

## Tom's Wild Year: The Story of *Swordfishtrombones*

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*HAVE I GOT NEWS FOR YOU* it was not. Tom Waits did, however, have news for fellow guest Ian Hislop, rounding on the latter after he suggested that Waits promote his new album more audibly, and snarling that he would "promote it in my own damn way".

The year was 1983, the album *Swordfishtrombones*, and the programme was the October 18<sup>th</sup> edition of Channel 4's dismal yooof-oriented chatshow *Loose Talk*. Waits had already sidestepped the trap set when host Steve Taylor asked whether the singer was familiar with "the seedier parts" of his native Los Angeles, replying, "You mean like a farming community?" The squirm-inducing interrogation staggered on until Waits lost it with Hislop. In those pre-reality-TV days it was almost shocking.

For any Waits fan who'd made the transition to *Swordfishtrombones* from, say, *Small Change*, the subtext of the

*Loose Talk* conversation was all too clearly the 33-year-old singer's annoyance at being typecast as a beatnik bum who'd lived in LA's Tropicana Motel and made boozy faux-jazz albums about... well, living in LA's Tropicana Motor Hotel. For *Swordfishtrombones* was nothing if not a radical rewrite of Waits' nighthawk persona, dispensing not only with the Tropicana but with the many crutches he'd used since making his first album for David Geffen's Asylum label a decade earlier: manager Herb Cohen, producer "Bones" Howe, and (Elektra-)Asylum Records itself.

To this day I can recall the mild shock we felt on the *NME* staff when *Swordfishtrombones* followed abruptly on the heels of Waits' lush, Howe-helmed soundtrack for Francis Ford Coppola's big-budget film *One from the Heart*. How, we wondered, could one man have released two such utterly different records in the space of one year?

In fact, for any rock critic with ears, embedded within *One from the Heart* were subtle pointers to Waits' future. Both "Circus Girl" and "You Can't Unring a Bell" stood out amidst beautiful ballads like "I Beg Your Pardon". Going back further through Waits' work, "Red Shoes by the Drugstore" from 1978's *Blue Valentine* was an early forerunner of the bolder and more primitively percussive style of *Swordfishtrombones*. 1980's *Heartattack and Vine*, meanwhile, anticipated the savage Howlin' Wolf-via-Captain Beefheart R&B of *Swordfish*'s "Gin Soaked Boy" and "16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought Six".

Yet Waits had for some time been struggling to get out from under the identity he'd staked out with *The Heart of Saturday Night* (1974) and *Nighthawks at the Diner* (1975). In the event it took a young woman named Kathleen Brennan – script editor on *One From the Heart*, and subsequently Waits' wife – to catalyse the changes he wanted. "[Kathleen] was the one that started playing bizarre music," Waits later claimed. "She said, 'You can

take this and this and put all this together. There's a place where all these things overlap."

For those who'd worked with Waits up to this point, Brennan's influence on her husband was more than slightly resented. It was felt that, like Yoko Ono, she had driven a wedge between her man and his past out of some unstated desire to take control of his career. "She really separated him from everybody," Bones Howe told me, though he quickly added: "I don't harbour any bad feelings towards her, because I really believe she saved his life. She provided him with strength when he needed strength."

"In a good way I'm alive because of her," Waits has said of the woman who inspired his song "Jersey Girl". "I was a mess. I was addicted. I wouldn't have made it." When the Waits' vacationed in the summer of 1982 in Ireland, where Kathleen had cousins, the proof of her galvanising impact was clearly felt in the songs that began to tumble out of Waits. Whether or not it is true that almost all of *Swordfishtrombones* was written in a fortnight in

the Emerald Isle as a thematically-linked suite of songs matters not. What matters is that the songs were extraordinary sloughings-off of Waits' failsafe methodology, their inception not moods or characters – or piano chords, for that matter – but visual images that stretched way beyond Waits' usual barfly terrain.

"Shore Leave", an early demo of which Waits played for Elektra-Asylum's Joe Smith in April 1982, was a vivid mimesis of his homesick protagonist getting lost in Hong Kong. "Dave the Butcher" was a creepy organ instrumental inspired by a local cleaver-wielder in Ireland. Such tracks attempted to get inside the heads – the musical souls, one might almost say – of their subjects. "I was trying to find music that felt more like the people that were in the songs," Waits told me in 1999, "rather than everybody being kind of dressed up in the same outfit."

