deception. Originally, he fell in love with her strong wit and caustic tone and also her delicate wounded eyes; he felt compassion and attraction toward her contradictory blend of apparent fragility and brazenness. Now he is simply hurt and frustrated by repeatedly taking back this girl, whom he needs to ask, “And just who are you this time?” This girl is a wanderer in the sense that she lives outside the constraints of truth and honesty, every day taking on a new personality and living a new story. She disassembles her identity and commitments, not being bound by past, present, or future trials. Unable to accept her erratic and unpredictable personality, he compares her actions to the prevarication of a carny heckler on the midway; with spite, he tells her to keep taking things the wrong way as he expresses his resentment toward his time spent “in the jail of [her] arms.” This character’s scathing reproach of the girl’s duplicity is blatantly and sardonically asserted in the lyrics “Are you pretending to love / Well I hear that it pays well.” The melodramatic actions of this chameleon girl are also trenchantly criticized as he inquires, “Are you still jumping out of windows in expensive clothes?” He is trying to avenge his lacerated heart by redirecting her malevolence as he demands her remorse for his suffering.
In addition to their physical wandering and vagabond lifestyles, many of Waits’s characters are on emotional journeys. As wanderers, these transient characters are attracted to new experiences, amusements, and possibilities, but Waits recognizes that such fragmented lifestyles may never coalesce comfortably into a cohesive pattern. Therefore, amid broken relationships, forlorn emotions, and maudlin ballads, Waits includes inescapably beautiful moments of tenderness and ardent devotion in songs like “Jersey Girl” (*Heartattack and Vine*), in which the character says that “nothing else matters in this whole wide world / when you are in love with a Jersey girl.” Sublime fondness and lasting commitment are also shown in the penetrating lyrics of “Take It with Me” (*Mule Variations*), in which a character vows his everlasting love and dedication to a heart in a woman, in a house, in a town, in a land that he will hold dear forever; he is “gonna take it / with me when I go.” Similarly, in the ethereal “Coney Island Baby” (*Blood Money*), the lead character says that “[s]he’s the spin on my world” and that “[a]ll the stars make their wishes on her eyes.” Waits’s vagabond wanderers, who have spent their lives escaping familiarity and order, occasionally find moments when they take comfort in being settled and belonging.

An incredibly skilled lyricist, Tom Waits captures the emotional human condition, which is affected by love, longing, and interpersonal relationships, and molds it into often very atypical and transcendent love songs. In his songs about love and relationships, whether miserable failures or spellbound successes, Waits’s words and character development are profoundly affecting as they eschew heightened intellectual emotionalism and instead are firmly grounded in the corporeal feelings and simple truths that everyone can understand.

**Soldier’s Things and Sailor’s Dreams**

The very nature of the occupations of soldiers and sailors requires them to be itinerant, and their lives can often be treacherous and filled with uncertainty. They encounter the dangers and beauty of ocean travel and exotic overseas destinations not ordinarily visited by other wanderers, train hoppers, and tire tramps. Most of the sailors and soldiers in Waits’s music are forced on the road or overseas because of their duties, but others are drawn to this nomadic way of life because of the need to escape from an insufferable home life, a purposeless, meandering existence, or haunts from their past. The military offers security without a complicated emotional commitment and allows its recruits to gain a new identity and develop a sense of purpose or immediacy in their lives. Waits’s military characters grapple with their difficult lives one day, one situation, and one place at a time while pursuing fulfillment, adventure, or emotional freedom. Home for many of Waits’s sailor and soldier characters is a faded picture in a tattered wallet or, for some, a place that will never be found.

The song “Johnsburg, Illinois” (*Swordfishtrombones*) evokes the kind of frayed sentimentality that often accompanies such wanderers on their travels.
It is a simple, short love song from a sailor or soldier sitting in a bar or diner, who, while talking about his girl back home, casually pulls out his wallet and shows her worn photograph to the man beside him. Far away from home, he longingly muses about his true love, without whom he cannot live, while softly contemplating the spot on his arm where he has written her name next to his own. Although this song is only one verse long, it is as meaningful and precious as the cherished photograph that possesses meaning beyond its physical self.

Loneliness and yearning often fill the hearts of soldiers called to serve in military duty far away from home. “Shore Leave” (Swordfishtrombones) concerns a sailor or marine who is on shore leave trying to make every moment of his two-day pass last, while walking down the street “in a Hong Kong drizzle” and missing his beloved wife back home. Certain unusual percussion and horn sounds give a feeling of exoticism, and the music, interestingly, while trying to produce an atmosphere of a wet Hong Kong street late at night, also creates a contrasting visualization of this soldier’s wife at home alone in Illinois, as the soldier wonders if the moon outside his window in China “could look down on Illinois” and illuminate the sky above her there. This soldier is a world traveler because of the nature of his military duty, but he is tethered by his sentimentality and devotion to a place of security and commitment back home. Similarly, the politically charged statement of “Day after Tomorrow” (Real Gone) takes the perspective of an American soldier who is disillusioned with war and who eagerly anticipates his return home to his family. This soldier is forced away from his family to a place where he despairs, where life is difficult and cold and all he does is follow orders. He is irritated and frustrated because he believes he has been misled by the government, which intentionally spreads lies, creating slick and appealing ads and commercials about what it means to be a soldier. A small-town kid holding on to some of his naiveté, this soldier still believes in rainbows, dreams, and gold at the end of the world and misses the simple things in life, such as holding his loved ones close, shoveling snow, and raking leaves. Originally fighting for justice and freedom, now he is merely fighting to survive and to make it though another day in the chaotic and dangerous situations he keeps enduring. Disenchanted by whatever motivated him to join the service, he now feels like “just the gravel on the road,” treated like an expendable commodity. In an interview, Waits delved into this view of dispensability, stating that “[t]he government looks at these 18-year-old kids as shell casings, you know, like we’re getting low on ammo, send in some more. We’re neck deep in the big muddy and the big chief is telling us to push on and offer up our children. I sure wouldn’t want to let my boys go.” The young soldier is lost and confused by the politics of war and the violence around him; he just does what he has been told to do without knowing how to interpret his feelings about the consequences of his actions and about all the lives that have been sacrificed. Unable to comprehend how God is able to determine whose prayers to listen to and “whose prayers does he refuse,” this dispirited
displaced soldier, who is simply lonely, afraid, and confused raw, intensifies the depiction of the raw humanity of war.

Torn between following his “body at home” and listening to his “heart in the wind,” a sailor in “Shiver Me Timbers” (*The Early Years Volume 2*) decides that the call of the sea is irresistible and that he has to leave his family and friends and sail away. This restless soldier cannot fathom staying at home and drifts on in search of inspiring accomplishments and thrilling adventures. He needs to travel alone and to live an independent and unencumbered lifestyle so that he can freely go wherever the ocean waves take him. His impulse toward challenging expeditions and personal explorations takes priority in his life, over even love and family; he feels that nobody knows or understands him and writes his goodbye “By the moon in the sky” as he heads out on his travels. The soldier in “Ruby’s Arms” (*Heartattack and Vine*) also abandons a relationship, although it breaks his heart, because of the intense lure of the adventure and uncertainty of army life. Agrieved by his inability to properly commit to this relationship as it deserves, he decides that, rather than compromise himself or Ruby, it would be best to slip away quietly. He finds emotional comfort in the thought that, even as he now has to leave his beloved Ruby’s arms, she will be able to find another soldier to hold her. Having absolved himself of his guilt for abandoning her, he steps out into the early morning full of wanderlust and heads out to the trains.

Disdain for suburbia and domesticity surfaces in the song “In the Neighborhood” (*Swordfishtrombones*), in which mundane surroundings and trivial annoyances such as tipped-over garbage cans, construction work, noisy delivery trucks, and broken windows signify the hassles of neighborhood life. The character in this song is frustrated by the “goddamn flatbed” that has him “pinned in again”; it is symbolic of the entrapment he feels is inherent in his entire situation and existence. Everyday predictability, such as “Friday’s a funeral and Saturday’s a bride,” is unbearable in this suburban neighborhood where everybody’s personal life is public and everyone knows what everyone else is doing at all times. In order to escape the suffocating chokehold of domesticity and complacency, one character joins the army in order to free himself and experience the world from a new perspective.

“Cold Cold Ground” (*Frank’s Wild Years*) begins with a scene in an old café abroad somewhere where a couple of soldiers are sitting together. One of them is a quite young recruit who “never slept with a dream before he had to go away.” Back home, “Uncle Ray bought a round” to drown everyone’s concern and worry for their loved ones overseas in the cold trenches and to help them focus on living their own lives. This song looks at the voids that soldiers leave behind at home and the sometimes cruel sentimentality that is displayed by those left behind in order to conceal their emotional weakness and vulnerability. Riddled with references to death, “Cold Cold Ground” is a sobering look at empty aspirations, violence, and the futility and unfairness of life. Dreams are buried in the consequences of war, as anything beyond survival becomes frivolous, as “the piano is firewood” and “Times Square is a
dream” and everything has become utterly bleak; ambitions are aborted, and no one knows where to turn.

The song “Time,” from *Rain Dogs*, portrays the undoing of a man who has found himself east of East St. Louis and who is falling into disconsolation as he begins to understand that his life has become desperate and elusive. He has a growing awareness of the fact that there is nothing left for him where he is, and he feels deserted as the moon looms overhead and even the band has gone home for the night. He then joins the army, where everyone pretends to be an orphan in order to evade the emotional strain of commitment and responsibility to family and friends, who are left behind to put candles in the windows and anxiously await the soldiers’ return. The dreams, memories, and prayers of sailors, soldiers, and other wanderers can easily become confused with the forged reality of erasure and negation inherent in their lives, especially when they are forced to reevaluate the motivations for their actions. Soldiers and sailors protect themselves from their emotions by not becoming attached to the people they meet; the fewer personal feelings invested, the less it will cost to move on. There is a terrible beauty in the lines “So just close your eyes, son,” for “this won’t hurt a bit”; they evoke the deep isolation and the desperate heroism of being caught between nowhere and no one, trying to tackle the world alone.

In the song “Singapore” (*Rain Dogs*), the theme of the sea voyager is presented. Sailors who have been all over the world, from tawny moors to the sewers of Paris, leave home, and their loved ones must again say goodbye as the seafarers embark on another journey to Singapore. These men find escape from domesticity and are hardened by life on the ocean, where new recruits are quickly molded to be tough and mean. Home is now an iron ore vessel where the rules are different; all actions become much more relevant and efficacious, as “in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.” However, while these sailors may rove to countless exotic places and take on many new lovers while on shore, they are reminded that, while partaking of the pleasurable distractions on land, they must not fall asleep and must always be alert to danger and prepared to leave whenever they hear “that steeple bell.”

Violence and paranoia fill the powerful song “Hoist That Rag” (*Real Gone*), another example of Waits’s newfound political commentary on the U.S. government and its ideology. The beginning of part of America’s violent history is introduced in the song with references to Piggy Knowles and Sing Sing Tommy Shay Boys, who belonged to the infamous Hook Gang in New York City. Here, America is Waits’s transient character, as the American government tries to become omnipresent and to impose its grandiose policies and righteous beliefs on other countries in order to protect U.S. interests. “Hoist that rag,” “the cracked bell rings,” and “the ghost bird sings” are all references to idols of American patriotism—the U.S. flag, the Liberty Bell, and the bald eagle—but the terms “rag,” “cracked,” and “ghost” indicate that perhaps these symbols have been damaged by their use as beacons of freedom in unwanted wars. The soldiers in this song appear to be reluctant participants
who are ordered to open fire as soon as they step off the boat and onto the shore and who numb themselves to the daily horrors they encounter.

The trauma of experiencing war firsthand overwhelms the soldier in “Swordfishtrombone” (Swordfishtrombones), who returns home from the war mentally traumatized “with a party in his head” and “an idea for a fire-works display” and who hides himself away in a room above a hardware store, unable to properly function and reorient himself to reality without a machete in one hand and a bottle of scotch in the other. In order to repulse the nightmares and trepidation of combat embedded in his thoughts and memories, and to unearth new possibilities of life after war, he heads out to California in search of something to help him cope with things he cannot forget. The alluded-to substance and alcohol abuse may help the soldier escape the traumatic ravages of war and the constant memories that plague him, but, combined with his psychological instability from his service, it also leads to violent crimes. The various events of his life all illuminate his patterns of escape and his pronounced mental instability. He is left degraded, ruined, and surrounded by colorful rumors; “some say he’s doing the obituary mambo,” “some say he’s hanging on the wall,” and some say they saw him “sleeping in a box car going by.” It is a struggle to piece together the truth about this ambiguous character, whose existence seems based on uncertainty, rumors, and unknowing and who incarnates many aspects of the idea of the wanderer as he drifts through his realities and the imaginations of those who vie to tell the biggest tale.

In “Tom Traubert’s Blues” (Small Change), the main character Tom wants to go “waltzing Matilda” to break the despondency of being a soldier. He is tired of being surrounded by other soldiers and of being in foreign lands where no one speaks English and he is cold and miserable. The song refers to the Australian folksong “Waltzing Matilda,” by Banjo Peterson, in which the term “waltzing Matilda” means to go wandering around looking for a job carrying only a pack with the bare necessities. The pack is called a matilda, and if you were to walk behind someone carrying such a pack on his back, the up and down movement of the pack would make it appear to “waltz.” To explore the countryside or outback with all of your possessions wrapped in a grey blanket on your shoulder, in search of stark beauty, isolation, and escape from bustling urban centers, fuels a deep yearning in many wanderers. Tom Traubert has lost his patron saint of safe travel, St. Christopher, and is not looking for sympathy. He just wants the simple diversion of going waltzing Matilda to escape the haunts and horrors that would otherwise occupy his mind. He is a wanderer who travels alone, nursing a “wound that will never heal” and searching for his personal dreams and aspirations.

A war veteran in the song “Soldier’s Things” (Swordfishtrombone) has returned or retired from the service and is having a yard sale. He longingly reminisces about his glory days in battle. This song examines how people’s personal belongings, such as swallowtail coats, tablecloths, patent leather shoes, and bathing suits, take on certain human characteristics; shoes or
boots can hold the shape of the feet of the previous owner and visually relate the journeys they have been on. As this soldier’s service memorabilia and medals are being sold off in a dollar bin, we see a chapter being closed in the life of a world traveler.

Soldiers and sailors are commanded to wander and travel the world. It is considered a duty and therefore they often feel no guilt when they abandon their loved ones. The military offers security without a complicated emotional commitment and allows its recruits to gain a new identity and to develop a sense of purpose or immediacy in their lives. Waits’s military characters grapple with their difficult lives, one day, situation, and place at a time, while pursuing fulfillment, adventure, a sense of duty, or, in some cases, emotional freedom.

**Train Songs**

Trains are a recurring image in Tom Waits’s music. Characters are seen leaving on trains or experiencing life jumping trains; sometimes the outside world is depicted as it would be seen through the observation window of a train. The actual physical image of the train can be found represented in the wheeze, groan, chug, and clank of songs such as “Gospel Train” (*The Black Rider*) and “Clang Boom” (*Real Gone*), in which Waits attempts to recreate the actual sound of a locomotive with train whistles, low wind and string instruments, and imaginative percussion (and mouth percussion). Rich sources of imagery and humanity are associated with trains, such as the scenes of slow, heavy departure; loved ones fading into the distance; picturesque scenery; dark tunnels; freight yards littered with hobos and vagabonds; thick, black billows of coal smoke and steam; the haunting sound of train whistle blasts; the immediate sense of being transported somewhere else and not being able to stop until you arrive at your destination; a feeling of escape; and the sensation of being conveyed from one place to another that is new and alive with possibilities. The trains in Waits’s songs are also often accompanied by the dramatization of train hoppers and their insecurities and by the migratory nature of their lifestyle. Trains provide an escape route for transients, who can simply ride the rails to the next freight yard or town when life becomes too unbearably settled or filled with ruin.

Waits uses train imagery to evoke the contrast between a certain rural, industrial, or even antiquated scene and our rapidly advancing, computerized and technological society. Trains are in sharp contrast to air travel, where the images are much stranger and evoke a very different sentiment. With airplanes, loved ones walk through a metal detector and disappear, so the same sense of departure and closure achieved by watching someone fade into the distance on a train is not possible. The presence of the image of a locomotive fading away is very effectively handled metaphorically in the song “Time” (*Rain Dogs*), in which soldiers pretend that they are orphans and that, to protect their emotional state, their memories must fade away like a
train that you can see “getting smaller as it pulls away,” and literally in “2:19” (*Orphans—Brawlers*), in which “[o]n the train you get smaller as you get further away.” In a different way, this depiction of the association between fading memories and trains is also found in “Blind Love” (*Rain Dogs*); a character stands at the train station but cannot manage to step onto the train because he does not want to lose his treasured memories of his love, who has left him. Trains embody the notion of forward motion and of transporting characters to new places and new experiences. Each destination is merely a stopover for the vagabond stranger, who is “pushed from behind by hopes frustrated, and pulled forward by hopes untested.”

“Town with No Cheer” (*Swordfishtrombones*) is about a small, miserable old town in Australia that was devastated when the Victoria Railway Company decided that the only bar in the town, which it operated, was no longer necessary and “the train stopped in Serviceton less and less often.” This small town, whose existence depended upon the goods and services it provided and received as a train stop for the past 65 years, was now slowly being abandoned because there was no longer an “oasis for a dry local grazier.” The townspeople were dependent upon the travelers who rode the rails; once they no longer stopped in Serviceton, they had no other way to support their tourism-based livelihood. The Freedom bell ringing at the beginning of the song, accompanied by lonely bagpipes, helps accent the feeling of gloom looming over the ghost “town with no cheer,” now viewed only from the windows of the trains passing by. There are stark dichotomies between new and old, urban and rural, prosperity and regression, which are created as the train is used as a point of observation separating the “newfangled buffet cars and faster locomotives” from the dusty “long faces” of the 80 townspeople of Serviceton. The train, which once symbolized opportunity for this small town, has now become a source of heartache, and for Vic Rail, the whistle-stop is only a fleeting memory in a business ledger. The idea of the train as a point from which to observe the world is also present in “9th and Hennepin” (*Rain Dogs*), in which a vagabond describes his decrepit neighborhood and the derelicts who inhabit it in the image that he has “seen it all through the yellow windows / of the evening train.”

Trains are important fixtures in the lifestyles of wandering hobos and vagabonds, as freight hopping is a primary means of transportation and survival. “Diamonds and Gold” (*Rain Dogs*) describes the difficulty a hobo has in tearing himself away from life on the railroad, the mad dogs of summer, and everything that he knows. The song explores the desperation of life on the railroads, where survival instincts overshadow any issues of morality or ethics. Even if they are wounded or broken, the hobo will keep on going and sleep at the side of the road. The lyrics also speak to the inherent greed and avarice of capitalist society—what people will do for diamonds, silver, gold, oil, stocks, a promotion. Brutality and violence occur frequently in the lives
of vagabonds and railroad tramps, as shown in this song, in which one transient is attacked and has his knees shattered and, more figuratively, another character, rising to success, has his hopes destroyed and, like scavengers looking for something to get them ahead, his fellow drifters rifle through what is left of his belongings. For these railroad vagabonds and opportunists, “a hole in the ladder” renders escape from their personal turmoil impossible, as the “hills are green” only in stolen dreams; even then, their dreams are not safe from pillage.

