



Larry Jaffee

Rock

Tom Waits *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards*  
Anti/Epitaph 86677-2P

**S**INCE JOINING INDIE label Anti/Epitaph, Tom Waits has released four albums, the Grammy-winning *Mule Variations* (1999), *Real Gone* (2004), and in between, simultaneously *Alice* and *Blood Money* (2002), both of which had their origins as scores for earlier European theater productions.

But Waits apparently has been stockpiling his studio output, as evidenced by this new sprawling, three-CD release of 54 songs, including 30 new recordings – equaling over three hours of rare or never-before heard music. Despite being a “prestige” artist, to whom all fellow songwriters bow down, the limited-edition *Orphans*, with its 94-page booklet, is the kind of project that most likely would not see the light of day if administered by “major label” mentality.

And that’s why Waits hooked up with Anti/Epitaph in the first place, following a fruitful, decade-long relationship with Island (1983 - 1993) that petered out when the once-indie was absorbed into Polygram, which has been since integrated into the Universal Music Group empire.

The Island period, in contrast to his more “Tin Pan Alley meets jazz” vocals from the early years on Asylum, was critical in Waits changing gears musically (and personally). He married Kathleen Brennan in 1980 after meeting her on the set of the film *One from the Heart*, for which he provided the memorable soundtrack (duets with Crystal Gayle). The Waits-Brennan union is still going strong a quarter century and couple of kids later, and she remains a frequent collaborator.

Musically at this time, Waits headed full force into a far more experimental mode, paying little or no consideration to commercial potential. A student of the avant-garde composer Harry Partch (1901 - 1974), Waits felt liberated in adopting a bang-on-a-can method of making music and using about anything that could double as an instrument (or is that noise-maker?) Enough can’t be said about the new sound and direction he established on his initial Island album *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), an oeuvre that still echoes on *Orphans*.

Each of the three *Orphans* CDs has its individual theme: “Brawlers” is chockfull of raucous blues and full-throated juke-

joint stomp; "Bawlers" comprises Celtic and country ballads, waltzes, lullabies, piano and classic lyrical Waits' songs; while "Bastards" is filled with experimental music and strange tales.

Many of "Bawlers'" tracks evoke a weepy, melancholy feel, heavy on the regrets, stories full of what coulda, shoulda, woulda....

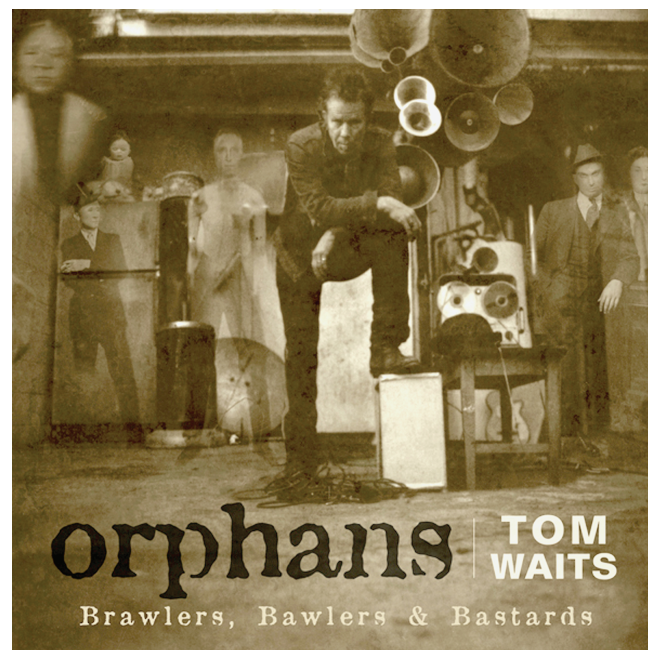
In contrast, "Lie to Me" and "Low Down" kick off the "Brawlers" disc with fairly straight-forward rock 'n' roll, and his vocals sound like they're being shouted through a megaphone. And, of course, he's been known to do that, both on stage and in the studio.

"Bottom of the World" is reminiscent of a tender Shane McGowan/Pogues ballad, but Waits has previously written his fair share of this sort of tune.

"Dog Door," with its clangy guitar riff and cut-and-paste drum machine, sounds like something Beck would do. "It's Over," a lament over a failed marriage, would not be out of place on his jazzy *Small Change* days, circa 1976.

Perhaps the most startling song is "Road to Peace," an examination of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict — startling because Waits usually leaves pointed political song-smithing to writers like Steve Earle and Neil Young. Most likely using a newspaper article as their source of information, Waits and Brennan lyrically detail the protagonists' lives; both sides' extremists have more in common than they realize.

In addition to the new material, *Orphans* features several songs originally recorded for movie soundtracks ("Sea of Love"), tribute albums (Bukowski, Kerouac), and uniquely interpreted cover versions ("Heigh Ho," "What Keeps Mankind Alive," "Young At Heart," and "Goodnight Irene," among them) now find a home on a Waits' album for the first time.



The single thread that ties it all together is Waits' immense talent as a first-class, often hilarious raconteur with the ability to hold the listeners' attention even if he were merely reciting a Wikipedia entry on the mating habits of insects ("Army Ants"), or his family's history with automobiles ("The Pontiac"). Waits relays with great aplomb his characters' back-stories, painting fully developed cinematic vignettes worthy of the best pulp fiction, and doing it in the span of a couple of minutes. And, of course, he's the king of memorable one-liners, such as "All the Time's" "You won't go very far / you left your blonde wig in the car ...."

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