Mystified as Smith was by this unprecedented music by an artist who had, in any case, long outgrown his initial "prestige" status

on Asylum, the label chief nonetheless rubber-stamped Waits' proposal that he be allowed to book Hollywood's famous Sunset Sound studio and self-produce his next album. "Tom and Kathleen decided they could make it better themselves," Smith told me. "There was no point in battling that out because I didn't think another producer was going to up him to 300,000 sales. I thought he'd made a mistake in leaving Bones anyway."

Gathering a hybrid troupe of musos young and old, and with Kathleen Brennan at his side – he claimed that his wife "really co-produced that record with me, though she didn't get credit" – Waits set about translating his new songs into bold new sounds.

"He'd heard me play in the James Harman Band, I think at the Cathay de Grande," says drummer Stephen Hodges. "Somehow they got in touch and I went up to Amigo studios in North Hollywood and played some. There was a percussionist there, and I think [bassist] Larry Taylor. Then they called one more time

and we started work at Sunset Sound. And there was Victor Feldman and there was Larry, and Fred Tackett on guitar, and Joe Romano and Randy Aldcroft on horns. That was sort of the little crew."

Eschewing the latest technology, which was making popular music increasingly soulless, Waits and his accomplices rolled up at Sunset Sound with a truckload of instruments that had only made fleeting appearances in rock music – marimbas, squeeze drums, Balinese percussion, calliopes, glass harmonicas.

A major influence on Waits' new approach was the eccentric Harry Partch, hobo composer and inventor of such bizarre instruments as the Gourd Tree and the Cloud Chamber Bowls. Waits had been aware of Partch for some years, not least because Partch had wound up in Waits' hometown of San Diego. At a Partch Ensemble concert in 1978, Waits swung by and talked to Ensemble member Randy Hoffman about the Cloud Chamber Bowls. "He was fascinated by them," Hoffman recalls. "I

remember him pounding on my chest and saying, 'That just gets you right *here!*'"

Waits was especially fascinated by the many kinds of marimba Partch devised and built. The vibraphonic tones of these instruments – beloved also of Captain Beefheart and played on *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970) and *The Spotlight Kid* (1972) by one "Ed Marimba", no less – suggested something at once exotic and strange, a world away from the jazz/R&B instrumentation he'd relied on for so long.

Master of the marimba was the 48-year-old Feldman, a child prodigy in his native England before moving to America at the age of 23 to play piano, vibes, and percussion with everyone from Woody Herman to Steely Dan. "Victor was kind of the grand poobah on *Swordfish*," says Stephen Hodges. "When we did 'In the Neighborhood', he orchestrated that whole horn thing."

Feldman's marimbas supplied the main textures on "Shore Leave", which also featured the still more obscure metal

aunlongs played by Francis Thumm, an old pal of Waits' from San Diego. Offsetting these sounds were the jagged interjections of Fred Tackett's guitar and banjo, together with the surprisingly harmonic sound of a chair a chair dragged across the studio floor.

"Fred had to keep adding strings because they made him play his guitar with his car key and it kept breaking the strings," Hodges recalls. "After *Swordfish* he was re-ingratiated back into his children's good books. One too many Juice Newton records had put him on the outs with the kids, and now he became hip again." Tackett's mangled South Side soloing on "Gin Soaked Boy" is one of the album's supreme highlights.

On the holy-rolling, tambourine-rattled "Down, Down, Down", Tackett was replaced by Carlos Guitarlos, sometime guitarist with debauched R&B combo Top Jimmy and the Rhythm Pigs. "Tom called me and said, 'I'm in the studio, come on down,'" Guitarlos remembers. "There was just a little backing drum

because Victor Feldman played the sort of jazz second-line snare. I thought they were really jumping. There was no vocal on it yet. I kept playing and playing, and Waits said, 'That's okay, but it doesn't seem quite right'. So we tuned one string down a little bit, so it was a little bit flat."

Stephen Hodges recalls Waits in the studio as "kind of quiet but really personable." He loved the way Waits hummed what he wanted to each of the musicians in turn. "I learned from him that if you don't get it in the first two or three takes you just move on," the drummer says. "You keep going till you catch some of the *innocence* you have when you know that you know but you *don't* quite know."

If the opening "Underground" ostensibly concerned a community of mutant dwarves, it was also an obvious metaphor for the subterranean realm Waits had discovered: "*It's a place I've found/There's a world going on underground...*" A short stomp of a song, with a generous pinch of Brecht-Weill stirred

into it, the track gleefully introduced some of Waits' new building blocks: Feldman's clonky marimba, Aldcroft's farting trombone, the dampened thud of Hodges' drums, and Tackett's staccato, proto-Marc-Ribot Telecaster.