The hobo lifestyle on the rails also emerges in the rowdy field holler “Cold Water” (*Mule Variations*), in which a train-hopping vagabond claims “there ain’t nothin’ sweeter” in the world “than ridin’ the rails.” The lonely down-trodden anthem “Bottom of the World” (*Orphans—Brawlers*) is filled with boxcar transients who have had the brotherhood and freedom of railway life instilled into them early in life by their family and friends, who claimed that “[t]he best friend you’ll have is a railroad track.” The wanderers in this song are filled with stories to share and are simply looking for meaning in life, doing everything they can to sustain themselves, and grasping at the memories of what were once dreams. These wayward vagabonds may be lost at the “bottom of the world,” yet they are still held together by hope and beauty. One character, even though he slept in a field last night, still finds beauty in the situation as he recounts the wonder of a drop of dew balanced perfectly on a blade of grass. Home is never one place for very long; for the main character, who has been on the move since he was 13, the “bottom of the world” may not be such a terrible place. It is all he knows, and he speaks not of regret but of the people he encounters and his dreams about a beautiful girl. In contrast, the soldier in “Ruby’s Arms” (*Heartattack and Vine*) is filled with regret as he leaves his love in the middle of the night, taking with him nothing but his boots and leather jacket, and heads out to where “the hobos at the freight yards have kept their fires burning.” Overwhelmed by his tumultuous emotions, he is torn between his need to get on a train and leave this place and the knowledge that, if he leaves, he will never see his girl again. His need for independence and personal equanimity carry a greater weight than his need for stability. This character is taken away by the next train, hoping that all of his pain stays behind. This train hopper’s sense of purpose is found in the life experiences he acquires while riding the rails. He keeps his adventures short but continuous, as “the shorter the trip, the greater the chance of completing it.”

Trains and train stations are places where hurt, lost, and dejected characters in Tom Waits’s songs seek refuge, solace, and anonymity and where hopeful people may dream or create new identities for themselves. A drunk whose girlfriend has left him for another man drowns his sorrows at train station bars “with all these conductors and porters” in the song “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart” (*Small Change*). These types of places signify, for some, the potential for change and the opportunity to move on to a new place, to a new start. This is especially true for Waits’s character Frank, in
“Yesterday Is Here,” from Frank’s Wild Years, who declares that he is leaving for New York City on a train and is filled with the hope that he will become famous and make his fortune. Similarly, the characters in “Down There by the Train” (Orphans—Bawlers) are searching for a new identity for themselves by seeking redemption. The uncompromising universality of grace is shown by the fact that the whistle and the bell of the train to forgiveness can be heard equally “[f]rom the halls of heaven to the gates of hell.” On this train, all of the forsaken are carried to the “trestle down by Sinner’s Grove,” where salvation reigns and there is the promise of being “washed in the blood of the lamb” “of all your sins and all of your crimes.” The “blood of the lamb” is a judgment of grace, and, therefore, redemption without the fear of retribution is presented as a possibility for everyone, even the worst sinners. All of the passengers are treated equally, whether they have lost all hope, are criminals, are shameful, are whores, or are “the soldier who pierced the heart of the Lord.” The train carries all of the runaways, all those who have lost their faith, all the blatantly irreligious, and all those who hide in the shadows to a place in the light, because on this train they are able to start over, restore their hope, and be freed from their past transgressions. The train brings the sinners and takes away the redeemed. Like the notion of transience, salvation in this case is so free and boundless that it encourages the idea of forgiveness among all individuals; everyone’s name will be on the clemency list on Judgment Day, and they will be gathered together to receive their pardons.

Trains also possess a strangely inexplicable allure of promise and adventure. Wilhelm, an innocent city clerk, is drawn down the path of diablerie and corruption by a train that has the devil as its conductor, asserting that there is room for one more passenger, in the song “Gospel Train,” from The Black Rider. Waits’s characters who are seduced by life on the railroads end up being strangers wherever they go, governed by intuition, caution, risks, and chance, as “Satan will fool you” even though you “trust in the Lord.” The lifestyle of an itinerant train hopper involves anticipating the movements of one’s adversary and being flexible in the face of the obstacles the world inevitably conjures. The trajectory of the wanderer is often determined simply by the destination of the next train, and thus every day has no advance itinerary and is unpredictably pieced together. In contrast, the main character in “Fannin Street” (Orphans—Bawlers) rue the day he ever got off the train and settled down, as it was not his vagabond lifestyle that was his ruin but the temptations and seduction of Fannin Street, as he realized too late the seductive power of drinking, gambling, and deception. The enticement and appeal of all the “glitter and the roar” of Fannin Street overtook his transient and adventurous nature. When he was young, his instincts impelled him to seek out an itinerant lifestyle, and with ease he was able to say goodbye to family, home, and neighborhood. It was stepping off the train and staying put that has brought him to this place “where the sidewalk ends,” and he is now “lost and never found.”
In “Downtown Train” (Rain Dogs), the train embodies both hope and disappointment as a person anxiously awaits the appearance of the object of his affection on the downtown train, even though he knows that “every night is just the same.” The train becomes a place of expectation and disillusionment in love for this person, who believes that surely with all the people whose paths cross in the subways he will encounter someone who has more depth and insight than the usual Brooklyn girls, who “try so hard to break out of their little worlds” but do not have the richness of character that will capture his heart. He is left longing for his true desire. The train offers this individual a place of hope and anticipation where his loneliness may be overcome and two worlds can possibly collide.

Late in the exploits of Frank, as shown in “Train Song” (Frank’s Wild Years), the train signifies the misery, hopelessness, and failure of Frank’s situation, as he finally breaks down in East St. Louis with no dreams, no money, and no one. He laments that “[i]t was a train that took me away from here / but a train can’t bring me back home.” The train was supposed to carry him off to fame and fortune; all his problems would be obliterated, and his dreams would come true. However, although the train did succeed in transporting him somewhere far from where he began, it took him even further away from attaining his goals, so that now he has traveled a great distance without accomplishing anything memorable or of worth. Trains embody the notion of propulsion, but when his dreams did not materialize as he had hoped, returning to the life he once had was difficult. The train has guilelessly failed Frank, as, for all the promise it delicately presented, he abandoned and destroyed everything that he had, ultimately determining his own fate and taking himself far beyond the reach of a train ride in order to return back home.

The grind and wheeze of the train engine and the blasts of the whistle fit snugly into Waits’s musical soundscapes and add an appropriate smear of coal dust to his lyrics and characters. The sonic beauty of a train wreck and the piercing scream of metal against metal inspire many of Waits’s songs. By stepping on (or off) a train, his characters are hoping to immerse themselves in the allure of unpredictability and in new and bizarre experiences.

THE WILD YEARS

One particular character in Waits’s music, an entertainer named Frank O’Brien, is subjected to extraordinary development. This recurrent character is worked into the fabric of numerous songs as early as “Frank’s Song” (The Early Years Volume 1), depicted in depth in Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, and Frank’s Wild Years, and transformed into a powerful theatrical work. Elements of insanity, escapism, military trauma, encounters with temptation, addiction, and failed love are the subject and themes Waits explored and eventually coalesced into the personality of Frank by the time he created Frank’s Wild Years. Biographical information on Frank must be gleaned
retrospectively from textual indications, as Waits scattered the obscure circumstances of Frank’s past among the songs from these three albums.

*Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs,* and *Frank’s Wild Years* can be considered a trilogy in terms of music, style, and production values. These three albums are a major departure from Waits’s past musical styles and are a progressive exploration of new timbral and textural varieties seeped in exciting new instrumentation. These albums are linked by the character Frank, who is introduced in *Swordfishtrombones,* developed in *Rain Dogs,* and then followed on his ill-fated orphic quest for fame in the play *Frank’s Wild Years.* Though all of the songs from *Swordfishtrombones* and *Rain Dogs* do not necessarily contain biographical material or direct references to the character Frank, they provide a foundation for the emotional and psychological development of his transient character and how it gets represented lyrically and musically. The saga of this battered musician, who abandons his small-town misery, begins on *Swordfishtrombones* with the song “Frank’s Wild Years,” which creates the atmosphere for Frank’s seduction, forays with the devil, fabulous adventures, and perilous exploits. It is here that Frank torches his suburban southern California home and heads north on the Hollywood Freeway. An ambitious accordion player who has fallen on hard times, Frank finds himself freezing on a park bench in a snowstorm, with only fleeting memories of his imagined triumphs as a nightclub entertainer.

In “Frank’s Wild Years,” from *Swordfishtrombones,* Frank finds his beginnings in typical middle-class bondage. He is a used-office-furniture salesman who “assumed a $30,000 loan / at 15-1/4% and put a down payment on a little two bedroom place” and who leads a dull, uneventful, and unsatisfying life. He has an insubstantial relationship with his wife, whose only redeeming quality is that she can make good Bloody Marys, and he is repulsed by the blind, skin-diseased Chihuahua that is the family pet. Since he is leading a normal middle-class life with no major turmoil, Frank is forced into the illusion that “they were so happy.” But for a suppressed nightclub entertainer, being settled down in the Valley is not bringing him any closer to attaining his dreams of success and fame. One night, on his way home from his unfulfilling job as a salesman, he decides he can tolerate it no longer, and so, fueled by a bellyful of beer, he douses the family home with gasoline and watches it burn to the ground. This eventful night demonstrates Frank’s psychological disturbance and reveals his urge to run away as a means of escaping the shackles of domesticity. His actions signal the beginning of the rash of irrational behavior to follow as he heads out on the highway and, with no indication of remorse, has one final thought—“[n]ever could stand that dog”—as he sets out to make his dreams come true.

While songs like “Swordfishtrombone” and “Shore Leave,” from *Swordfishtrombones,* and “Singapore” and “Time,” from *Rain Dogs,* do not necessarily indicate that Frank was literally a seafaring man or a soldier, they do help to elucidate various motivations and causes behind the mental instability and irrational behavior that eventually consume Frank in *Frank’s Wild Years.*
Years. Although it is debatable whether or not he actually is the character in “Swordfishtrombone” who comes home from “the war with a party in his head,” it is undeniable that he too has “a mad dog that wouldn’t sit still,” which inspires his wandering spirit. Also from Swordfishtrombones, the song “In the Neighborhood” depicts the military as a means of escaping a mundane life in suburbia filled with trivial annoyances and works to support the underlying theme of Frank’s running away to evade his problems and unhappy situations. The thematic ideas of insanity, delusion, and mental instability are synthesized in songs like “Rain Dogs,” where wanderers have “always been out of [their] minds,” and “Clap Hands” (Rain Dogs) with its lyric “Sane, sane, they’re all insane.” Both of these songs develop the idea of mental disintegration, which later crystallizes with Frank’s downfall.

The early workings of the subject matter for Frank’s chaotic encounters with temptation and his eventual undoing can be found in such songs on Swordfishtrombones as “Down, Down, Down,” where the moonshine-drinking, tobacco-chewing, cheating, and lying character is easily swayed by the devil, who “called him by name”; “Trouble’s Braids,” in which the character gets into mischief one time too many and winds up a wanted fugitive; and “Union Square,” which has the character “goin’ down down down.” The song “Jockey Full of Bourbon” (Rain Dogs) is imbued with the hallucinatory images and crazed situations encountered by an inebriated, bourbon-drinking vagabond. The lyric “Across the stripes of a full moon’s head” and “A flamingo drinking from a cocktail glass” explore the language of hallucinations and wild imagination, which, for Frank, distort his surroundings and limit his ability to distinguish illusions from reality. Prevarication and deception are manifest in “Tango Till They’re Sore” (Rain Dogs), in which Frank admits that he will openly and freely expose all of his deep secrets, but, in the interest of self-preservation and the attainment of his goals, he must lie about his past or at least give it an interesting spin. These actions predict Frank’s suffocation in a web of lies and misguided truths. This song also gives a glimpse of the future circumstances of Frank’s failed dreams, when the disillusioned character requests his theme song but then is forced to concede that daisies will have to suffice as he is brought back to the reality of his situation.

Failed love and loneliness have been an inspiration for many of Waits’s moving and maudlin ballads. Frank’s character is unsuccessful in his pursuit of love, and this aspect of his personality has long been in development, from the heartfelt devotion of “Johnsburg, Illinois” (“[s]he’s my only true love” and “she’s all that I think of”) to the sad “Hang Down Your Head,” in which the girl is blamed for the failed relationship in which she tore “the promise from [her lover’s] heart” and caused him so much pain that he had to leave, to the deeply embittered “Gin Soaked Boy,” in which the theme of betrayal is prevalent in the lyrics “you’ve been lying to me” and “[h]ow could you crawl so low.” Throughout the course of the trilogy, the full spectrum of Frank’s romantic interchanges is presented and explored. When faced with misfortune or adversity in his romantic involvements, Frank’s
impulse to flee from the source of discomfort or pain is often overwhelming. This issue is raised and questioned in “Frank’s Wild Years” when he “got on the Hollywood Freeway,” and in “Swordfishtrombone,” where “he packed up all his expectations” and “he lit out for California.” The albums *Swordfishtrombones* and *Rain Dogs* provide an initial insight into the character development of Frank, whose character emerges full force in *Frank’s Wild Years*.

With the background emotional and psychological profile of Frank introduced, *Frank’s Wild Years* reveals his intense journey of imagined triumph, fabricated success, predestined failure, and lacerated redemption. The play and album *Frank’s Wild Years* takes the form of a reminiscence, the story of an ordinary person who let dreams and fantasy dominate his life. Eventually, Frank’s dreams shatter and crash to the ground, and the mourning for a life lost sets in with the sobering “Cold Cold Ground” and “Train Song” (*Frank’s Wild Years*). It was Waits’s wife, Kathleen Brennan, who came up with the appropriate secondary title “*un operachi romantico in two acts*” for *Frank’s Wild Years*, signifying the combination of popular music styles used, such as mariachi and classical operatic elements. After working on *One from the Heart* with Francis Ford Coppola, Waits explored the possibilities of opera and of completely integrating a fully realized story and intricate characters into music with his work on *Frank’s Wild Years*.

The story of one man’s downfall and eventual redemption in the play begins with an impoverished and disconsolate Frank freezing on a park bench in East St. Louis, reevaluating his shortcomings and failures moments before death. For Waits, the story of *Frank’s Wild Years* chronicles a guy from a small town who goes out to seek his fame and fortune; a standard odyssey. Eventually, what happens is that he dreams his way back home to the saloon where he began. He’s given . . . a ticket home, and there he tells the story of his success. But he stops in the middle of it, and tells the real story. He’s no hero, he is no champion; wasn’t what he says he was. He was, really, a guy who stepped on every bucket in the road. His friends pull him out of it, and tell him he’s got plenty to live for. In the end, he wakes up on the bench, ready to start again.18

As Waits commented, “It was the snowflake that didn’t fall that saved him from hitting the freezing point”19 and gave him a second chance. Frank is a wanderer who views “human reality as a series of episodes, that is as events without past and with no consequences” and eventually “imagined himself a scriptwriter and a director pulling the strings of other people’s lives without damaging or distorting their fate.”20 As Frank attempts to re-create and gain control over his own life and achievements, he simply patches together reality and his imaginative creations without truly recognizing their boundaries or consequences. Waits sets the scene for the story of Frank’s decline in the liner notes of *Frank’s Wild Years*:
Rainville. Hardly ever did though, rain that is. It was nowhere. Railroad tracks ran up the back of the state like stitches. Telephone lines slashed the orange dawns like a wrecked ships rigging. . . . And when it rained the whole town went mad. Dogs ran wild in the streets. Frank was squeezed between scrap iron places and radiator repair shops. . . . Rainville, good place to dream yourself away from. When the trains thundered past the backyard fence, bound for Oxnard, Lompoc, Gila Bend, Stanfield and parts south where the wind blew big, Frank would count the cars and make a wish just like he did when he was a kid. . . . At least something was getting out of town alive. . . .

One moonlit night Frank packed up his accordion and said blow wind blow wherever you may go . . . cause I’m going straight to the top . . . up where the air is clean.

Frank is well traveled and has experienced his fair share of life’s struggles and hardships. Frank’s Wild Years opens with “Hang On St. Christopher,” in which once again Frank seeks escape and is plagued by both good and evil forces as he tells St. Christopher to hang on and open up the passenger side door so that the devil can ride alongside. His ambitions as a lounge singer crystallize in the song “Straight to the Top” as he experiences the seductive power of success, Reno, and disillusionment. In his journey toward stardom, Frank also wants to truly escape from himself, as shown in “Blow Wind Blow” by the lyrics “you gotta take me on into the night” and “Blow me away,” which reveal his desire to be absolved of any responsibility in determining his fate. His impending failure is fueled by his propensity for fabrication and by his turbulent imagination; he swears he was riding a field mouse, dancing in a slaughterhouse, sitting on a high chair, and smoking like a diesel. Governed by a will much more powerful and dominating than his own, Frank cannot resist the pull of temptation and appropriates it as an excuse for his actions and for his blatant disregard for consequence, as exemplified in the song “Temptation,” in which his will has vanished and “now [his] confusion is oh so clear.” Temptation becomes closely linked both to the construction of Frank’s illusory reality, in which everything originates in dreams, and to the assailable constitution of his dreams, where he admits “I just know that she is made of smoke” but must continue down this path because he is not prepared to fully abandon his goals quite yet.

“Innocent When You Dream” reveals Frank’s regrets for his fissured past and marks his inability to find resolution in his life beyond the terrain of his escapist dreams. Frank is haunted by guilt from his broken past, riddled with incidents from broken relationships, but finds comfort in the thought that you’re still innocent when you dream. Similarly, in “I’ll Be Gone,” Frank turns to escape in his effort to temper the memories he cannot seem to discard and to find release from his misgivings. Unable to make his dreams permeate his reality, he instinctively runs away from his problems and in the process “find[s] every boot that’s leaving” and “shoot[s] all the lights in the café” so that in the morning he will be gone, with only his emotional debris left behind. The longing for his past as his present situation rapidly
deteriorates continues in “Yesterday Is Here,” in which he understands that if he wants the domestic comforts of money in his pocket, a top hat on his head, hot meals on the table, and a warm bed at night, he will have to wait until “yesterday is here” and the life that he abandoned comes full circle. For Frank, the potential for success lies before him, and he needs to try to actively chase his dreams while “the moon is shining bright,” rather than hope that the past will somehow reinvent itself. He is unwilling to suppress his goals of fame and glory, and his need for constant escape is invigorated by his belief that “If you want to go” to “where rainbows end,” you will have to say good-bye to the past in order to move forward.

