

MODEST AMERICA

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In American pop culture, the expanse of landscape and the magic of the cities are continually eclipsed by the flickering neon of the small town, where the streets are wet and windswept, the bar half-empty and only the petrol stations bid a stiff formal farewell. . . Like so many writers, filmmakers, musicians and photographers, this remains Tom Waits' favourite territory.

Over 10 years of recording, in *Foreign Affairs*, *The Heart of Saturday Night*, *Asylum Years*, and more recently the much applauded *Strombonefish* and *Raindogs*, Waits has drawn on musical traditions which honour the amateur. He borrows bar-room pianos, accordians, street corner blues, parade bands which sound like they are falling apart at the seams, and off-key country and western vocals, and then goes on to sing about the people who inhabit these out-of-the-way musical regions. In contrast with get-up and grab-it America,

Waits seems to respect small-scale dreaming. His figures possess only notional desires and they are destined to stay right where they are. Waits doesn't only defend



Tom Waits poses for the sleeve of *Raindogs*.

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less than perfect humanity, he casts himself alongside this other nation of waiters. As one critic put it, this is Beckett in Arkansas. Small town languor doesn't even prompt steamy emotions. Small hopes mean that love, or the weather, might improve, that the train might stop or the hangover fade.

Waits isn't going to leap up and offer himself as a voice in praise of modest Americans, like Bruce Springsteen. Instead he stays low, sometimes seemingly swallowed up by his crew of half-demented characters themselves strung out between the past and the present, between youth and old age, between memory and desire.

Elsewhere he tinkers around, admiring the instruments of Harry Partch's orchestra as though they were wondrous objects thrown up by nature. Partch invented a whole new musical notation using junkyard objects, sounds found from scrapheaps and an assortment of hand-me-downs. Here Waits finds pipes whose train whistle noise would, in his own words, break your heart. With this collector's respect for once-loved objects, cracked surfaces and broken bottles, he laces melodies around the objects, pulling lyrics out of a hat as though they too were faint recollections, half-remembered fragments, snatches from stories overheard, mumbled phrases and slogans from little America.

Waits won't make Statements and he is rarely pictured standing upright. He resists completely the American temptation to be grand and proclamatory. Nor does he feel he should do his duty, warn the nation's youth against alcohol and stand up and be counted. When Gavin Martin put his praise of drink to him Waits demurred. He was only saying what others had before him. Why should he set a good example, was this some kind of military academy? And regarding posture he prefers to slouch or squat in undignified positions. He disappears up the sleeves of his battered jacket, eyes the camera warily and twists his arms tight around him, as though otherwise he might fall apart.

On stage Waits shies away from anything vaguely reminiscent of boastful male sexuality. He dances and pirouettes like a Glaswegian drunk on a Saturday night caught up in dreams of himself as a matador, a ballerina or Mick Jagger. His movements are stiff and ungainly but they take off into a homage to down-and-out

masculinity, to bodies divested of charm and virility, and to parts of the body overlooked by fashion.

Raindogs, released last November, was produced, recorded and written in New York. It bears many of the signs of Waits' older small town iconography but is even more eclectic as he ventures musically towards Kurt Weil-inspired arrangements and vocals which recall the lyrical intensity of Ernst Busch. This is a bleaker and a sharper album than the others. Waits' rejoinder to the 80s resides in an imagery where the moon is always yellow, old emotions barely surface, bad dreams abound and the rain rarely lets up. Childhood memories are fearful rather than fond ('16 men on a deadman's chest') and a parade of damaged, wounded characters stalk the streets. Waits' love of community, with its diversity and peculiarity, gives way to bitter social observation. Staggering across social injustice Waits cannot wish it away. In *Raindogs* the rich get pleasure from playing poor, while the girl behind the counter feels obliged to spend hundreds on her fading looks. Waits here edges into Diane Arbus territory and recoils. Self-mocking humour and an undying sense of rock, blues, and melody, make his music seem less lonely.

Keith Richards plays on two blues-inspired songs, and as a living example of the walking dead this seems not incongruous. Waits clearly took to Richards' less than upright body frame ('head at three, arms at ten'). Why not? Is being out of it so much more dishonourable than being in there, in the thick of it? In *Union Square* and *Blind Love* Waits' voice reaches a new gravelly low. This is truly a view from the pavement. Rum, whisky or bourbon don't rescue him from an overblown romanticism, but at least they lighten the load. His praise of drink and oblivion make his comments about women with crumbling beauty, or Miss Charlotte in her fireman's raincoat, or the Brooklyn girls who think they're getting somewhere, sound like an all-party convention of great male American writers. In this respect Waits is as stuck as any of his romantic forbears. At least he doesn't expect every woman, to whom his gaze is turned, to jump on the back seat of his draughty motorbike. Nor does he leave them behind and not look back. But while men can excavate the pavements, women still can't roll in the mud.