Following on from "Shore Leave" and "Dave the Butcher", "Johnsburg, Illinois" threw a tiny lifeline to any old-school Waits fiends who'd struggled with the first three tracks. Ironically Waits reverted to piano-ballad type as he paid tribute to the woman who'd urged him to revolutionise his sound. Named after the Midwest town where Kathleen had grown up, the ninety-second song reassured us that our friend hadn't entirely thrown out the baby with the bathwater.

On "16 Shells from a Thirty-Ought Six" the mighty beat suggested industrial Beefheart, or Howlin' Wolf working on a chain-gang. It was also a new landscape for Waits, with its bizarre southern-gothic image of a crow trapped behind the "bars" of a guitar's strings. Meanwhile "Town With No Cheer" came out of a news

story Waits had read about an Australian town where trains no longer stopped and the bars had all closed, the sheer dreariness of the place conjured by a combo of bagpipes, wheezy accordion and even a discreet synthesizer.

"In the Neighbourhood", the album's first single, was a brass-band parade through the Waits' funky Union Avenue neighborhood in LA. "I was trying to bring the music outdoors with tuba, trombone, trumpets, snare, cymbals, accordion," Waits said of it. The track also provided the pretext for his first video, directed by the great documentary maker Haskell Wexler.

Though it remains the album's best-known track, "Frank's Wild Years" is an anachronism on *Swordfishtrombones*. Ronnie Barron's loungey organ returned Waits to the sleazy milieu of *Heartattack and Vine* as he recounted a version of the way his own dad had walked out on his family, in Frank's case torching his own home in the San Fernando Valley. Like "Underground", the song could also be read as a metaphor for ripping it up and

starting again.

Waits threw another bone to his old fan base with the exquisite "Soldier's Things". A second outing for piano, featuring Greg Cohen on upright bass, the song captured the sadness of abandoned possessions. "Trouble's Braids", meanwhile, spun off Waits' old beat-verse style on '70s classics like "Small Change". A thrilling mix of frenetic bass and African percussion, the track brought the best out of Feldman and Hodges.

Because Waits had already made the decision not to tour by the time the sessions ended, there was a profound sense of anti-climax as the players went their separate ways. "I remember looking at Tom and Kathleen and going, 'Well, I guess I gotta go home and clean my garage now,'" Hodges remembers.

Then came the bracing news that Elektra-Asylum had turned down the album, a rejection that gave Waits the chance to split from a label where he no longer felt appreciated. Fortunately a white knight arrived in the form of Island Records' Lionel

Conway, who alerted his boss to Waits' predicament. "I didn't know Tom's albums well," says Island founder Chris Blackwell, "but I loved the aura he projected – his presence, his extraordinary intelligence, and his musical originality."

Flying to LA in early 1983, Conway and Blackwell met the Waits' and offered to release the album. "Tom didn't speak much," Blackwell says. "Most of the conversation was with Kathleen, who played a big part in my decision to sign him." Waits was delighted to be on a label that was as artist-friendly as Elektra and Asylum had themselves once been.

To hear music so raw and organic in a decade when most Anglo-American rock – including albums by Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Joni Mitchell – was so synthetic was a Godsend. Nor can the album's influence on the back-to-analogue sounds of the subsequent decade be overstated.

"We tried to create kind of a hollowness in the studio," says Stephen Hodges. "Rather than going after people with volume,

you go after them with truer dynamics. The Italians figured it all out centuries earlier with *forte* and *pianissimo* and so on, but most everybody went another way with it and we went *this* way. Being someone who got to be there at that time was a really big deal."

"I think I was envious," said Elvis Costello, who later used some of Waits' sidemen on his *Spike* and *Mighty Like a Rose* albums. "Not so much of the music but of [Waits'] ability to rewrite himself out of the corner he appeared to have backed himself into."

At *NME* we applauded the courage of making such defiantly uncommercial music at a time when bright shiny pop was the order of the day. "I would rather be a failure on my own terms than a success on someone else's," Waits said. "That's a difficult statement to live up to, but then I've always believed the way you affect your audience is more important than how many of them there are."

"*Swordfishtrombones* might have been different from the music Tom made before, but it wasn't different from his whole outlook," Carlos Guitarlos concludes. "You could say it was like a world music album, but it wasn't. You could say it was a new direction, but Tom was always capable of seeing all those things.

"It was more like something he just *did* finally, like he was stepping out of his own shadows."