Frank constantly struggles to get by in his daily life as he fights for control and seeks out the solace and security of love. “Please Wake Me Up” gives a glimpse of the perfect love that will “fit right into [his] scheme,” which he yearns for in the midst of his failed relationships. He is waiting for the day “when our divorces are final.” His romantic pursuits and passion live with his hopes in his dreams, the only place true companionship and comfort exist for Frank. Act I of the album Frank’s Wild Years concludes with Frank dreaming “away tomorrow” and running away from himself and his life’s struggles in the song “Frank’s Theme.” His solution for all of his problems is to dream away his sorrows, all of his painful goodbyes, and all of the pain he has caused others. He convinces himself that “up ahead the road is turning” for him. Frank has gathered life experiences that everyone can relate to, such as heartbreak, despair, depression, fear, and temptation, but he copes with his crises in a perhaps less than ideal manner.

In Act II of Frank’s Wild Years, Frank’s dreams become porous and steeped in reality as he no longer can avoid or escape truth as depicted in “More Than Rain.” He realizes that his dreams are not working out as he had planned, and, as his illusions crumble, he understands that his problems cannot be dismissed as just a little rain on his parade; the turmoil he is enduring is more than just sad times and thunder. Penniless and ill fated, Frank sees that “nobody’s caught the bouquet” and that “nothing is going [his] way” as his dreamscape slowly crumbles and gives way to grey skies. He is cautioned against once again retreating to the oblivion of his dream world and is even entreated by a street-corner evangelist, in the song “Way Down in the Hole,” to be aware of his inability to resist temptation, the allure of evil, and the power of “the fire and the fury” of the devil. Frank is told that he would have nothing to worry about if only he will “hold on to Jesus’ hand” and walk alongside the angels, who will shield him with their wings.

Frank’s wild abandon and determination to achieve success emerge in the Vegas version of “Straight to the Top” and “I’ll Take New York” as he reaches for “the moon and the stars” and believes in his impossible fantasies. He wants to be so successful that everyone will roll out the red carpet and “break into the best / champagne when [he] land[s]” as his career flourishes in New York. However, Frank’s evil and chaotic constitution dilutes these imaginary aspirations with the outrageous images from “Telephone
Call from Istanbul.” His encounter with this distorted reality, which includes blue donkeys and monkeys riding fans, brings forth the erratic advice to “never trust a man in a blue trench coat” and to “never drive a car when you’re dead,” words that ooze a Waitsian brand of wisdom.

Frank O’Brien’s uncontrollable actions are a result of his turbulent and chaotic past, and the brutal fact that he is powerless to govern or predetermine them is finally acknowledged in the harrowing “Cold Cold Ground”; he falls into a reactive existence, in a way observing his life as he realizes that it is passing him by. He looks for comfort but is faced instead with the idea that he will never escape this drudgery until he effectively buries every dream in the “cold cold ground.” The lines “stop talking to the neighbors” and “beware of my temper” also reflect his borderline psychosis and his incapacity to properly channel his negative emotions. As a result of his instability and his inability to control the consequences of his destructive actions and failures at love, he once again seeks out sweet escape. However, Frank cannot wander forever; eventually, he is forced to examine his life and to deal with his problems.

“Train Song” reveals Frank’s decline and is truly representative of where the sidewalk ends. The train signifies the misery, hopelessness, and failure that face Frank, who has arrived with no dreams, no money, and no one. In the past, when faced with difficulty or seemingly insurmountable pressures, Frank fled and took his travels somewhere new, but now he is stranded, alone, cold, impoverished, dreamless, and engulfed by the blackest night, aware that he cannot realize his hollow dreams. He laments what he has done when faced with the pressure of accepting responsibility for the direction of his life. He has overshadowed his life and its truths with fabrications and illusions, but these, rather than giving him the control of the clapper’s rope, took him further away from his goals and filled the “steeple full of swallows,” which, though plentiful, could never assemble to ring the bell. In effect, he attempted to gain control and to rectify the insanity of his life by removing himself from any negative, violent, confusing, or painful situations, but this merely resulted in his evading his responsibilities and created additional instability. Now, he is immensely forlorn and apologetic, and, though he has not necessarily found salvation, he is a survivor, saved by the “snowflake that didn’t fall.” He has found himself with a second chance. The album Frank’s Wild Years concludes with a second version of “Innocent When You Dream,” which beautifully captures the final transformation of Frank and the emergence of his sea of maudlin memories and regrets.

**Human Oddities**

An abundance of characters in Tom Waits’s music are societal and human oddities who do not resemble or commingle with the norm, either physically or in their lifestyles. They are broken-down circus sideshow people with one good eye and three missing fingers: the midgets, the freaks, the eyeball kids
with the demon spirits or the obligatory hearts of gold. Waits himself possesses an element of the carny in that he hauls the freak shows into town on his back, fights off the thieves and devils along the way, and, throughout it all, spins crazy yarns collected from rickety circus tents all over the world. His stories take place in isolated, dusty, open fields, which the carnivals transform into a magical place for a night or two. His narratives speak about road-weary misfits who are exploited for their sellable skills and often follow them back to the dark corners of their beat-up trailers, where people and things are not so magical. The circus provides escape from existential demons and creates a place of acceptance for everyone, a promise of a nomadic lifestyle along with a delightful sense of belonging and an absence of responsibility. The character in “Whistle Down the Wind” (Bone Machine) dreams of going to “places where they never sleep / And the circus never ends,” dancing alongside the twisted caravan that is an unending train of reality-eluding dreams, sights, and sounds. The importance of carnival to the theme of the wanderer is the idea of embracing impermanence: the constant movement from town to town and the transformation of the performers from ordinary to hideously distorted or from freakish outcasts to center-ring stars. The identities of Waits’s wandering carnival characters are often dictated by their unusual physical characteristics, which cannot be sloughed off. For these outcast or freakish characters constantly in flux, “fitness—the capacity to move swiftly where the action is and be ready to take in experiences as they come—takes precedence over health, that idea of the standard of normalcy and of keeping that standard stable and unscathed.” However, Kathleen Brennan often questions Waits’s reasoning for inserting amputees and mutants into his music; she says, “There’s no reason everybody has to be missing a finger or having only one good eye.” But Waits is irrevocably attracted to the dark and damaged, more intrigued by the Brothers Grimm than by Hans Christian Andersen, and undaunted by Kathleen’s threats that “If you write another song where you take somebody’s finger off, I’m going to leave you. If you lop somebody’s arm off, or if you make another guy blind in a song, I’m going to leave you.”

The Black Rider is essentially the devil’s carnival with a beautiful array of freaks and a band that accompanies him on saws, biscuit tins, and bones. Rather than exploring the cotton candy splendor of a delightfully entertaining three-ring circus, Waits exposes the chamber of horrors found in the dilapidated tent out back. The Black Rider is laden with decadence, decay, and themes of dependence, whether related to drugs, magic bullets, the devil, or the acceptance and acknowledgment of others. The crank and wheeze of the orchestra and the howl of tormented souls in The Black Rider exude the morbid curiosity, fearful excitement, and pathos that embody the circus freak show. The stripped-down, heavily percussive “bone” music is aptly indicative of the campy ringmaster devil who traps the soul of an innocent city clerk named Wilhelm and reveals a world that, like the circus, rejects moral standards and is governed by a vastly different and darker set of rules.
Beginning with a drum roll and a megaphone bellow, “Lucky Day Overture” (*The Black Rider*) displays the character of the circus Barker from “Harry’s Harbor Bizarre,” drawing in the crowds to see all the human oddities, like the three-headed baby, Hitler’s brain, the monkey woman, the crow girl, and the dog-face boy. This vertiginous moritat gives a fitting welcome to a fantastical German expressionist carnival. The following song, “The Black Rider,” continues the dizzying wheeze-and-grind resonance of circus music, with the devil, Peg Leg, now taking his place as the circus Barker who entreats everyone to “[c]ome on along with the Black Rider” and to follow his seductive lead into “the web of the black spider,” where he’ll “drink your blood like wine.” The devil’s persuasiveness and his easy dismissal of consequence are appropriately immersed in an enchanting Kurt Weill-esque orchestration, complete with a lurching tin-can beat. Waits effectively incorporates the carnival into the realm of the absurd, the bizarre, and the grotesque in *The Black Rider*, which sonically offers the aberrant thrill of a freak show or a ride on an archaic Tilt-a-Whirl assembled by a drunk carny. The recurrent instrumental “Carnival” pieces from *The Black Rider*, originally scored for strings, trombone, bass clarinet, horn, bassoon, alto flute, bass, and percussion, provide the intensity and drive required for a convincing carnival performance. The “Carnival” music fanatic ally clunks along with metallic clanks and growls, train-whistle blasts, and other bizarre sounds interjecting throughout, capturing the vivacity and the dementia of the circus.

Another allusion to lubricious show barkers surfaces in “Nighthawk Postcards,” from *Nighthawks at the Diner*, when used-car salesmen are shown to “throw out kind of a Texas Guinan routine” or “they give you the P. T. Barnum bit.” The salesman-as-show-barker character also is encountered in “Step Right Up,” from *Small Change*, where a conniving salesman is trying to peddle his products at a going-out-of-business sale with empty promises or prizes and bargains galore. Guaranteed to solve every quandary and correct every blemish, the stellar merchandise can do everything—remove hair, deliver pizza, recover long-lost belongings—and the list of its marvels is endless. A more macabre and oblique show Barker is found in the song “In the Colosseum,” from *Bone Machine*. Here, the character tells of the bloody and horrific events that take place in the colosseum in hopes of attracting an audience. He lists the brutish happenings of decapitation, blood splashing, and muddy dog attacks going on inside while trying to sell tickets for the colosseum’s show tonight. With an atmosphere of “[n]o reason, no blame,” audiences can escape reality, not through the visual splendor of a costumed circus performer but through bloody and barbaric images.

Absurd scenes saturated with the interactions of mutant and anomalous characters provide a vivid richness and strange beauty to Waits’s music, as exemplified in “A Little Rain,” from *Bone Machine*, “Where a man with missing fingers / Plays a strange guitar.” Similar crazed images germinate in “Such a Scream,” from *Bone Machine*, which is a wild paean by a character called Pale Face dedicated to an unearthly woman who supposedly has a halo,
wings, horns, and a tail and whose praises go “clank and boom and steam.” When dwelling in a place where dreams reign sovereign and the inhabitants have names like Pale Face and the Eyeball Kid, there are no laws to guide the sensibilities. The adulation of this peculiar individual is not melodious and tender, but, as it is emerging from the conversation between two human oddities themselves, the Eyeball Kid (a recurrent character) and Pale Face, it is brimming with disjunctive and crooked phrases. Outlandish and turbulent images populate this song, from the surreal (“The well is full, inside the doll-house of her skull”) to the disturbing (“You’ll ride the only wall of shame”) which portray the object of his affection in a curious disarray.

Making numerous appearances throughout Tom Waits’s repertoire is the character the Eyeball Kid, who has become a classic protagonist for Waits. He was “born without a body, not even a brow,” so that everyday life and sustenance are an enormous challenge. The Eyeball Kid is fully introduced in *Mule Variations*, where his humble beginnings are documented. His seemingly normal parents, Zenora Bariella and Coriander Pyle, were, like all parents, wishing for success for their children: “All they ever wanted was a show biz child.” So on December 7, 1949, they got their show biz child certainly, though he was perhaps not exactly as they had hoped, and, by the time he was nine, he rolled off to join a roving circus tour and find his own kind of success. As with every potential talent, slick, opportunistic managers crawl out to give the promise of glitter and glory under their compassionate leadership. The heartless rapaciousness of the carny manager is shrouded by his contrived concern for the fact that the Eyeball Kid is constantly harassed and bombarded with abuse and stares because of his deformity, and he promises to always be there to protect him. But no amount of kindness goes without a binding contract, and the Eyeball Kid, like many freaks and human oddities before him, is forced to “cry right here on / the dotted line.” However, despite the formidable obstacles that he must endure without being able to speak or blink, he dreams big and implores his manager to book him into Carnegie Hall. It is the human oddities, the Eyeball Kid, Burnt Face Jake, Jo Jo the dog-face boy, and Pale Face, that shatter illusions of idealization and perfection, teach us how to really see and to dream big despite all odds. However, Carnegie Hall is an impossible dream for a giant eyeball, and the carnival sideshow is the only place that truly embraces the aberrant, so inevitably, the circus Barker cries out his name.

The Eyeball Kid is also referred to in the opera *Alice*, in which he makes a brief appearance at the Mad Tea Party, where they sing about how he was born alone inside a Petri dish without a body or a brow. The character of the caterpillar, Tabletop Joe, is inspired by the Ringling act Johnny Eck, who was born without a torso. Encountering life experiences similar to those of the Eyeball Kid, the caterpillar also has tremendous aspirations to be famous and a passion for music, and, despite his imperfections, he figures out ways to perform, despite the fact he has only his hands. However, he, too, realizes that his features and talents are not considered acceptable for the traditional
mainstream concert stage, and he decides instead to join the distorted reality of the circus. There, he receives top billing and is accompanied by his own orchestra in the Dreamland show, where he proves wrong everyone who doubted his abilities for success. The escapism of the dream world and the nightmarish haunts of the adventures of Alice are like those of the carnival, and the characters that emerge could easily have escaped from the house of horrors, such as the individual, Edward, in the song “Poor Edward” (Alice) by the White Knight, who is cursed with having the face of a woman on the back of his head that has the ability to laugh and cry and that acts as his devil twin. Sometimes the affliction and tribulations of going through life tortured by abnormality becomes unbearable; for Edward, “[f]inally the bell tolled his doom” and he “hung himself and her” to escape the suffering that even the tainted glitter of a traveling carnival could not vanquish. “Poor Edward” is a metaphor for the themes of obsession and uncontrollable compulsions in Alice, where Dodgson’s emotions of attachment are so powerful and so visceral that he fears that his separation from young Alice will result in the destruction of both of them.

The character Frank in the song “Straight to the Top (Rhumba)” (Frank’s Wild Years) also has prodigious ambitions to go straight to the top and to achieve fame and fortune as a lounge entertainer. The rhumba feel adds to his sense of urgency about achieving his goals, and he vows to himself that he will never stop trying to reach them until he knows that he is “wild and free.” A lounge lizard “Vegas” version of “Straight to the Top” reappears toward the end of the album and shows Frank striving toward his intended objectives and believing in the veracity of the dreams he envisages. He has confidence in himself and the successful singing career he sees before him. However, in “I’ll Take New York,” while his affirmation of his success continues, he is following his dreams “to the end of the line,” but it is underpinned by his imminent failure.

Perhaps the ultimate homage to Waits’s carnival fascination is found in the dark spoken-word vignette of the aptly named “Circus” (Real Gone). The song is truly an amalgamation of all things Waitsian: trains, deserted fields, unusual characters, deformities, sadness, melancholy, sailors, surreal images, abandoned farm machinery, blues laments, broken hearts, booze, tattoos, violence, love lost, revenge, bitterness, and camaraderie. An assortment of wild characters is introduced, like Horse Face Ethel, One Eyed Myra, Yodeling Elaine, Mighty Tiny, and Poodle Wells, all with their own unique skills and their own personal tragedies. The characters roll into town and set up their tent on a “green knoll, outside of town by the train track and a seagull dump” and pound their stakes in the ground to mark their territory for the night. Loneliness is pervasive among these wandering characters, who are unable to maintain real relationships. As a circus performer, Yodeling Elaine finds her relationships inevitably doomed; she has a brief romantic encounter with another troubled wanderer character, a sailor whom she “lassoed and lost.” Music unites the characters as it allows them
to daydream and commiserate while creating art that is uplifting and inspiring. Questionable substances run rampant through the community of circus freaks, providing comfort and escape as the main storyteller recollects that the doctor passed them a “preparation” without hesitation; Pruno mixed with Kool-aid was a common libation. Abuse and entrapment run rampant in the intercircus relationship between Funeral Wells and Poodle Murphy. Since they are both transients, part of the same act, and follow the same roving carnival circuit, they are trapped by the very lifestyle that should be giving them freedom. Once, when Poodle Murphy attempted to “leave the bum,” he just went and found her as soon as she left. Her discontent and bitterness run deep; she would “like to hammer this ring into a bullet” and wishes she had whisky and a gun to escape her desperate situation of domestic violence. “Circus” pinpoints the humanity of these sideshow characters, who are often cloaked in shadows. The characters depicted live under a veil of the universal misery of existence, knowing that transience is the nature of the world and that everything that is held dear exists for a short while and then fades away.

The outlandish freaks that populate Waits’s music are fascinating and sometimes astonishing characters with intriguing stories. For these societal misfits, happiness is fleeting at best; they are constantly seeking out a place where they will be truly accepted and valued for their differences and for who they are, rather than having their flawed characteristics always render them spectacles. The carnival thoroughly encompasses the theme of the wanderer as it meanders across the countryside in a nomadic bohemian caravan, with its exploited performers in demeaning costumes and cheap illusions, seeking out success, personal glory, and fame, or at least notoriety.

**A LITTLE DROP OF POISON: OUTLAWS AND BANDITS**

Whether remorseful or unrepentant, the outlaws who dwell in Tom Waits’s songs are all incessant wanderers, forced into a peripatetic lifestyle in order to maintain their freedom and evade the consequences of their actions. Society is threatened by the freedom and disregard for order and legislation that mar these individuals, who are always on the road and do not necessarily feel bound by society’s controls and rules. Not necessarily road ramblers or vagabond wanderers by choice, Waits’s outlaws are always trying to outrun their past transgressions and escape to a new life. Whether revenge, fury, necessity, rebellion, or psychotic episodes provoke their heinous or violent actions, the path of a fugitive is very lonely and tormented; they are pursued not only by the law but also by the demons inside of their head. Their lives are episodic and their interactions with others superficial, unless their companions are willing to share the repercussions of their past and accept a lifetime of pursuit. While trying to outrun the hounds and find sanctuary, some may seek freedom through redemption, others just freedom, and others still luxuriate in the splendor of their notoriety.
In “Potter’s Field” (*Foreign Affairs*), the story of a nefarious criminal named Nightstick is told against a blustery orchestral tone poem by a character who is the only one who knows where the outlaw stayed last night. Reputed to be a fierce thief whose days are now numbered, because he is being hunted down, Nightstick slept with one eye open in a wheelbarrow in a wrecking yard “with nothing but revenge to keep him warm.” The character Nightstick experiences a full range of emotional turmoil, from that felt by a hardened deceitful criminal to that of a vulnerable wretch involved in a perilous confrontation that results in the seemingly indestructible outlaw’s being suddenly mortally wounded. As he dresses “the hole in his gut with a hundred dollar bandage,” he realizes that his actions were in vain; all he has is a half a million dollars that do not amount to anything as he lies bleeding and listening to a siren lullaby. The fear of death and oblivion press upon him, and Nightstick reaffirms his pernicious reputation and audacity as he staggers through the night shadows, screaming out taunts and shooting out streetlights. Injured and driven to madness, he finds that money becomes insignificant as he begins tossing around handfuls of bloodstained bills and then “wink[s] beneath a rainsoaked brim” as he disappears without a dream into the night. The storyteller claims to know where the infamous Nightstick escaped, if he escaped at all.

Like many of Waits’s characters, a lot of his criminals are not always successful; they are the losers, the ones who get caught. In the song “Red Shoes by the Drugstore” (*Blue Valentine*), a criminal plans to steal a diamond for his girlfriend and then vanish somewhere with her. He tells her to wait by the magazines with her raincoat and a suitcase and, specifically, to wear her red shoes. He had never been this late before and, unfortunately for this thief and his elaborate plans to run away with his girl, “the cold jingle of taps in a puddle / was the burglar alarm” foiling his caper and resulted in leaving his poor girlfriend standing alone by the newsstand wearing those red shoes. Despite his best intentions, even as a criminal this character fails. “Fish in the Jailhouse” (*Orphans—Brawlers*) is about Peoria Johnson, one of Waits’s convicts who gets caught but claims he can break out of any prison with just an old fishbone. The evening meal is his ticket to freedom, as fish is on the menu and all he needs to do is “[s]and me one side dull, whittle the other side sharp” in order to fashion “a fishbone skeleton key.” Without a doubt, he believes, “[b]y Saturday night [I’ll] be in Central Park,” and he is certain that this feat will also make his notoriety explode, because everyone will hear exactly what he did.

The character Romeo in the song “Romeo Is Bleeding” (*Blue Valentine*) is an example of a tough, bloodthirsty ruffian who is inflamed with a murderous desire to avenge the death of his brother. Having satisfied his vindictive rage, Romeo, now a renegade fleeing the law, returns momentarily to his neighborhood on 18th Street, retaining his cool bravado. For all of his young disciples, the evening begins as just another ordinary night spent seeing how far they can spit, but now they are huddled in the brake lights of
Romeo’s ’58 Belair, listening to how he killed a sheriff with his knife. As the sirens wail from the crime scene, Romeo assures everyone listening that the cop will “never see another summertime for gunnin down [his] brother.” Romeo is from a fierce Mafioso community where weakness is fatal and a hardened exterior is essential to survival. From an early age, he cultivated an incorrigible façade. He preserves his emotional impermanence, lives in the present, and creates the emotional front necessary to carry on his dangerous and unpredictable lifestyle. He is a hero to the other boys, and they all know they could be just like him if only they had his intrepidity and cool nerve. Unable to reveal weakness or accept defeat, Romeo “sings along with the radio / with a bullet in his chest,” not wanting to disappoint or disenchant his disciples, who all imitate his stance and mimic his every move. Unwilling to display his mortal fragility, Romeo escapes to the movie theater, where he dies quietly and alone, forever immortalized as a hardened street legend.

The bandit fleeing down the highway with a girl by his side is the center of the song “Wrong Side of the Road” (Blue Valentine). A thief looking for adventure and needing to keep ahead of those looking for him plans a getaway with his young girlfriend, whom he forces to promise she will never snitch. He instructs her on a rendezvous point. In order to be with him, the girl must accept the life of an outlaw wanderer, abandon all sense of security and comfort, leave her family and home, and give up everything that is dear to her. Her existence becomes radically different as she accompanies the criminal on his travels; she now requires a gun and has to learn to be inconspicuous so that she does not alert someone to their whereabouts. Her innocence and childhood dreams are quickly banished as she is pulled into a felonious career under the persuasive control of “jonny,” who steals away her ingenuousness and dreams by forcing her to lose her childlike innocence and fall in love with him and this lifestyle. The dreams of this outlaw are realized as they head down the highway “spendin someone else’s dough” with a “double barrel shotgun” and drive defiantly all the way to Reno on the wrong side of the road, looking for escape and entertainment.

A mysterious and threatening outlaw who, it is believed, has wings hidden beneath the folds in his coat is the subject of the song “Black Wings” (Bone Machine). He is an infamous legend that “rides through your dreams on a coach” where all the stories seem possible through the distorted haze of his notoriety. He is a vengeful bandit who lives by the rules of retribution where you take an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and he is very careful to “[n]ever leave a trace or forget a face,” which gives him the aura of omnipotence. Possessing seemingly unearthly and extraordinary powers, he defies capture and cannot be bound; he can break out of any prison and breathes fire into the crazed rumors surrounding his reputation. Dangerous, intangible, and cunning, he is skilled at deceit and can turn himself into a stranger as life necessitates. He is a reputedly guileful and insidious drifter who, as easily as he kills a man with a guitar string, can be welcomed at a dinner table with kings and who even, completely against type, is reputed to have once saved
a baby from drowning. While some people say they fear him, others claim to admire him, but, because they know that, as evil incarnate, he has the power to plague their nightmares and terrorize their dreams, everyone denies ever having known or met him.

A convict who has “never been no good at staying out of jail” is holed up in the Strip Poker Motel with his “[h]ot ice, cold cash” in “Shake It” (Real Gone). Looking for distraction from his troubled life, the outlaw hides out with a woman for the night. In the song “Trouble’s Braids” (Swordfish trombones), the protagonist flees from a violent crime he committed and lies low until the bleeding stops; he then is forced to immediately adopt the lifestyle of a vagabond. This song relates the phobic escapades of this fugitive, who pulled on “trouble’s braids.” In order to avoid the repercussions of his actions, he hides “in the briars,” making sure he is “downwind from the bloodhounds.” Similarly, in “Gun Street Girl” (Rain Dogs), a character named John is running from his armed crimes. He is a fugitive, hiding in a sycamore tree and waiting for his pursuers to end their chase. His troubles begin after he falls in love with a Gun Street Girl and fuels his psychotic instability with alcohol and a “bran’ new michigan 20 gauge,” a dangerous combination. After he shoots a hole in a yellow Corvette, he has no choice but to buy a different car, dye “his hair in the bathroom of a Texaco,” and leave his hometown of Waukegan as quickly as he could. Having lost his dreams, exiled in Indiana unable to ever return home, and forever condemned to live his life constantly with one eye on his gun and the other on the door, he numbs his pain with the sweet relief of bourbon and becomes a fabled story to everyone back home. The cautionary tale “Don’t Go into That Barn” (Real Gone) is confrontational and filled with prophetic prose and fiendish musings. It is filled with dark, foreboding scenery like old black trees, upside-down slave ships, black cellophane skies, shiny tooth talons, and a big, blue moon. The song also contains what is pretty much a murderer’s checklist, asking “Did you cover your tracks?” and “Did you hide your gun?,” and has the outlaw on the run without even a shirt.

“Sins of my Father” (Real Gone) addresses the concept that the misgivings of the father will be visited upon the son. This father-and-son relationship has meaning on a universal individual level and also within the larger context of Waits’s occasionally transparent political worldview. The “Sins of my Father” can be interpreted as literally familial or as metaphorically political in the suggestion that governments are corrupt and overly focused on their own survival, rather than on the well-being of their citizens. This, in turn, affects how future generations must pay for and deal with “the sins of the father” that have come before. The singular or political protagonist is caught in the humiliation of his fallen state, and, despite the lies and rumors that accompany him while he heads out on the dirt road leading home, he wonders if the pawnshop will sell him back all his cherished possessions and if the place he once called home will take him back. For the main character, it is much too late to try to change his fate; it has already been determined that he will
be hanged in the morning. He has gone too far, he has been caught “way beyond the gavel and the laws of man,” and now the only thing left for him to do is to seek salvation and forgiveness for his wrongdoings and those of his Father. The protagonist realizes that “wicked are the branches on the tree of mankind” and that, even though he has been judged and forsaken by mankind, only God can make the final judgment on whether “29 days of sinning and 40 to repent” warrants clemency or persecution. Waits presents God as full of grace and capable of unmerited mercy and compassion, even toward someone who has succumbed to a degenerate life of “carving out a future with a gun and an axe.”

“Walking Spanish” (*Rain Dogs*) also concerns a criminal on death row who is unable to evade persecution and ends up “walking Spanish down the hall.” “Walking Spanish” refers to the involuntary and humiliating stride of someone whose neck and lower torso are being held and raised by someone to spur him along in a controlled manner or, more loosely, to being forced to do something. This criminal is a perpetrator of violence, armed with “a homemade special.” An unspecified malicious act has been committed with his blade camouflaged “in his trick towel,” and he is once again incarcerated and forced to walk that painful and opprobrious gait, “walking Spanish” down the hall. This character attempts to live his life consequence-free, like the vagabond who is not bound by societal order or restraints; however, he is largely unsuccessful. He is indifferent to redemption and does not disclose his past, reveal his motivations for his actions, or substantiate rumors. Self-righteous and rebellious, he did not submit to interrogation or torture when he was caught and would never succumb to the will of others, no matter how hard they tried. His resolve is infallible only because it has to be. He faces his unavoidable execution, knowing that there is nothing he can do to prevent it. Despite his brash humanity, as he is forced to remove his watch and rings before his execution, he cannot help submitting to some extent to his immense vulnerability, as “Even Jesus wanted just a little more time” when he was forced to walk Spanish to his death.

Waits’s unsettling catalogue of fallen criminals comprises dreamers as well as wanderers, in that they are always searching for a haven, a glorious abode where their crimes are truly forgotten and forgiven, a place of grace where sirens do not instill gut-wrenching fear and they can begin to live life again without constantly having to look over their shoulder or sleep with one eye open.

**CROSSROADS**

Innumerable times, life’s wanderings lead to a crossroads, where temptation entices, the devil finds a comfortable abode, and preachers and evangelists admonish those on the wrong path. It is the place where insanity lurks and crumbling souls seek redemption and escape. The threats of evil and addiction lurk around these crossroads, their magnetic charms penetrating
the fantastical visions of those who find themselves at a difficult or vulnerable point in their lives. The crossroads are as personally meaningful as the lowside of the road; all people know where that place is and have at some point found themselves there. As well, to further this, David Smay observes,

Tom goes underground for three things: death, damnation, and inspiration. Death’s easy—we’re mortal clay, dust to dust, we’re all going to be dirt in the ground when we’re buried in the cold, cold ground and the worms go in and the worms go out and we’re extruded out of their hindparts as nitrogen-rich soil. Damnation’s a gospel concern. You gotta keep the devil away or you’re gonna go down, down, down where the devil calls you by name and makes you wash the brimstone skidmarks out of his boxer short and file his taxes online over a balky dial-up connection. (Damn you, Satan!) Inspiration is a trickier thread to pull out. It requires a digression.25

The devil takes over the life of the lost individual in “Down, Down, Down” (Swordfishtrombones), in which a hopeless character who “went down down down” is unable to resist his persuasive power. The boy soon finds himself “sleepin’ in the devil’s bed.” The addiction of a gambler who is caught in the addictive throes of Las Vegas, where everyone lives hard, dies young, and leaves a good-looking corpse, is depicted in the allusive song “Mr. Siegal” (Heartattack and Vine), in which the lure of the casinos and women is overwhelming. The gambler’s addiction keeps him bound to the city of glitter, lights, prostitution, and the sweet lullaby of the slot machines as he risks everything to make possible his next bet. Once he realizes he is caught in the unyielding stranglehold of addiction, he implores, “Tell me Mr. Siegal, how do I get out of here?” His addiction is not just limited to gambling; it extends to all of the perils that are part of the allure of Las Vegas. He finds himself penniless at the crossroads of a Mexican whorehouse and a Catholic church and must decide which way to turn. Once again, evil temptation prevails as he wipes off his revolver, buttons up his shirt, and shoots “the morning in the back, with [his] red wings on.” Not knowing how to break the downward spiral, he is left to wonder “how do the angels get to sleep, when the devil leaves the porch light on?” He is warned by a pit boss, who has seen many people succumb to the addiction of gambling, that he should keep on moving and not get trapped by the bramble-ridden stranglehold of Vegas, but he takes no heed and instead makes another bet, rolls the dice, and continues on his self-destructive path.

Themes of deception, addiction, and insanity are woven throughout The Black Rider, which tells the ghost story of a city clerk named Wilhelm, who is determined to marry the daughter of a huntsman who is determined to maintain his legacy. In the song “Just the Right Bullets,” Wilhelm, a failure as a hunter, is drawn into a deal with the devil, who convinces him that he will never be a successful hunter without his assistance and offers him magic bullets that will hit all his targets, allowing him to win his true love’s heart and also making him an acceptable son-in-law for the privileged huntsman.
The devil is a slick dealer who claims to just want Wilhelm to be happy, and he promises to fix his wagon and his musket so that he will never have to go home empty-handed again. The devil entices Wilhelm by convincing him that the deal is a small price to pay to have 60 magic bullets that will hit whatever target he desires and that it is an offer that he simply cannot refuse. However, as revealed in the song “Flash Pan Hunter,” “[e]ach sulfurous bullet may have its own wit” and “[e]ach cartridge comes with a warning.” Wilhelm pays no heed to these messages and falls violently into the rapturous addiction that hides his deficiency as a hunter. The whole time, the devil patiently waits for his delicate prey to become even more vulnerable and in need of his provisions.

With the magic bullets, Wilhelm’s marksmanship is impeccable and his dependence on these bullets grows into an uncontrollable addiction. As a warning to Wilhelm, the German folktale of Georg Schmid’s descent into addiction is told in the song “Crossroads.” The song chronicles the disillusion and desperation that lead a good upstanding citizen into accepting the seemingly harmless magic bullets, but they are just a gateway drug that leads to harsher addictions “just like marijuana leads to heroin.” The character, Georg Schmid, finds escape in the magic bullets that allows him to shoot a target without taking straight aim, but at a very costly price, negotiated with the devil. In Georg’s tale, too, like a new addict feels, he denies his impending ruin and lack of control and at first feels that he can take or leave the bullets, just use them when things do not go well, when the wind is strong, the fog is thick, or his actual skills simply fall short of what is required. However, that is the incessant cycle of addiction; the more he uses the magic bullets, the less he is able to go on without them, until finally every shot he takes required a magic bullet, and he is “hooked, heavy as lead.” However, even though Georg is out there at the crossroads, surrendering to the devil’s bullets, he still believes that he is in control of his destiny and that the bullets are under his control, hitting what he wants them to hit. But, like Wilhelm, old Georg does not realize the plight he is getting himself into. The sense of freedom and escape from reality provided by the bullets slowly disintegrates into a dependency even more unbearable than the situation that was originally being avoided.

Inevitably, Wilhelm uses up all of his magic bullets and needs just one more for the shooting contest on his wedding day. His staggering desperation is overwhelming in the song “In the Morning” (from the score to The Black Rider), in which his marksmanship without the aid of the magic bullets is horrendous, back to its original state. His feeble explanation, that “perhaps a wind has blown the barrel from its mark,” convinces no one, and he has nightmarish images of hunting where he can hear the calls of the bird he intends to shoot but cannot hit it in the dark. Even though he realizes he has bought and sold his true love, his addiction is too powerful and consuming, and he once again goes to the crossroads to make a final deal with the devil for one last bullet for the shooting contest on his wedding day. Unfortunately,
Wilhelm has wandered too far down the wrong path at the crossroads and is unable to turn back, and this final bullet takes not the wooden dove but his young bride as its target. Wilhelm is driven to insanity by his deception and addiction, which cost the life of his beloved bride; once again he escapes from reality and from having to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems.

A different face of evil is found in the condemnation of sinners by the holy and saved, where escape is promised in the virtue and salvation of Jesus, rather than in the ostensibly more accessible seduction of the devil. Evangelists and preachers warn against the treachery of cavorting with temptation and evil and predict the end of the world with the wrath of Judgment Day, if even from the closest street corner. Wanderers themselves, evangelists, and preachers travel around the world instilling fear in the souls of the sinners to make them seek redemption and resolution. The “Earth Died Screaming” (*Bone Machine*) is like a chapter from Revelations, with a street-corner evangelist screaming through a distorted microphone that the end of the world is approaching. The apocalypse is near, warns the evangelist, who tells the unsaved souls that, unless they are saved, the gates to heaven will be closed to them and the world will come to chaos, with airplane-size crows and three-headed lions. He describes the day of wrath, when the world will be engulfed in thunder, lightening strikes, falling stars; the moon will disappear, fish fall from the sky, and “the earth die[s] screaming” while everyone is oblivious as they lie dreaming. Another evangelist, in “Way Down in the Hole,” from *Frank’s Wild Years*, is trying to enlist the help of the people who pass by his street-corner pulpit in the fight to keep the devil “way down in the hole.” This evangelist infuses fear of Satan into passersby, saying that no place is free from his influence or presence as even when you walk through a place as seemingly safe as a park or garden, you should always be wary and look over your shoulder. He promotes the saving grace of walking alongside Jesus. This evangelist warns against the cold hands of temptation but promises that if the masses hold on to Jesus’ hand, they will all be saved from Satan “when the thunder rolls” as they face Judgment Day.

“Dirt in the Ground” (*Bone Machine*) offers the heightened awareness of a world-wearied purveyor of his own truths who believes that it does not matter whether he lives a life of virtue or a life of avarice and vice, since everyone is going to end up in the same place after death. Morality is contemplated through his existentialist tract, which offers the leveling truth that it does not make a difference if you are a tree, bird, or the big blue sky, because “hell is boiling over” and “heaven is full” and everyone is equally chained to the world in which we live. The character preaches that, even if redemption is sought or punishment is given, as the gallows groan, the hangman will intone the reminder that everyone is going to end up the same as dirt in the ground and that there is no escaping that reality. The elemental breakdown of Judgment Day is chronicled in a shrieking falsetto in “All Stripped Down” (*Bone Machine*), in which all the creatures of the world must line up for judgment and everyone has to reveal his true self; every façade will be obliterated, and
no one will be able to hide behind material objects or money or simply run away, since everyone will be judged equally as his true spirit shines through.

Moral corruption and the feeling of being abandoned by God are the bleak and disturbing subject matter for “God’s Away on Business” (Blood Money). A masterpiece of bitterness and misanthropic fatalism, this song takes an incisive look at how the world is growing more and more corrupt and people are becoming increasingly heartless, focused on self-preservation, and willing to do anything for a buck and will turn their backs on anyone looking for assistance or kindness. It is debatable whether power corrupts or whether society allows corrupt people to be in power; the song asks why the people who are kept in charge are the “Killers, thieves, and lawyers.” It is easy to fall onto the path of corruption and immorality, to follow a mob mentality, and to justify depraved or degenerate acts such as “Digging up the dead with a shovel and a pick” as excusable since one is just doing a job or one’s duty or following an order. Temptation is everywhere, and while “[t]here’s always free cheddar in a mousetrap, baby,” every choice and every action has a consequence, especially when “God’s Away on Business.” In Waits’s later work, his narratives have contained an increasing sense of consequence. Ranging from the thought-provoking questions raised in “Georgia Lee” (Mule Variations) about why God was not looking out for the welfare of the innocent young girl, Georgia Lee, to the politically charged commentaries of some of his more recent songs, Waits is asking bigger questions, addressing universal truths, and challenging people to take responsibility for their decisions.

Contrasted to the harsh judgment in many of the other songs found on the apocalyptic Bone Machine, the song “Jesus Gonna Be Here” is a serendipitous sinner’s testament that his savior will be here soon to keep his promises and to comfort his soul. This faithful practitioner worships his benevolent and sympathetic savior in his own way, as it is much easier for him to face every day and struggle through his transgressions if he accepts that there is a liberal and mellow divinity deciding his fate, rather than a vengeful almighty power. Since Jesus will be “rolling on down the lane” soon enough, the character is in no rush to line up or shout. He has no doubt that he is going to get himself “[u]nfurled from this mortal coiled up world.” He comforts himself with the image of his immanent Jesus, who will be coming over the horizon in “a brand new Ford.” He avoids the possibility of severe judgment and condemnation for what he considers to be just small sins and knows his Jesus will be sophisticated, merciful, and forgiving enough to overlook little personal indulgences like drinking. He feels he has overall been faithful and righteous and will leave this earth in a better condition than he found it.

In “Chocolate Jesus,” from Mule Variations, another faithful practitioner worships a benevolent and sympathetic savior in his own way, because he does not appreciate the value of organized religion and orthodox religious practice but feels that perhaps he is loved “maybe just a little bit more” for his true and honest devotion. He maintains his faith at the local candy store, where he renounces the usual treats and sugary temptations and prays
exclusively to a chocolate Jesus, which not only makes him feel good inside but also functions to keep his cravings and hunger satisfied. This character even eagerly provides helpful hints in caring for a sacred chocolate Jesus in inclement weather by showing that if you wrap it up in cellophane when the sun is high and hot, you can savor it in its new, liquid form, drizzled over a bowl of ice cream. For this worshiper, it is much easier to face every day and to struggle through his transgressions with a liberal and mellow divinity deciding his fate rather than an almighty power.

When sorting through daily problems or dealing with major catastrophes, Waits’s characters turn to some form of religion or spirituality that they may tailor to suit their needs. Waits does not actively support organized religion and his characters often approach and utilize religion in a blasphemous manner. God is often representative of undeserved kindness, yet the appearance of this unexpected forgiveness also functions to heighten and intensify the evil, dark abyss that engulfs many of his protagonists. His characters are very human in their convictions and are often easily caught in addictions, swayed by temptation, drawn into the promise of salvation, or persuaded by evil even as they seek to escape from their hardships, which unfortunately lead them straight to the crossroads.

**SURURALISM**

Moving away from late-night urban images and sounds, Waits explores the rural world in *Mule Variations*. His compositions here project rural and blues elements, which he himself described as “surural,” which he considers to be a surreal aesthetic melded with rural sounds, themes, and images. In addition to the rustic field hollers like “Cold Water” and the knee-stomping “Filipino Box Spring Hog,” *Mule Variations* contains affecting and highly emotional odes to family life and domesticity in the songs “House Where Nobody Lives,” “Picture in a Frame,” “Take It with Me,” and “Come On up to the House.” In contrast to the fragmentation and relentless movement of many of Waits’s recent works, *Mule Variations* finds identity, home, and permanence emerging alongside new themes, like persistence, endurance, high ambitions, and grace. *Mule Variations* may appear to be an erratic assemblage of conflicting ideas and emotions, but, eventually, in Waits’s grand design, everything finds its place. This album possesses just as many unusual characters, deranged rants, and dreamscapes as Waits’s previous releases, but with a more tangible sensation of dust in your eyes and earth under your fingernails.

“Get Behind the Mule” (*Mule Variations*) is filled with bucolic images and the strange brutality that rural isolation often inspires, similar to “Murder in the Red Barn” (*Bone Machine*), where, after a “murder in the red barn,” no one questions Cal “about that scar on his face” because axes, bloodstains, and death are a daily and regular part of farm life. In “Get Behind the Mule,” a character named Molly kills another character, called Jimmy the
Harp “[w]ith a horrid little pistol and a lariat.” Rather than persecuting her, others help her to hide and bury the body, because she fears “they’ll come alookin’ for me boys.” The boorish behavior associated with country inhabitants is portrayed when shots ring through the countryside as an indicator that someone desires a glass of lemonade; again, while sitting on a porch, you can see someone stir his drink with a nail. The aberrant methods of punishment and redemption that can infiltrate isolated communities are on display when two wild sons “[h]ad to stand naked at the bottom of the cross” and confess to the world and the Lord the wrongdoings they had committed. “Get Behind the Mule” also alludes to the notion of thinking big thoughts, maintaining high ambitions, and preserving a clear vision that is never compromised. No matter what happens, how heavy the burden of desperation and pain may feel, or how far down they fall, people are instructed never to let the troubles in life grow larger than the good and to always keep beauty, joy, and hopes in their minds.

The intangible nature of domesticity and what makes a house a home are the subjects of the song “House Where Nobody Lives,” in which an abandoned house becomes an eyesore in a neighborhood, its paint cracking and peeling off the wood, papers stacked all over the porch, weeds taking over the garden and standing as tall as the front door, birds crowding the chimney, and an abandoned set of drawers indicating that it is unlikely that anyone will ever return. This empty house once held laughter, love, and dreams and was home to a family, but now it is “just made of wood” and stands inexplicably abandoned, dark, and empty, devoid of its former inhabitants, who had reasons to look for their happiness elsewhere. The character in this song observes that no quantity of material objects and possessions can replace “someone to have, someone to hold” and is acutely aware that what transforms a house into a home is not its physical components, not the wood, not the windows, but the love and life energy that flow among its inhabitants.

In contrast to the deserted house in “House Where Nobody Lives,” “Filipino Box Spring Hog” takes an opposing look at the concept of domesticity. In “Filipino Box Spring Hog,” the house is open, and its inhabitants warmly welcome old friends and vagabonds for a somewhat vulgar, improvised feast for which a pig is doused in gasoline and roasted in a hollowed-out mattress. Soon the house is brimming with rowdy people and strange foods like “rattlesnake piccata.” The host of the impromptu spree is jolly and overjoyed as his festivities get under way and he gathers his motley companions. Even Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan make an appearance at this riotous party as Waits “[i]s naked to the waist” with his dog at his side and Kathleen is sitting down “[i]n her criminal underwear bra.” The convergence of these boisterous characters and the communal “surural” experience of “Filipino Box Spring Hog” is a far cry from the lonely and desolate characters that have previously permeated Waits’s works.

The curiosity everybody feels about the lives and activities of their neighbors is captured in “What’s He Building,” in which insubstantial evidence
inspires radical rumors and a fabricated identity for a mysterious recluse in his uninviting abode. Prying neighbors try to deduce what this character, who “never waves when he goes by,” is hiding from them; they question the sounds and moan they hear from under the door and try to guess what he may be up to with his router, table saw, and a shocking amount of formaldehyde. All they want to know is “What’s he building in there?” This song pointedly illustrates a deteriorated America in which any solitary activity by an individual encourages suspicion and unsubstantiated accusations. An entire identity and personality are constructed for this introverted character on the basis of minimal information and the gossip ring formed by his meddlesome neighbors. Similarly, in “Buzz Fledderjohn” (Orphans—Brawlers), Waits recounts a story about living next door to an unusual woman, Buzz Fledderjohn, who is “like six feet nine with no fingernails, husband was a chief bosun in the navy and I think he was in Guam for a year and a half. She raised four boys and their backyard was this strange place with carp in the bathtub. I was never allowed in Buzz Fledderjohn’s yard, that was the big thing.”

The curiosity of the young boy in the song compels him to “stand on the roof of Stuart’s old Dodge” in order to get a better look at the mysterious and fascinating goings-on in Fledderjohn’s yard. Whether it is truth or the product of a child’s imagination, he claims to have seen pythons big enough to swallow dogs whole and piranhas swimming in a mixing bowl. It is the community’s fear of the unknown, its distrust of the strange or abnormal, and its concern for the safety of the children that makes an outcast of Buzz Fledderjohn and perpetuates a sense of danger and mystery about herself and her home.

The deeply devotional odes “Picture in a Frame” and “Take It with Me,” with lyrics like “I love you baby and I always will,” focus on the immortality of love and commitment. Though not necessarily “surural” in the same sense as “Filipino Box Spring Hog” or “Get Behind the Mule,” these songs depict a passion for the reality of permanence, simple domesticity, and the tapestry of life. The character in “Take It with Me” never feels “more alive or alone” than when he is lost and broken down at the side of the road, showing that, while the excitement of the road is enticing, the road is also lonely. Now he prefers the comforting bliss of domesticity, watching children playing and friends congregating on his front lawn. In this song, a couple is caught in the oblivion of their love; they completely disregard the world around them as they take the phone off the hook, drink champagne, and reminisce about the old days when they lived in Coney Island and “fell asleep on Beaula’s porch.” These characters have an urge to settle somewhere and dream “of belonging; to be, for once, of the place, not merely in.”

The power of love to transcend life and death is upheld, since “[t]here ain’t no good thing ever dies,” and the character promises that he is forever bound to his wife, believing that love is much more powerful than this physical existence and that it will extend into the spiritual and follow him into his afterlife.

The song “Come On Up to the House,” which closes Mule Variations, is an open-armed call to all the downtrodden vagabonds, desperate drunks,
frightened runaways, exploited freaks, tormented deviants, rain dogs, and lost souls that Tom Waits has immortalized in song. His tattered characters first find in him a sympathetic listener, who gives them not only comfort but a voice, and now they finally find grace, forgiveness, and shelter in his home, with Tom Traubert sitting on the couch with the Eyeball Kid, listening to Frank play his accordion. Waits’s roaring, weathered voice offers a harsh love for all the martyrs and all the self-pitying, angst-ridden characters who find life overwhelming. He tells them to quit being victims and to pull themselves together and then swings opens the door. Human resilience is celebrated, and personal tragedies are to be left on the mat at the front door as everyone is reminded that when all you can see “[i]s all that you lack,” you need to remember where a bed, a warm meal, an open ear and compassion will always be found. This somewhat distorted glimpse of domesticity may be partially reflective of the lifestyle Tom Waits has settled into, but it seems more likely that his characters have simply led him to this inviting place in order to forget their troubles and tribulations. The contradictory themes of leaving and coming home are omnipresent in Waits’s music and complement the grand concept of transience that informs many of his narratives. After wandering and seeking escape for what seems like an eternity, all of the drifters have overcome their fears and finally have found a home.
Beautiful Maladies: Tom Waits’s Realism

One way to think about it is that Tom is very invested in what is real. It’s just that the things that are most real to him are the things that he makes up.

David Smay, *Swordfishtrombones*

Tom Waits is a captivating and intriguing theatrical creation the like of which is not uncommonly found in the realm of celebrity. However, in the context of the celebrity highway, Waits is not cruising by in his brand-new Cadillac but is found walking happily at the side of the road, perhaps wearing a stylish but scuffed pair of shoes. Throughout his career, Waits has played with at crossing truth and authenticity with fabrication and illusion. However, despite the deliberate construction of his early hipster image, Waits has always been unalteringly true to his vision and his passion for irony, pathos, tragic beauty, and absurdity. While sometimes striking deeply resonant chords with his profound worldviews and detailed representations of reality in his lyrics and music, Waits, as an inimitable performer, also finds himself producing his perception of reality on many different levels. Waits, like the realists, works toward a translucent form in his music, one in which he shows the listener the underlying constituent components of human life by using everyday events and characters as his subject matter. In music, in order “to achieve that fusion of the particular and the general which is the essence of realistic art,”¹ this involves an acknowledgment of universal experience and an assumption of a unity of the world from which individuals cannot be disentangled. Waits’s characters and themes ought to be examined in the broader context of the
realism aesthetic (in spite of his self-declared allegiance to surrealism) and of the constitutive contradictions within realism.

In his discussion of the negation of outward reality, Lukács shows that the “attenuation of reality and dissolution of personality are thus interdependent: the stronger the one, the stronger the other,” and, consequently, “man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is as inexplicable to others as to himself.”2 By recognizing that this opposition between man and his environment exists, Waits brings further meaning and depth into his realistic representations by delving beyond external appearances into the abstract realms of personality, motivation, emotion, and dreams. In his compositions from Swordfishtrombones on, Waits has often used dreams and fantasy in order to heighten the meaning of the quotidian elements of his works. He explores the possibilities of presenting dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, and unreals with the same realistic detail as the piano bars, tattoo parlors, greasy diners, and lonesome highways of his earlier works. Even though he borrows techniques such as stream of consciousness, free association, nonlinear dialogue, and collage from the surrealists and is informed by expressionism, Waits utilizes these techniques and styles to present all aspects of reality encountered by his characters in his narratives. By choosing often misfit, outcast, or desperate characters as his subjects, Waits demonstrates the contradictions within society and individuals; “the average man is simply a dimmer reflection of the contradictions always existing in man and society; eccentricity is a socially-conditioned distortion.”3

The fundamental contradiction within realism arises, according to Jameson, from the very originality of the concept of realism itself, which claims both “cognitive” and “aesthetic” status. He writes:

A new value, contemporaneous with the secularization of the world under capitalism, the ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis which had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgments and its constitution as sheer appearance. But it is extremely difficult to do justice to both of these properties simultaneously.4

Therefore, realism finds itself almost immediately incompatible with aesthetic theories, which attempt to encompass some sort of universality. The more detailed and realistic a work or style becomes, the less it is able to transform an intangible idea. At the other end of the contradiction within realism, the greater the emphasis on artistic conventions, effects, and techniques becomes, the more difficult it is to maintain the cognitive truths of the work. For Waits, songs like “The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me)” and “Bad Liver and a Broken Heart” (Small Change) exemplify effective collisions between the cognitive and the aesthetic values of realism. With music that reflects the staggering traipse of a drunk, Waits presents the image of the lugubrious drunken piano player sharing his stories with strangers. Such musical and
character presentations and choices in his early years were indicative of his own persona both on- and off-stage at the time and maintained the fabricated nature of his performance and songs.

Every art form has its own responsibilities to its material production, which does not necessarily translate into the conditions of the other arts. Music finds itself somewhat of an outcast in the discussion of realistic art in that its subject matter is irreconcilable with its form of representation. Music speaks the unspeakable, and, by the very nature of its intangible material, it is not possible for it to reproduce the details of reality as naturally and exactly as, say, a landscape painting or a piece of descriptive literature. Music, unless restricted to the literal, naturalistic reproduction of such things as birdcalls, pained screams, or lightning crashes, is at best an impression of the subject matter it attempts to depict. Without meaning or significance, music is reduced to nothing more than a naturalistic description, instead of an expressive art form. How does one realistically transmute information about space, color, and texture purely cognitively in the intrinsically aesthetic language of music? For all the arts, the notion of realistic artists is a salient paradox, if not an impossibility, since, in order for any individual to accomplish anything, whether in life or in art, they must be motivated by inspiration, passion, will, or desire. Being governed by emotion, artists can no longer be considered realists. While it is easy to accept that artists must be free from self-indulgence and distorting personal emotionalism, as any art can be flawed by irrelevance, it is difficult to agree that in order for artists to be realists they must be free of all emotion. There must be a way for artists to maintain a level of emotional commitment to their works without having to denounce the realist aesthetic.

Tom Waits began his career being consumed by the constitution of his characters and performance persona, but he soon learned to separate himself from his songs and his persona. Waits realized that, in order to write murder mysteries, the author himself did not have to be a murderer or create a statement of reality and that his songs did not have to be a demonstration of his personal reality riddled with his personal emotions. Careful and fascinated observation and interest, rather than highly personal emotional catharsis, began to infiltrate his compositional style. Instead of being propelled by his personal feelings or turmoil, Waits worked more in the spirit of realism, driven by a vivid artistic rather than personal passion to accurately represent his characters, their narratives, their distorted emotions, and their psychological depths objectively, without judging, censoring, abusing, or transforming them.

How do Waits’s music and instrumental pieces then function as realistic art and, truly, how far can music be carried as a realistic form of art when its very medium abstracts? Unable to directly represent tangible objects or understandable ideas, music does not seem to fit within the scope of realism but seems to be once removed from it. Music, as a representative art, is the one least able to reproduce things materially or quantitatively, as the
limit in imitating actual sounds is quickly reached. Such moments of lifelike imitation, like the ringing of a bell or the blast of a train whistle, do not easily blend into the fabric of musical construction but rather obtrude from its intrinsic design, like a material object glued onto a painting or an article of clothing placed on a sculpture. While Waits occasionally makes use of musical effects and instrumental techniques that mimic sounds in reality, such as playing with rice in a bass drum to imitate waves crashing against a shore, his music is not replete with or focused on developing such lifelike musical impressions.

Waits also works in a style similar to Brecht’s epic operas and theater works, in which the elements of words, music, and production exist separately and independently, rather than one element gaining supremacy over the others. Brecht emphasized the narrative in his works and required that the music in his operas and theater pieces communicate and set forth the text or, alternately, take the text for granted, take up a position, and give the desired attitude.\textsuperscript{5} Waits’s music, from his early jazz-piano styles to his blues-based grooves to his abrasive percussive meanderings, has always been meaningful and communicative independent of the text. Following the epic theatrical sensibilities of Brecht and Weill, Waits’s music functioned to depict moods, create ironic statements, and expand characters, narratives, or personas. Since Waits’s music can be seen to have taken “up a purely emotional attitude and spurned none of the stock narcotic attractions,” it “became an active collaborator in the stripping bare of the middle-class corpus of ideas. It became, so to speak, a muck-raker, an informer, a nark.”\textsuperscript{6} Waits’s music clarifies its intended emotional effects without distortion and elucidates the social, political, or moral meanings that underlie his realistic observations.

True popular music is supposed to be indicative of the voice of the people; however, the influence of capitalism, with its concern with record sales, cross marketing, and high commercial sales figures, has changed the face of music consumption. However, Waits has managed to pursue a 30-year career defined by his personal aspirations and with little concern for financial gain. He has been driven by his intense desire and compulsion to create, rather than by commercial success. Waits’s music receives very little airplay, except for ambitious college radio stations, being too outside the musical demographics of stations that play the music of his chronological contemporaries or modern rock. His music is spread primarily from friend to friend, musician to musician, teacher to student, and so forth, rather than through advertising and marketing. The lack of commercial use of Waits’s music also contributes to its authenticity and sincerity, qualities inherent to realism.

Realistic art in part involves observing and representing humanity and objects precisely and dispassionately. Authenticity and sincerity are essential concerns in realistic art; subject matter must not be heightened or debased but must be seen and represented as it is. This sincere perspective is not accomplished through passivity but is driven by an ebullient and genuine interest in the individuality and uniqueness of everything that is beheld.
Waits succeeds as a realist in his explicitly detailed and keen observations of misfit and lowlife characters and in his ability to disassociate his personal emotions from his art while still creating authentically expressive and aesthetically appealing works. Waits does not simply take flat musical snapshots of his characters or their situations. For example, even though Waits’s vagabond characters are clearly recognizable as vagabonds, he draws attention to subtle aspects and intricacies of each individual character, often in a beautiful wash of detailed language and textured musical layers. His songs are not merely emotionless depictions of human forms, societal organization, and peculiar objects but are saturated with diverse associations, obscure references, and emotional explorations. However, while this would appear to move Waits from the spirit of realism to, say, the terrain of romanticism or impressionism, it can be argued that Waits is providing realistic statements of human nature and the accompanying moods and feelings that are found within it. Just as the “literature of realism, aiming at a truthful reflection of reality, must demonstrate both the concrete and abstract potentialities of human beings,”7 so too does Waits aim to encompass both the subjective and the objective realities of his characters, their emotions and personalities, and their environments in his lyrics.

Music, like any of the arts, appeals to the imagination, but music also has the ability to present the transcendental essence of everything physical in the world. Music deals primarily with emotional sequences, which language cannot necessarily decode or analyze even when broken down to its constituent parts. While it is true that music can be composed purely cognitively, “an over-emphasis on its cognitive functions often leads to a naïve denial of the necessarily fictive character of artistic discourse.”8 For this reason, in order for music to maintain its value as art, it must contain elements of beauty and personality or reflect the existence of visceral beings in the process of either creation or appreciation. In order for music to be comfortably nestled in realism, a realism of emotions must be permitted to exist. Waits’s music speaks to the reality of a performer trying to communicate the particular narratives of his carefully selected and detailed characters. As his musical style has progressed throughout his career, his attention to realism has also developed. In his earlier years, all of his characters and their narratives were steeped in jazz and Beat poet conventions, and, as a result, the music that depicts each character is not always noticeably individualized. These earlier works can be considered somewhat anecdotal and are not fully constituted within the realism that his later works more thoroughly demonstrate.

Gradually, Waits took a more objective stance in his approach to his musical compositions and allowed the music to become much more representative of the needs of his characters and the development of his narratives, rather than reflecting the persona of a drunken jazzer and time-warped Beat poet that Waits wanted to project in the early part of his career. As Waits allowed his image to become separate from his music, his characters not only received the careful attention and incisive observation that is integral to the realism
in his lyrics but also became much more deeply embedded in the fabric and construction of his songwriting. Waits both worked to integrate his lyrics and music and to seek their independence. Like Kurt Weill, who used using gorgeous melodies to accompany disturbing lyrics of death, murder, and rape, Waits heightens the cynicism and irony of his lyrics by adding a contrasting melodic musical accompaniment to songs like “Who Are You” (*Bone Machine*) and “I’ll Shoot the Moon” (*The Black Rider*). Weill contradicts the assumption that a certain kind of music is appropriate for conveying a particular sentiment, and Waits too has experimented with the principle of providing foils musically in his compositions.

Admitting that emotion necessarily exists for the realist artist can cause objections based on fear of reinstating personal subjectivity, which can distort the objective representation of the subject matter, which realism seeks to avoid. Can artists represent universal truths or reality accurately if emotion enters into their work? Feelings are highly individualized and have the potential to interfere with the methods of realism, but they are necessary to motivate creation. They must therefore be cultivated in order not to obscure truth. No matter how disconnected artists may feel from a subject, it is undeniable that what they produce is demonstrative of their views, feelings, or perspectives. Therefore, according to realism, art must be impersonal. In order to reconcile emotion and universality, artists must not depict themselves in their work so that their art can be uplifted beyond personal affections and tendencies. Waits is very aware of the distinction between his emotional subjectivity and his artistic objectivity, and he understands the necessity of transcending personal feelings in order to produce effective and far-reaching art.

For years, Waits has carefully protected and guarded his own humanity and emotionalism, creating a persona that disguised it and dodged the media’s relentless attempts to uncover it. While deflecting attention from himself, Waits thoroughly investigated and probed one misfit wanderer or lonely traveler after another, trying to uncover their fascinating truths.

Works of art must reveal something individual or new in their realistic representation of common experience in order for it to have interest for others as a work of art and not simply be a lifelike impersonation. Musically and lyrically, Waits does not merely depict objective visual images that are stark and devoid of emotion. His music is brimming with the extremes of emotion and feeling, but they are carefully selected and portrayed. He truthfully depicts the emotional struggles, conflicts, and dreams of his characters without letting his personal feelings or judgments override those of his characters. Extending beyond the reach of musical photography, Waits focuses attention on what is significant and what signifies. In doing so, he allows his audience to experience a stronger, more intense, more communicative, more compelling, more disturbing, or more profound impression of the real than the real itself is capable of producing.

Tom Waits rejects imaginative idealization, as does the cognitive side of realism, in favor of an effective portrayal of the ignored and forgotten aspects
of life and dreams. He guides the listener through the underbelly of society, through the deepest despair of the human condition, through the crazed nightmares and psychotic episodes of his delusional characters, and remakes these situations with greater vividness in order that the listener may better comprehend the distinctness and individuality of his characters and their narratives. In addition to portraying the lives, appearances, and problems of ordinary individuals, Waits presents a realistic depiction of idealist and romantic characters such as Frank O’Brien (Frank’s Wild Years) or Woyzeck (Blood Money). This treatment of his characters allows Waits to explore all aspects of human expression and to deploy romantic ideas while still conforming to the expectations of realism. In the nightmarish images contained in albums such as Bone Machine, The Black Rider, and Blood Money, “the most improbable, fantastic statements appear real through force of descriptive detail,” and therefore it can be argued that “realistic detail is a precondition for the communication of a sense of absurdity.” As a result, while Waits may be drawn in his later works to surreal dream sequences and hallucinations, it is his attention to descriptive detail that keeps him tied to a realistic aesthetic.

Although Waits’s art is representative of life, it is still separate and distinct from his personal life and reality. Arguably, Waits does extend the confines of realism in his performances, where there exists a convergence of multiple realities, none of which includes a portrayal of the “real” Tom Waits. In his performance, these multiple worlds collide: there is the reality of his characters and their narratives, the reality of Waits as a performer morphing from character to character, the reality of Waits as the insightful comedian and storyteller in his banter between songs, the reality of Waits as a vaudevillian troubadour, the reality of Waits as a musician pounding on piano keys, tugging at guitar strings, growling into a microphone, or wildly stamping his feet. As one writer noted:

How we read lyrics is not a completely random or idiosyncratic choice. The lyricist sets up the situation—through [his] use of language, [his] construction of character—in a way that, in part, determines the response we make, the nature of our engagement. But once we say that, we admit that there’s another “voice” here, the voice of the lyricist, the author, the person putting the words in the “I’s” mouth, putting the protagonists into their lyrical situation. And the authorial voice can be more or less distinctive; we may recognize—respond to—that voice (Cole Porter, Elvis Costello, Morrissey, P. J. Harvey) even when reading a lyric. “Voice” in this sense describes a sense of personality that doesn’t involve shifters at all, but is familiar as the special way a person has with words: we immediately know who’s speaking.

Jameson articulates that in “the Brechtian aesthetic, indeed, the idea of realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, characterizing a particular stance towards it.” Both Brecht’s and Waits’s respective works of art are layered in realism so that “realistic” and experimental attitudes are tried out, not only
between its characters and their fictive realities, but also between the audience and the work itself, and—not least significant—between the writer and his own materials and techniques.”12 Like Brecht, whose “practice of ‘realism’ clearly explode[s] the purely representational categories of the traditional mimetic work,”13 Waits has challenged the scope of realism, in that he never reveals his true self or personal emotions and exists somewhere between these complex realities, adding the final lively touches to his realistic masterpieces.

Working in the realist vein, Tom Waits directs the vision of his audiences toward the distinctness and contours of his subjects, which are often overlooked in reality. Waits’s greatest gift is his ability to find beauty and magic in the things that seem to be the least beautiful or enchanted. Waits explores the color, movement, and sounds of the unexceptional, giving them aesthetic worth through his careful representation. Ordinary characters are dissected and given a new vitality as they are stripped of their habitual associations under Waits’s keen observation. Instruments, sounds, materials, and his voice are stripped of their practical functions and are manipulated and utilized in novel ways in order to more accurately depict the changes in his subjects and subject matter. Since realism involves the unembellished depiction of life, society, and nature and is connected to living existence and the truths and revelations that occur therein. This closeness to concrete reality and the artist’s passion to express truth allows aesthetic values to penetrate and be viable in realistic art. This also allows artists, such as Waits, to explore the psychological depths, inner motivations, and will of their subject matter without rejecting the methods of realism. For Waits, feeling, imagination, and psychological depth are essential to his expression of truth, human commentary, and depiction of the world.

Realism is not bound to reportage, literal imitation, or retelling of the obvious but works instead to enhance the common and unexceptional through careful treatment by the artist. Waits’s vast repertoire repeatedly refers to a physical reality, whether he ventures through dark street corners in New York, entertains the maniacal hallucinations of a drunk, sympathizes with the desperation of a diner waitress, or battles the temptations found at the crossroads of life. There is an undeniable grit to his music that leaves listeners with dirt under their fingernails or a tear in their eye and a greater understanding of existence, transience, permanence, emotional journeys, and common experiences. Waits has a passion for detail and description that translates well into realism. He can sagaciously portray the intricate, visible region of appearance, behavior, mannerisms, social organization, and situation and delve into internal truths found in feeling, temperament, morality, imagination, the subconscious, and dreams.

Realism tends to confront ugliness, pain, and darkness as well as to clarify traditional notions of beauty. Natural beauty is intensified and augmented in Waits’s realistic expression of truth, and ugliness is exposed and examined so as to discover its richness, express something new, and produce an
alternately beautiful result. Waits’s strongly defined characters, jagged musical accompaniment, and gnarly vocals defy formal standards of beauty but find a place in realism, where the conception of beauty has been widened so that it is shaped and formed by truth, sincerity, and expression. Essentially, what is aesthetically pleasing in art is that which has character. Character is the representation of truth in all its intensity, whether attractive, disturbing, or ugly, and it is this search for truth in all subjects equally that provokes Waits to investigate a deeper and more profound realism. This expanded perception of truth extends to two levels of reality, physical and psychological. The external truth helps to translate the inner truths of a person or object; facial expressions, gestures, words, colors, scenery, and sounds have the potential to express the ideas and feelings that are internalized. Realism lies essentially in the treatment of the subject matter, and, accordingly, the realistic artist has a responsibility to transmute the truth and individuality of the subject into something meaningful and vivid in reality.

Much of Tom Waits’s songwriting material emerged from the detritus of postindustrial, corporatized American culture and the narratives that flourished therein. He himself admitted, “I think something is gonna come out of this garbage world we’re living in, where knowledge and information are becoming so abstract and the things that used to really work are sitting out there like big dinosaur carcasses, rusting. Something’s gonna have to be made out of it that has value.”

**CLOSING TIME**

Tom Waits’s lyrics and music incorporate techniques not often found in popular music. His transient and bizarre characters have taken him on a lifelong journey through dreams, nightmares, and harsh realities, exploring dilapidated alleyways, eerie circus tents, and lonely railroads, while creating a transcendent soundtrack along the way. Metamorphosing from a battered, whiskey-sodden barroom piano player to a knee-stomping, brake-drum-banging circus freak to a lonely wanderer searching for a way back home, Waits has produced a highly schizophrenic and elevating repertoire of exciting aural conceptions for his characters and their narratives. Defining the movement he identifies with both musically and conceptually and summing up his recent creative output, Waits wrote, in the introduction to Bart Hopkins’s book *Gravikords, Whirlies & Pyrophones: Experimental Musical Instruments*, “With the digital revolution wound up and rattling, the deconstructionists are combing the wreckage of our age. They are cannibalizing the marooned shuttle to send us to a place that will sound like a roaring player piano left burning on the beach.” So, with this blazing inferno behind him, sand in his shoes, a red megaphone in one hand and a handful of fairy dust in the other, Tom Waits rambles off into the vast expanse with his incredibly vivid imagination and sonic dreamscapes.
Discography

Closing Time (1973). Asylum CD 60836. Ol’ 55; I Hope That I Don’t Fall in Love with You; Virginia Avenue; Old Shoes (& Picture Postcards); Midnight Lullaby; Martha; Rosie; Lonely; Ice Cream Man; Little Trip to Heaven (On The Wings of Your Love); Grapefruit Moon; Closing Time.

The Heart of Saturday Night (1974). Asylum CD 1015-2. New Coat of Paint; San Diego Serenade; Semi Suite; Shiver Me Timbers; Diamonds on My Windshield; (Looking for) The Heart of Saturday Night; Fumblin’ with the Blues; Please Call Me Baby; Drunk on the Moon; The Ghosts of Saturday Night (After Hours at Napoleone’s Pizza House).

Nighthawks at the Diner (1975). Asylum (Elektra) CDA 2008. (intro); Emotional Weather Report; (intro); On a Foggy Night; (intro); Eggs and Sausage (In a Cadillac with Susan Michelson); (intro); Better Off without a Wife; Nighthawk Postcards (From Easy Street); (intro); Warm Beer and Cold Women; (intro); Putnam County; Spare Parts I (A Nocturnal Emission); Nobody; (intro); Big Joe and Phantom 309; Spare Parts II and Closing.

Small Change (1976). Asylum CD 1078. Tom Traubert’s Blues (Four Sheets to the Wind in Copenhagen); Step Right Up; Jitterbug Boy (Sharing a Curbstone with Chuck E. Weiss, Robert Marchese, Paul Body, and The Mug and Artie); I Wish I Was in New Orleans (in the Ninth Ward); The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me) (An Evening with Pete King); Invitation to the Blues; Pasties and a G-String (at the Two O’Clock Club); Bad Liver and a Broken Heart (in Lowell); The One That Got Away; Small Change (Got Rained on with His Own .38); I Can’t Wait to Get Off Work (and See My Baby on Montgomery Avenue).

Foreign Affairs (1977). Asylum CD 1117. Cinny’s Waltz; Muriel; I Never Talk to Strangers; Medley: Jack & Neal/California Here I Come; A Sight for Sore Eyes; Potter’s Field; Burma Shave; Barber Shop; Foreign Affair.
**Blue Valentine** (1978). Asylum CD 162. Somewhere (from *West Side Story*); Red Shoes by the Drugstore; Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis; Romeo Is Bleeding; $29.00; Wrong Side of the Road; Whistlin Past the Graveyard; Kentucky Avenue; A Sweet Little Bullet from a Pretty Blue Gun; Blue Valentines.

**Heartattack and Vine** (1980). Asylum CD 60547. Heartattack and Vine; In Shades; Saving All My Love for You; Downtown; Jersey Girl; 'Til the Money Runs Out; On the Nickel; Mr. Siegal; Ruby’s Arms.

**Bounced Checks** (compilation) (1981). German Asylum K52316. Heartattack and Vine; Jersey Girl (alternate master); Eggs and Sausage; I Never Talk to Strangers; The Piano Has Been Drinking (live in Dublin, Ireland, March 1981); Whistling Past the Graveyard (alternate master); Mr. Henry (previously unreleased); Diamonds on My Windshield; Burma Shave; Tom Traubert’s Blues.

**One from the Heart** (1982). CBS Records CK 37703. Opening Montage: Tom’s Piano Intro, Once upon a Town; Is There Any Way Out of This Dream?; Picking Up After You; Old Boyfriends; Broken Bicycles; I Beg Your Pardon; Little Boy Blue; Instrumental Montage: The Tango, Circus Girl; You Can’t Unring a Bell; This One’s from the Heart; Take Me Home; Presents.

**Swordfish Trombones** (1983). Island CIDM 90095. Underground; Shore Leave; Dave the Butcher (instrumental); Johnsburg, Illinois; 16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought Six; Town with No Cheer; In the Neighborhood; Just Another Sucker on the Vine (instrumental); Frank’s Wild Years; Swordfish Trombone; Down, Down, Down; Soldier’s Things; Gin Soaked Boy; Trouble’s Braids; Rainbirds (instrumental).

**Anthology of Tom Waits** (compilation) (1984). Asylum (Elektra) 7559-60416-2 (LP or cassette only). Ol’ 55; Diamonds on My Windshield; (Looking for) The Heart of Saturday Night; I Hope I Don’t Fall in Love with You; Martha; Tom Traubert’s Blues; The Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me); I Never Talk to Strangers; Somewhere (from *West Side Story*); Burma Shave; Jersey Girl; San Diego Serenade; A Sight for Sore Eyes.

**The Asylum Years** (compilation) (1984) (1986). Asylum 7559-60321-1 (LP or cassette only); 7559-60494-2 (CD only). Diamonds on My Windshield; (Looking for) The Heart of Saturday Night; Martha; The Ghosts of Saturday Night (After Hours at Napoleone’s Pizza House); Grapefruit Moon; Small Change (Got Rained on with His Own .38); Burma Shave; I Never Talk to Strangers; Tom Traubert’s Blues; Blue Valentines; Potter’s Field; Kentucky Avenue; Somewhere (from *West Side Story*); Ruby’s Arms.

**Rain Dogs** (1985). Island CIDM 131. Singapore; Clap Hands; Cemetery Polka; Jockey Full of Bourbon; Tango Till They’re Sore; Big Black Mariah; Diamonds and Gold; Hang Down Your Head; Time; Rain Dogs; Midtown (instrumental); 9th and Hennepin; Gun Street Girl; Union Square; Blind Love; Walking Spanish; Downtown Train; Bride of Rain Dog (instrumental); Anywhere I Lay My Head.

**Frank’s Wild Years** (1987). Island CIDM 1129. Hang On St. Christopher; Straight to the Top (rhumba); Blow Wind Blow; Temptation; Innocent When You Dream (Barroom); I’ll Be Gone; Yesterday Is Here; Please Wake Me Up; Frank’s Theme; More Than Rain; Way Down in the Hole; Straight to the Top (Vegas); I’ll Take New York; Telephone Call from Istanbul; Cold Cold Ground; Train Song; Innocent When You Dream (78).

**Big Time** (live compilation) (1988). Island CIDM 1203. 16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought-Six; Red Shoes; Underground; Cold Cold Ground; Straight to the Top;
Yesterday Is Here; Way Down in the Hole; Falling Down; Strange Weather; Big Black Mariah; Rain Dogs; Train Song; Johnsburg, Illinois; Ruby’s Arms; Telephone Call from Istanbul; Clap Hands; Gun Street Girl; Time.

The Early Years (1991) (recorded July–December 1971). Bizarre/Straight R2 70557. Goin’ Down Slow; Poncho’s Lament; I’m Your Late Night Evening Prostitute; Had Me a Girl; Ice Cream Man; Rockin’ Chair; Virginia Ave.; Midnight Lullaby; When You Ain’t Got Nobody; Little Trip to Heaven; Frank’s Song; Looks Like I’m up Shit Creek Again; So Long I’ll See Ya.

Bone Machine (1992). Island 314-512-580-2. Earth Died Screaming; Dirt in the Ground; Such a Scream; All Stripped Down; Who Are You; The Ocean Doesn’t Want Me; Jesus Gonna Be Here; A Little Rain; In the Colosseum; Goin’ Out West; Murder in the Red Barn; Black Wings; Whistle Down the Wind; I Don’t Wanna Grow Up; Let Me Get up on It; That Feel.

Night on Earth (1992). Island 510 725-2. Back in the Good Old World (Gypsy); Los Angeles Mood (chromium descensions); Los Angeles Theme (another private dick); New York Theme (hey, you can have that heartattack outside buddy); Mew York Mood (a new haircut and a busted lip); Baby I’m Not a Baby Anymore (Beatrice theme); Good Old World (waltz); Carnival (Brunello Del Montalcino); On the Other Side of the World; Good Old World (gypsy instrumental); Paris Mood (un de fromage); Dragging a Dead Priest; Helsinki Mood; Carnival Bob’s Confession; Good Old World (waltz); On the Other Side of the World (instrumental).

The Black Rider (1993). Island 314-518-559-2. Lucky Day Overture; The Black Rider; November; Just the Right Bullets; Black Box Theme; T’Ain’t No Sin; Flash Pan Hunter (intro); That’s the Way; The Briar and the Rose; Russian Dance; Gospel Train (orchestra); I’ll Shoot the Moon; Flash Pan Hunter; Crossroads; Gospel Train; Interlude; Oily Night; Lucky Day; The Last Rose of Summer; Carnival.

The Early Years Volume 2 (1993). Bizarre/Straight PT3 40602. Hope I Don’t Fall in Love with You; Ol’ 55; Mockin’ Bird; In Between Love; Blue Skies; Nobody; I Want You; Shiver Me Timbers; Grapefruit Moon; Diamonds on My Windshield; Please Call Me, Baby; So It Goes; Old Shoes.

Beautiful Maladies (compilation) (1998). Island 314 524 519-2. Hang On St. Christopher; Temptation; Clap Hands; The Black Rider; Underground; Jockey Full of Bourbon; Earth Died Screaming; Innocent When You Dream; Straight to the Top; Frank’s Wild Years; Singapore; Shore Leave; Johnsburg, Illinois; Way Down in the Hole; Strange Weather (live); Cold Cold Ground (live); November; Downtown Train; 16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought Six; Jesus Gonna Be Here; Good Old World (waltz); I Don’t Wanna Grow Up; Time.

Mule Variations (1999). Anti/Epitaph 86547-2. Big in Japan; Lowside of the Road; Hold On; Get Behind the Mule; House Where Nobody Lives; Cold Water; Pony; What’s He Building?:; Black Market Baby; Eyeball Kid; Picture in a Frame; Chocolate Jesus; Georgia Lee; Filipino Box Spring Hog; Take It with Me; Come On Up to the House.

Blood Money (2002). Anti/Epitaph 86629-2. Misery Is the River of the World; Everything Goes to Hell; Coney Island Baby; All the World Is Green; God’s Away on Business; Another Man’s Vine; Knife Chase; Lullaby; Starving in the Belly of a Whale; The Part You Throw Away; Woe; Calliope; A Good Man Is Hard to Find.
Alice (2002). Anti/Epitaph 86632-2. Alice; Everything You Can Think; Flower’s Grave; No One Knows I’m Gone; Kommieezuspadt; Poor Edward; Table Top Joe; Lost in the Harbour; We’re All Mad Here; Watch Her Disappear; Reeperbahn; I’m Still Here; Fish and Bird; Barcarolle; Fawn.

Real Gone (2004). Anti/Epitaph 86678-2. Top of the Hill; Hoist That Rag; Sins of My Father; Shake It; Don’t Go into That Barn; How’s It Gonna End; Metropolitan Glide; Dead and Lovely; Circus; Trampled Rose; Green Grass; Baby Gonna Leave Me; Clang Boom Steam; Make It Rain; Day After Tomorrow; Chickaboom.


Brawlers: (86677-2-A). Lie to Me; LowDown; 2:19; Fish in the Jailhouse; Bottom of the World; Lucinda; Ain’t Goin’ Down to the Well; Lord I’ve Been Changed; Puttin’ on the Dog; Road to Peace; All the Time; The Return of Jackie and Judy; Walk Away; Sea of Love; Buzz Fledderjohn; Rains on Me.

Bawlers: (86677-2-B). Bend Down the Branches; You Can Never Hold Back Spring; Long Way Home; Widow’s Grove; Little Drop of Poison; Shiny Things; World Keeps Turning; Tell It to Me; Never Let Go; Fannin Street; Little Man; It’s Over; If I Have to Go; Goodnight Irene; The Fall of Troy; Take Care of All My Children; Down There by the Train; Danny Says; Jayne’s Blue Wish; Young at Heart.

Bastards: (86677-2-C0). What Keeps Mankind Alive; Children’s Story; Heigh Ho; Army Ants; Books of Moses; Bone Chain; Two Sisters; First Kiss; Dog Door; Redrum; Nirvana; Home I’ll Never Be; Poor Little Lamb; Altar Boy; The Pontiac; Spidey’s Wild Ride; King Kong; On the Road.
Filmography

**ACTING APPEARANCES**

*Paradise Alley* (1978) Directed by Sylvester Stallone  
*Tom Waits For No One* (1979) Directed by John Lamb  
*Poetry in Motion* (1982) Directed by Ron Mann  
*One from the Heart* (1982) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
*The Outsiders* (1983) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
*Rumblefish* (1983) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
*Ironweed* (1987) Directed by Hector Babenco  
*Candy Mountain* (1988) Directed by Robert Frank  
*Cold Feet* (1989) Directed by Robert Dornhelm  
*Queen’s Logic* (1991) Directed by Steve Rash  
*At Play in the Fields of the Lord* (1991) Directed by Hector Babenco  
*The Fisher King* (1991) Directed by Terry Gilliam
Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1992) Directed by Francis Ford Coppola
Fishing with John (1992) Directed by John Lurie
Short Cuts (1993) Directed by Robert Altman
Mystery Men (1999) Directed by Kinka Usher
In the Boom Boom Room (2001) Directed by Barbara Kopple
Domino (2005) Directed by Tony Scott
La Tigre e la Neve (2005) Directed by Roberto Benigni
Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus (2009) Directed by Terry Gilliam

FILM SCORES

One from the Heart (1980)
Night on Earth (1992)
Bunny (1998)

SOUNDTRACK CONTRIBUTIONS

A Wedding, music (1978)
Paradise Alley, “Annie’s Back in Town” (1978)
Bad Timing, “Invitation to the Blues” (1980)
Prenom Carmen, “Ruby’s Arms” (1983)
Street Wise (documentary), “Take Care of All of My Children” (1985)
 Yötyö [Night Job], “Time” (1985) (Finnish)
Down by Law, “Jockey Full of Bourbon,” “Tango Till They’re Sore” (1986)
Ironweed, “Poor Little Lamb,” “Big Rock Candy Mountain” (1987)
Boulevard of Broken Dreams, “Tom Traubert’s Blues” (1988)
Bill & Ted’s Bogus Journey, “Tommy the Cat” (with Primus) (1991)
Léolo, “Temptation,” “Cold Cold Ground” (1992)
Jersey Girl, “Jersey Girl” (1992)
Little Criminals, “Clap Hands” (1995)
Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead, “Jockey Full of Bourbon” (1995)
Twelve Monkeys “Earth Died Screaming” (1995)
Generation X, “Telephone Call from Istanbul” (1996) (Fox TV movie)
Afterglow, “Somewhere” (1997)
A Little Bit of Soul, “Cold Cold Ground” (1997)
A Little Bit of Soul, “Cold Cold Ground” (1998)
Condo Painting, “Black Wings” (1998)
Fight Club, “Goin’ Out West” (1999)
The Specialist, “Russian Dance” (1999)
Keeping the Faith, “Please Call Me Baby” (2000)
The Perfect Storm, “The Heart of Saturday Night” (2000)
Lighter or Darker, “Coney Island Baby” (2003)
Joe’s Flyin A-Garic, “Table Top Joe” (2004)
In the Realms of the Unreal, “Innocent When You Dream” (2004)
La Vida Secreta de las Palabras, “All the World Is Green” (2005)
Domino, “Jesus Gonna Be Here” (2005)
La Tigre e la Neve, “You Can Never Hold Back Spring” (2005)
Jarhead, “Soldier’s Things” (2005)
Le Scaphandre et le Papillon, “All the World Is Green,” “Green Grass” (2007)

Theater (Composition)
Frank’s Wild Years (June 22, 1986, Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago)
The Black Rider (March 31, 1990, Thalia Theatre, Hamburg, Germany)
Alice (December 26, 1992, Thalia Theatre, Hamburg, Germany)
Woyzeck (November 19, 2000, Betty Nansen Theatre, Copenhagen, Denmark)

Theater (Performance)
Frank’s Wild Years (Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, 1986)
Demon Wine (early 1989, Los Angeles)

Guest Appearances (Selected)
Blind Boys of Alabama, Go Tell It on the Mountain, “Go Tell It on the Mountain” (2004)
John Callahan, Purple Wino’s in the Rain, “Tears from the Rain” (2006)
The Eels, Blinking Lights and Other Revelations, “Going Fetal” (2005)
Gatmo Sessions Vol. 1, Moanin’ Parade, all songs (2000)


Bette Midler, *Broken Blossom*, “I Never Talk to Strangers”

Martin Mull, *I’m Everyone I’ve Ever Loved*, “Martin Goes and Does Where It’s At” (1977)


*Sailing on the Seas of Cheese*, “Tommy the Cat” (1991)

Bonnie Raitt, *Homeplate*, “Sweet and Shiny Eyes” (1975)

Rolling Stones, *Dirty Work*, “Sleep Tonight” (1986)


Various Artists, *Dead and Gone #1: Trauermärsche Funeral Marches*, “Anywhere I Lay My Head” (1997)
Various Artists, *For the Kids*, “Bend Down the Branches” (2002)
Various Artists, *Free the West Memphis 3*, “It Rains on Me” (2000)

**Music Videos**

*The One That Got Away* (1976)
*In the Neighborhood* (1983)
Downtown Train (1985)
Jockey Full of Bourbon (1986)
Blow Wind Blow (1987)
Temptation (1987)
Cold Cold Ground (1988)
16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought-Six (1988)
It’s All Right with Me (1990)
Jesus’ Blood Never Failed Me Yet (1993)
I Don’t Want to Grow Up (1992)
Goin’ Out West (1993)
Hold On (1999)
What’s He Building (1999)
God’s Away on Business (2002)
Another Man’s Vine (2002)
This One’s from the Heart (2004)
Lie to Me (2006)
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Tribute Albums and Covers

Tribute Albums

Gerd Köster, *The Piano Has Been Drinking* (1990)
Billy’s Band, *Being Tom Waits* (2001)
Claudia Bettinaglio, *Saving All My Love for You* (2001)
Pascal Fricke, *Bangin’ on the Table with an Old Tin Cup* (2007)

**COVERS**

Wolfgang Ambros, “Tom Traubert’s Blues” (2005)
Tori Amos, “Time” (2001)
The Bacon Brothers, “Jersey Girl” (1999)
Beat Farmers, “Rosie” (1987)
Blue Hawaiians, “Jockey Full of Bourbon” (1999)
The Bobs, “Temptation” (1991)
Tim Buckley, “Martha” (1973)
T-Bone Burnett, “Time” (1986)
Keith Carradine, “San Diego Serenade” (1978)
Johnny Cash, “Down There by the Train” (1994)
Mary Chapin Carpenter, “Downtown Train” (1987)
Nicole Chillemi, “Picture in a Frame” (2006)
Alex Chilton, “Downtown” (1995)
Popa Chubby, “Heartattack and Vine” (1996)
Holly Cole Trio, “Purple Avenue” (1991)
Christine Collister, “Broken Bicycles” (1996)
Das Duo Live, “In the Neighborhood” (1990)
Adam Dorfman, “Jockey Full of Bourbon” (2000)
Rita Eriksen and Frank Eriksen, “Poncho’s Lament” (1994)
Everything but the Girl, “Downtown Train” (1992)
Faraway Brothers, “Jesus Gonna Be Here” (1999)
Fossanova, “Telephone Call from Istanbul” (2000)
Frente!, “Ruby’s Arms” (1995)
Davis Gaines, “Rainbow Sleeves” (1996)
Giant Sand, “Invitation to the Blues” (1995)
Gomez, “Goin’ Out West” (2005)
Grievous Angels, “Cold Cold Ground” (1998)
Lee Hazlewood, “Martha” (1973)
Heavy Metal Horns, “Way Down in the Hole” (1994)
Susan Hedges, “Come On Up to the House” (2001)
Freddy Henry, “San Diego Serenade” (1979)
Hessel, “Jersey Girl” (1991)
Maggie Holland, “Invitation to the Blues” (1995)
Holmes Brothers, “Train Song” (1997)
Hootie and the Blowfish, “Hope I Don’t Fall in Love with You” (2000)
Hue and Cry, “Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night” (1991)
Rickie Lee Jones, “Rainbow Sleeves” (1983) (Waits never recorded this song)
Jubilant Sykes, “Take It with Me” (2001)
Mary Karlzen, “The Heart of Saturday Night” (2006)
Betsy Kaske, “Fumblin’ with the Blues” (1980)
La Chicana, “Frank’s Wild Years” (2005)
Ladyfuzz, “I Never Talk to Strangers” (2006)
Thomas Lang, “San Diego Serenade” (1994)
Magnapop, “Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis” (1995)
Manhattan Transfer, “Foreign Affair” (1979)
Barbara McAfee, “Rainbow Sleeves” (1996)
Ralph McTell, “San Diego Serenade” (1976)
Meatloaf, “Martha” (1995)
Natalie Merchant, “I Hope I Don’t Fall in Love with You” (2004)
Elliott Murphy, “Hold On” (2002)
Juice Newton, “San Diego Serenade” (1979)
Maura O’Connell, “Broken Bicycles” (1991)
Elli Paspala, “Temptation” (1993)
Gordon Payne, “Fumblin’ with the Blues” (1978)
Jeffrey Lee Pierce, “Pasties and a G-String” (1995)
Picketts, “Looking for the Heart of Saturday Night” (1992)
Pride of the Cross, “Tommy’s Blue Valentine” (1985)
Queens of the Stone Age, “Goin’ Out West” (2007)
   “Is There Anyway Out of This Dream” (1987)
   “New Coat of Paint” (1991)
Bill Sheffield, “Invitation to the Blues” (2005)
Patty Smythe, “Downtown Train” (1987)
Bruce Springsteen, “Jersey Girl” (1987)
   “Tom Traubert’s Blues” (1993)
Jack Tempchin, “Tijuana” (Co-written with Waits)
These Immortal Souls, “You Can’t Unring a Bell” (1995)
Linda Thompson, “Day After Tomorrow” (2007)
Tribe 8, “Ice Cream Man” (1995)
Johan Verminnen, “Better Off without a Wife” (1976)
Walkabouts, “Yesterday’s Here” (1993)
Jerry Jeff Walker, “The Heart of Saturday Night” (1976)
Seth Walker, “Picture in a Frame” (2006)
Freddie White, “Martha” (1981)
Paul Young, “Soldier’s Things” (1985)
Notes

CHAPTER 1

6. Ibid.


**CHAPTER 2**


7. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 85.

11. Ibid., 84.


25. Ibid.


29. Tom Waits, as quoted in “Play It Like Your Hair’s on Fire,” interview with Elizabeth Gilbert.


32. Ibid.


40. Ibid.


45. Tom Moon, “Tom Waits: Shadow Dancing.”


47. Frith, Performing Rites, 191.


49. Smay, Swordfish Trombones, 94.

50. Tom Waits, “Nighthawk in the Light of Day.”


52. Frith, Performing Rites, 198–199.


58. Waits, “Conformity Is a Fool’s Paradise.”


60. Waits, “I Hope More People Misunderstand Me.”

62. Tom Waits, “Conformity Is a Fool’s Paradise.”
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to the broken, dark, and damaged, the influence of Harry Partch, Alan Lomax, and Victor Feldman, and Waits’s opinion of cover versions of his songs.


Index

Adam Opel AG, 53
“A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” 41, 82
“Ain’t Goin’ Down to the Well,” 46
Alcivar, Bob, 24
“Alice,” 38
Alice, 9, 10, 11, 37, 38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 49, 108, 109
Alice in Wonderland, 9
Alice in Wonderland, 9
“A Little Rain,” 34, 74, 107
“All Stripped Down,” 33, 117
“All the Time,” 46
“All the World is Green,” 40, 88
“Altar Boy,” 49
“Another Man’s Vine,” 41, 88
Anti Records, 9, 11
Anvil, 7
“Anywhere I Lay My Head,” 30, 74
Armstrong, Louis, 55
“Army Ants,” 49
“A Sight for Sore Eyes,” 23
Association, The, 2
“A Sweet Little Bullet from a Pretty Blue Gun,” 25, 83
Asylum Records, 2, 5, 10, 38, 80
Aunglongs, 6, 26, 27
“Baby Gonna Leave Me,” 44, 66
“Back in the Good Old World (Gypsy),” 73
“Bad Liver and a Broken Heart,” 23, 57, 79, 97, 124
“Barcarolle,” 38
Bastards, 12, 49, 50
Bauman, Zygmunt, 54, 64
Bawlers, 12, 47, 49
Beat, 42
Beat classic, 65
Beat Generation, 3, 25
Beatnik, 2, 3, 33
Beat-oriented expression, 3
Beat poets, 22, 23, 24, 127
Beat, time warped, 3
Beautiful Maladies: The Island Years, 9
Beck, 10
Beefheart, Captain, 2, 6, 26
Belly, Lead, 6, 46, 48
“Bend Down the Branches,” 47
Benigni, Roberto, 19
Berg, Alban, 10
Berlin, Irving, 2
“Better off without a Wife,” 24
Betty Nansen Theatre, 10
Big Bad Love, 47, 48
“Big Black Mariah,” 29, 30
“Big in Japan,” 35
Big Time, 8, 27, 32
“Black Market Baby,” 36, 83, 84
Black Rider, The, 8, 9, 10, 11, 27, 34, 35, 42, 50, 60, 95, 98, 106, 107, 115, 128, 129
“Black Rider, The,” 35, 107
“Black Wings,” 34, 112
Blair, Michael, 27
“Blind Love,” 30, 88, 96
Blood Money, 10, 11, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 55, 82, 88, 90, 118, 129
“Blow Wind Blow,” 31, 103
“Blue Skies,” 23, 87
Blue Valentine, 4, 5, 24, 75, 78, 81, 82, 83, 89, 111, 112
“Blue Valentines,” 25, 78, 89
“Bone Chain,” 49
Bone Machine, 8, 10, 12, 27, 32, 34, 35, 40, 42, 50, 72, 74, 89, 106, 107, 112, 117, 118, 128, 129
“Books of Moses,” 49
“Bottom of the World,” 46, 97
Bounced Checks, 5
Brain (from Primus), 33
Brawlers, 12, 46, 47, 49
Brecht, Bertolt, 9, 12, 49, 126, 129, 130
Brennan, Kathleen, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 28, 46, 60, 65, 102, 106, 120
“Briar and the Rose, The,” 35
Brill Building, 5
Brown, James, 43, 53
Browne, Jackson, 2
Bruce, Lenny, 2
Buchner, George, 10
Buckley, Lord, 2, 22
Buckley, Tim, 2
Bukowski, Charles, 2, 12, 49
“Burma Shave,” 23, 69
Burning Airplane, 11
Burroughs, William S., 9
“Buzz Fledderjohn,” 47, 121
Calliope, 9, 40, 41
“Calliope,” 41
Carney, Ralph, 10, 27
“Carnival,” 35, 107
Carroll, Lewis, 9
Carter, Stephen, 52
Cassady, Neal, 22, 65, 66
Cave, Nick, 43
“Cemetery Polka,” 29
Chamberlin, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 44, 49
Charles, Ray, 2, 52
Chicago, 7, 30
“Children’s Story,” 49
“Chocolate Jesus,” 36, 118
“Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis,” 23, 81
Chromelodeon, 25
Chumbus, 35
“Cinny’s Waltz,” 24
Circular violin, 39
“Circus,” 44, 109, 110
“Clang Boom Steam,” 44, 95
“Clap Hands,” 29, 101
Claypool, Les, 10, 33, 43
Closing Time, 2, 8, 22, 66, 68, 77, 78, 85, 86, 87
Cohen, Greg, 10, 27
Cohen, Herb, 2, 8
“Cold Cold Ground,” 32, 92, 102, 105
“Cold Water,” 36, 71, 97, 119
“Come On Up to the House,” 36, 119, 121
“Coney Island Baby,” 37, 40, 55, 90
Conundrum, 34
Copenhagen, 10, 11
Coppola, Francis Ford, 4, 5, 59, 102
Costello, Elvis, 129
Crosby, Bing, 2
“Crossroads,” 116
Cubist funk, 43
“Danny Says,” 48
“Dave the Butcher,” 28
“Day after Tomorrow,” 12, 44, 46, 91
“Dead and Lovely,” 43, 55, 83
Dead Man Walking, 47, 48
De Bankole, Isacah, 19
“Depot, Depot,” 24
Der Freischutz, 9
Devil’s Rubato Band, 34
“Diamonds and Gold,” 29, 96
“Diamonds on My Windshield,” 68
*Dime Store Novels, The (Volume 1)—Live at Ebbett’s Field*, 11
“Dirt in the Ground,” 33, 117
Disney, 13, 49
Dobro, 36
Dodgson, Reverend Charles, 9, 109
“Dog Door,” 49, 55
“Don’t Go into the Barn,” 43, 113
Dousegoni, 35
*Down By Law*, 5
“Down, Down, Down,” 28, 101, 115
“Down There by the Train,” 48, 98
“Downtown,” 25
“Downtown Train,” 17, 30, 32, 36, 99
“Drunk on the Moon,” 77
Dylan, Bob, 2, 53

Eagles, The, 2, 17
*Early Years Volume 1, The*, 8, 22, 66, 71, 86, 88, 99
*Early Years Volume 2, The*, 8, 22, 85, 86, 87, 92
“Earth Died Screaming,” 33, 117
Eck, Johnny, 108
Edwards, Teddy, 48
“Eggs and Sausage,” 24
Elektra, 10
“Emotional Weather Report,” 24, 87
*End of Violence*, 47
Epitaph Records, 9, 10
Esposito, Giancarlo, 19
“Everything Goes to Hell,” 40
“Everything You Can Think,” 37, 38
Expressionism, 34, 124
Expressionist, 9
Eyeball Kid, 108, 122
“Eyeball Kid,” 36

“Falling Down,” 32
“Fall of Troy,” 48
“Fannin Street,” 48, 98
Farfisa organ, 32
“Fawn,” 39
*Feels Like Home*, 47
Feldman, Victor, 26
“Filipino Box Spring Hog,” 36, 119, 120, 121

“First Kiss,” 49
“Fish and Bird,” 39
“Fish in the Jailhouse,” 46, 111
“Flash Pan Hunter,” 35, 115
“Flower’s Grave,” 37, 38
“Foreign Affair,” 24, 71
*Foreign Affairs*, 3, 4, 65, 69, 71, 79, 86
_For the Kids*, 47
Frank, 7, 8, 68, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 109, 122, 129
“Frank’s Song,” 99
“Frank’s Theme,” 31, 104
_Frank’s Wild Years*, 6, 7, 8, 10, 27, 30, 31, 32, 48, 50, 58, 59, 68, 92, 98, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 105, 109, 117, 129
“Frank’s Wild Years,” 7, 28, 100, 102, 104
Frank trilogy, 8, 101
_Free the West Memphis*, 3, 47
Frith, Simon, 52, 54, 56
Frito-Lay, 52
“Fumblin’ with the Blues,” 76

“Georgia Lee,” 36, 74, 118
Gershwin, George, 2
“Get Behind the Mule,” 35, 119, 120, 121
“Ghosts of Saturday Night, The,” 2, 23
Ginsberg, Allen, 2
“Gin Soaked Boy,” 28, 101
“God’s Away on Business,” 37, 40, 118
“Goin’ Out West,” 34
“Goodnight Irene,” 48
Gore, Joe, 10
“Gospel Train,” 35, 95, 98
Grammy: Best Alternative Album, 8; Best Contemporary Folk Album, 9
Grand Weepers, 65
“Grapefruit Moon,” 24, 86
“Green Grass,” 44
Grim Reapers, 65
“Gun Street Girl,” 30, 113

“Had Me a Girl,” 22, 71
Hamburg, 9, 11, 34
Hammond, John P., 48
Hampton, Paul, 4
“Hang Down Your Head,” 29, 30, 101
“Hang On St. Christopher,” 31, 68, 103
Harmonium, 28
Harmoniums, 26
Harry Partch Ensemble, 25
“Harry’s Harbor Bizarre,” 107
Harvey, P.J., 129
Heartattack and Vine, 4, 5, 22, 23, 24, 72, 78, 82, 86, 90, 92, 97
“Heartattack and Vine,” 25, 82, 115
Heart of Saturday Night, The, 3, 23, 66, 68, 76, 77, 86
“Heart of Saturday Night, The,” 76
“Heigh Ho,” 49
Heritage, 2
Herzog, Werner, 10
Hidalgo, David, 32
Hodges, Stephen, 10, 26
“Hoist That Rag,” 12, 43, 93
“How’s It Gonna End,” 43
Hook Gang, 93
“How I Don’t Fall in Love with You,” 23
Hopkins, Bart, 131
Hormel, Smokey, 10
“House Where Nobody Lives,” 36, 119, 120
Howe, Bones, 3, 4, 5, 11
Howlin’ Wolf, 2
“How’s It Gonna End,” 43
“I Can’t Wait to Get Off Work,” 23
“Ice Cream Man,” 24
“I Don’t Want to Grow Up,” 34
“If I Have to Go,” 48
“I Hope That I Don’t Fall in Love with You,” 77
“I’ll Be Gone,” 31, 103
“I’ll Shoot the Moon,” 35, 128
“I’ll Take New York,” 32, 104, 109
“I Never Talk to Strangers,” 24
Impressionism, 127
“I’m Still Here,” 38
“In Between Love,” 22
Indonesian seed pods, 38, 39, 40
“Innocent When You Dream,” 31, 40, 53, 103
“In the Colosseum,” 34, 107
“In the Morning,” 116
“In the Neighborhood,” 28, 48, 92, 101
“Invitation to the Blues,” 24, 77
Island Records, 5, 6, 8, 9, 54
“It’s Over,” 48
“I Want You,” 86
“I Wish I Was in New Orleans,” 24, 77
Jabés, Edmond, 68
“Jack & Neal: California Here I Come,” 65
James, Skip, 6
Jameson, 124, 129
Jarmusch, Jim, 5, 8, 17, 18, 19, 59
“Jayne’s Blue Wish,” 48
“Jersey Girl,” 24, 25, 90
“Jesus Gonna Be Here,” 34, 118
“Jitterbug Boy,” 23
“Jockey Full of Bourbon,” 29, 101
“Johnsburg, Illinois,” 28, 90, 101
Johnson, Robert, 35
Johnston, Daniel, 50
Jones, Norah, 47
Jones, Rickie Lee, 3
Joplin, Janis, 3
Judgment Day, 33, 98, 117
“Just Another Sucker on the Vine,” 28
“Just the Right Bullets,” 115
Kafka, 41
“Kentucky Avenue,” 24, 75
Kerouac, Jack, 2, 3, 12, 22, 49, 50, 65
“King Kong,” 50
Kinney, Terry, 7
Kithara, 25
“Knife Chase,” 37, 41
Knowles, Piggy, 93
Koepke, Melora, 55
“Kommienezuspadt,” 38, 39, 43
“Last Rose of Summer, The,” 35
Liddell, Alice, 9
“Lie to Me,” 45, 89
“Little Drop of Poison,” 47
“Little Man,” 48
“Lonely,” 23, 87
“Long Way Home,” 47, 67
“Looks Like I’m Up Shit Creek Again,” 88
“Lord I’ve Been Changed,” 46
Los Lobos, 32
“Lost in the Harbour,” 39
Lovin’ Spoonful, The, 2
“Low Down,” 46, 84
“Lowside of the Road,” 35, 72
“Lucinda,” 46
“Lucky Day Overture,” 35, 107
Lukács, 124
“Lullaby,” 40

“Mack the Knife,” 37
“Make It Rain,” 44, 73
Mantia, Bryan, 42
Mariachi, 1, 21, 102
“Martha,” 24, 85
Mellotron, 30, 31, 38
Mellotrons, 6
Melvoin, Mike, 24
“Metropolitan Glide,” 12, 43
Midler, Bette, 4, 53
“Midtown,” 30
“Misery Is the River of the World,” 40
Modern Folk Quartet, 2
Monk, Thelonius, 22
Moon, Tom, 53
“More Than Rain,” 32, 104
Morrissey, 129
Morrison, Jim, 3
Mothers of Invention, The, 2
Muse tambourine, 37, 51
“Mr. Siegal, 115
Mueller-Stahl, Armin, 19
Mule Variations, 9, 10, 11, 12, 35, 36, 37, 51, 55, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 83, 90, 97, 108, 118, 119, 121
Mumbles, 4
“Murder in the Red Barn,” 34, 72, 119
“Muriel,” 23, 79, 86

Napoleone’s Pizza House, 2
“Never Let Go,” 48
“New Coat of Paint,” 24

New Orleans, 4
“Nighthawk Postcards,” 24, 66, 107
Nighthawks at the Diner, 3, 4, 24, 50, 66, 78, 79, 87, 107
Night on Earth, 8, 17, 20, 73
“9th and Hennepin,” 29, 96
“Nirvana,” 49
“No One Knows I’m Gone,” 37, 38
“November,” 35
Nursery Rhymes, 7

O’Brien, Frank, 7, 8, 31, 58, 68, 99, 100, 101, 102, 103, 104, 105, 109, 122, 129
“Ol’ 55,” 17, 68
“Ocean Doesn’t Want Me, The,” 34
“Old Shoes (& Picture Postcards),” 23, 66
One from the Heart, 5, 58, 102
“One That Got Away, The,” 76, 85
“On the Nickel,” 24, 72
On the Road, 65
“On the Road,” 50
Optigan, 6, 30, 31, 32, 35
Orphans, 13, 55, 58
Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers, & Bastards, 12, 45, 50, 51
Orphans—Bastards, 45
Orphans—Bawlers, 45, 67, 98
Orphans—Brawlers, 45, 73, 84, 87, 89, 96, 97, 111, 121
Oscar, 5

Pale Face, 108
Paradise Alley, 4
Parker, Charlie, 66
Partch, Harry, 6, 25, 30
“Part You Throw Away, The,” 37, 41
“Pasties and a G-String,” 22, 81
Pellonpää, Matti, 20
Performing Rites, 52
“Peter Gunn,” 41
Phillips, Phil, 47
“Piano Has Been Drinking (Not Me), The,” 23, 76, 124
Pickett, Wilson, 66
“Picture in a Frame,” 36, 51, 119, 121
“Pink Panther,” 41
“Please Call Me, Baby,” 24, 85
“Please Wake Me Up,” 31, 104
Pollock, 48
Polygram, 9
Pomona, California, 1
“Poncho’s Lament,” 22, 86
“Pontiac, The,” 49
“Pony,” 36, 73
“Poor Edward,” 38, 109
“Poor Little Lamb,” 49
Porter, Cole, 2, 129
“Potter’s Field,” 24, 111
Prepared piano, 30, 32
Primus, 10, 33, 35
“Putnam County,” 24, 79
“Putting on the Dog,” 46

“Rainbirds,” 28
Rain Dogs, 6, 7, 27, 29, 30, 32, 42, 44, 50, 70, 74, 88, 93, 95, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 113, 114
Rain dogs, 69, 70
“Rain Dogs,” 29, 70, 101
“Rains on Me,” 47, 73
Ramones, 12, 47, 48
Ranchera, 1
Real Gone, 11, 12, 41, 42, 44, 53, 58, 60, 66, 68, 73, 83, 88, 91, 93, 95, 109, 113
Realism, 124, 125, 127, 128, 129, 130, 131
Realist aesthetic, 125
Realistic Art, 126
“Redrum,” 49
“Red Shoes by the Drugstore,” 24, 70, 111
“Reeperbahn,” 39
Rhino Records, 10
Ribot, Marc, 10, 27, 42
Richard, Mark, 16
Richards, Keith, 26, 30, 34
“Road to Peace,” 46
Romanticism, 127
“Romeo is Bleeding,” 25, 111
“Rose of Tralee, The,” 47
“Rosie,” 23, 87
Rubato West, 34
“Ruby’s Arms,” 24, 92, 97

“Russian Dance,” 35
Ryder, Winona, 18

“SalsaRio Doritos,” 52
“San Diego Serenade,” 24, 86
“Saving All My Love for You,” 86
Schmid, Georg, 116
Schoenberg, 6
Schwarz, Willie, 27
Sea of Love, 47
“Sea of Love,” 47
“Semi Suite,” 24, 66, 67
“Shake It,” 43, 44, 113
“Shiny Things,” 48
“Shiver Me Timbers,” 23, 92
“Shore Leave,” 16, 27, 53, 91, 100
Shrek 2, 47
Sinatra, Frank, 2, 12, 31, 48
“Singapore,” 29, 93, 100
Singing saw, 35
Sing Sing Tommy Shay Boys, 93
Sinise, Gary, 7
“Sins of My Father,” 12, 43, 113
“16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought-Six,” 28
Small Change, 3, 4, 22, 72, 76, 77, 79, 81, 85, 94, 97, 107, 124
“Small Change,” 22, 72
Smay, David, 16, 54, 115, 123
“So It Goes,” 23
“Soldier’s Things,” 28, 94
“So Long I’ll See Ya,” 66
“Somewhere,” 24
“Somewhere (A Place for Us),” 39
“Spare Parts I and II,” 24
Sparklehorse, 49
Spence, Skip, 49
“Spidey’s Wild Ride,” 50
Stallone, Sylvester, 4
“Starving in the Belly of a Whale,” 37, 41
Steppenwolf Theatre, 7, 8, 59
“Step Right Up,” 107
Stewart, Rod, 17
Stinson band organ, 17
“Straight to the Top (Rhumba),” 31, 103, 104, 109
“Straight to the Top (Vegas),” 109
“Strange Weather,” 32
Index 175

Stroh violin, 38, 39, 40, 41
subvocalization, 58
“Such a Scream,” 33, 107
Surreal, 129
Surrealism, 124
Surural, 119
Sururalism, 35, 119
sururalist, 36, 37
“Swordfish trombone,” 27, 94, 100, 101
*Swordfish trombones*, 6, 7, 9, 16, 17, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 38, 47, 50, 53, 54, 55, 70, 90, 91, 92, 94, 96, 99, 100, 101, 102, 113, 115, 124
Tabletop Joe, 108
“Table Top Joe,” 37, 39
Tackett, Fred, 26
“Take Care of All of My Children,” 48
“Take It with Me,” 36, 51, 55, 90, 119, 121
Tandem Campany Guasch, 53
Tango, 7
“Tango Till They’re Sore,” 29, 101
Taylor, Larry, 42
“Telephone Call from Istanbul,” 32, 45, 104
“Tell It to Me,” 48
“Temptation,” 31, 103
Thalia Theatre Company, 9
“That Feel,” 34, 74
“This One’s from the Heart,” 79
Thomassie, “Big John,” 4
*Three Penny Opera*, 49
*Through the Looking Glass*, 9
Thumm, Francis, 25
“‘Til the Money Runs Out,” 78
“Time,” 29, 93, 95, 100
Tin Pan Alley, 23, 63
“Tom Traubert’s Blues,” 24, 94
“Top of the Hill,” 42, 53, 68
“Town with No Cheer,” 28, 96
Tracy-Locke, 52
“Train Song,” 32, 99, 102, 105
“Trampled Rose,” 44, 88
Tropicana Motel, 3
Troubadour, 2
“Trouble’s Braids,” 28, 101, 113
Turtles, The, 2
“$29.00,” 82
“2:19,” 46, 87, 96
“Two Sisters,” 49
“Underground,” 16, 27, 55, 70, 71
“Union Square,” 30, 101
Universal, 9
Uptown Horns, The, 30
“Used Carlotta,” 5
*Used Songs (1973–1980)*, 11
“Virginia Avenue,” 24, 78
Volkswagen-Audi, 53
Waits, Alma, 1
Waits, Casey, 12, 41, 42, 43
Waits, Frank, 1
“Walk Away,” 47
Walken, Christopher, 55
“Walking Spanish,” 30, 114
“Waltzing Matilda,” 94
“Warm Beer and Cold Women,” 24, 78
Warner Music, 11
Warner Records, 10
“Watch Her Disappear,” 39
“Way Down in the Hole,” 32, 104, 117
Weber, Carl Maria von, 9
*We’re a Happy Family*, 47
“We’re All Mad Here,” 39
Weill, Kurt, 9, 12, 34, 37, 49, 107, 126, 128
Weiss, Chuck E., 47
*West Side Story*, 24, 39
“What Keeps Mankind Alive,” 49
“What’s He Building,” 36, 120
“Whistle Down the Wind,” 34, 106
“Whistlin’ Past the Graveyard,” 25
Whittier, California, 1
“Who Are You,” 33, 89, 128
“Why Is the Dream Always So Much Sweeter Than the Taste?” 4, 5
*Wicked Grin*, 48
“Widow’s Grove,” 47, 84
Wilson, Robert, 8, 9, 10, 11, 34, 59, 60, 61, “Woe,” 41
“World Keeps on Turning,” 48
Woyzeck, 10, 39, 49, 61, Woyzeck, 40, 88, 89, 129
Woyzeck, Johann Christian, 10
Wozzeck, 10
“Wrong Side of the Road,” 25, 112

Yester, Jerry, 2, 8, 24
“Yesterday Is Here,” 31, 98, 104
“You Can Never Hold Back Spring,” 47
“Young at Heart,” 48
Young, Neil, 53

Zappa, Frank, 2, 8
Zoetrope, 5
About the Author

CORINNE KESSEL has worked as a multi-instrumentalist performer, composer, sound designer, and musical director. She is the Managing Producer for November Theatre, which produced the World English Premiere of the Tom Waits rock operetta, *The Black Rider*, which has toured across North America playing to sellout houses and garnering both rave reviews and numerous awards.