

***Bone Machine* (1992): What the hell is Tom Waits singing about?**

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Introduction

I grew up in Italy listening to American and British music. My first musical bliss was watching the televised Simon and Garfunkel concert from Central Park, New York in 1981. It brought sheer pleasure into my household for what was a rare moment of family unity around a music event. It was the revelation on which I founded my music religion. At the age of six, I established a strict rock'n'roll cult built on one main precept: songs must be sung in English and English only. Little did it matter that I wasn't able to speak that language for several years to come. What did matter was that those foreign syllables sounded musical and turned the singing voice into a beautiful instrument in the mix. As for their meaning, the songs I was exposed to always made sense thanks to little translations of titles or some verses provided by older siblings and friends. More importantly, I always felt that the true message in a song was contained in its rhythm, and in the intensity and the impetus of its sound.

In 1992 at the age of sixteen, and after years of collecting vinyl records, I got my first compact disc: *Bone Machine* by Tom Waits. I remember the state of trepidation I was in when I inserted the little disc that cost the equivalent of three vinyl LPs. Clanging sticks, a subtle guitar riff – *is it coming from a broken amplifier?* – a sinister whisper, and then a growl and heavy drums. That was the sonic train that hit me in the first minute or so of the opening track, “Earth Died Screaming”. Trepidation quickly turned into consternation and, as the record went on, dismay and disappointment. I didn't give up easily, though. One by one, I listened to all the 16 tracks until the end, without skipping one second. Exhausted by the experience, I was wondering: “What the hell have I just been through? Is this real music?” Had it not been Friday night, I would have returned the record straight away to get a more reassuring Uncle Tupelo or Jayhawks sound. Luckily, I was forced to keep it with me the whole weekend long, and as a frightened child lured by a horror movie he's not supposed to watch, I kept coming back to it over those 48 hours.

A song can be about anything, sings Dan Wilson, but what in the world were these songs about? As usual, the foreign language didn't help much in detecting meaning, but this time I couldn't get the message even from the sound. Before I could get an idea of what Tom Waits was singing about, I had to overcome the unexpected obstacle of understanding a way of making and presenting songs that was unknown to me until then. It took me several trials, commitment and perseverance but in the end those tunes got through my thick head. That was my initiation to a new way of understanding music, the gateway to my adulthood in the realm of pop song, and to a long-lasting veneration for a daring songwriter.

“Gone fishing”: The songwriting process

Bone Machine arrived at a time when I had developed some understanding of the rules upon which pop and rock songs are built. I had finally grasped the basic norms that regulate how a rhythm section, with its drums beats and bass lines, interacts with guitars and keyboards, and how a singer forms the melody against the chords of the song and the backing vocals add texture with harmonies. It was clear to me that even the most complex of experimental rock songs spawned from the infinite combinations of these fundamental rules. And if rules are made to confer certitude in one's existence, then my new CD shattered what I thought was

imperative and permanent.

There was no trace of the definite structure that I took for granted in popular music. I told myself if you didn't like these songs at first it's because they are wearing a different dress to the ones you are used to. And in some cases they are not wearing a dress at all: they are naked, stripped to the bone. The melody is exposed in all its simplicity, barely supported by a rudimentary and, sometimes, odd instrumentation. Once I figured out that these songs, too, rotated around a simple chord progression, I could finally pin this music down and match it with some of the cardinal points of my music upbringing. I started to hear James Brown in “Such a Scream”, Neil Young & Crazy Horse in “Going Out West”, The Pogues in “I Don't Wanna Grow Up”, Ennio Morricone and his Western film scores in “Black Wings”, and with a stretch of the imagination, The Kinks in “All Stripped Down” and the Rolling Stones in the incomprehensible noise of “Let Me Get Up On It”. But if none of those were evident at first hearing, I realized, it was because the singer was not preoccupied with bland reproduction of canons and was looking for something else when crafting a song.

Two main elements revealed what was at stake here: silence and noise. There are gaps, cracks, blank spaces in the music, as well as external audio interferences generated by people or things around the recording space. All these are present throughout the record, as the artist did not remove them from the final mix. I knew Tom Waits was an accomplished musician, a skilled piano player who previously recorded what sounded like sophisticated jazzy music to my ear. Someone like him, with decades of experience could not possibly overlook those silences and the noises. Indeed, he wanted them in there. But why?

I arrived at the conclusion that these recordings reproduce the instant in which the musician is capturing a living item, in other words, the song as it is meant to sound. It is not a matter of recording ‘live’ music. In fact, the recordings took place over several sessions and different sonic approaches (Jacobs 2006: 195-201; Hoskyns 2009: 388-397). Rather, it all has to do with the songwriting process. What ends up in the album is the closest possible version to what the songwriter hears in his head. When a version that captures the vision of the artist is caught on tape, it's a final take, even when it contains what is normally regarded as a recording flaw.

This process is the effect of the general idea that songs pre-exist their actual composition. They live among us and are waiting for the songwriter to make them viable for others. Tom Waits embraced this philosophy late in his artistic life, notably when he reinvented his music in the mid-1980s. As Barney Hoskyns writes in his unauthorized biography of Waits, the singer has lived his life in reverse, dedicating his early years to playing old people's music before opening up to instinctive and raw music in his middle-age (Hoskyns 2009: 275-6). If he spent most of the 1970s writing songs as a methodical disciple of reputable professional composers like Hoagy Carmichael, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen, in his forties he masterminded his own music by transgressing the customs of songwriting. He switched from rigour to intuition.

In a series of interviews given at the time of the album's release, the musician described the songwriting process with hunting and fishing metaphors. (Maher 2011: 209-238). When out fishing for songs, “[songwriters] gotta be real quiet sometimes if [they] wanna catch the big ones”. Rather than being an original creator of songs, an *auteur*, for Waits the songwriter is a human antenna, a conductor or a portal that allows songs to live in him or near him and transmits them to the outside. In an interview granted to the *New York Times Style Magazine* this year, Waits reiterated this concept by saying that “music is emotional, once you transcend the equipment [...] I like the idea that there are things coming in through the window and through you and then down to the piano and out the window on the other side. If you want to catch songs you gotta start thinking

like one, and making yourself an interesting place for them to land like birds or insects". On other occasions, Waits described the songwriter as a voodoo master of ceremony, a butcher or a mad doctor, someone who reassembles pieces of songs together into a Frankenstein creature. "I like breaking songs, [...] I like songs with scars on them – when I listen to them I just see all the scars". And so do we, when *Bone Machine* reproduces the noise of helicopters flying by, humans coughing, chattering, snuffling noses, and the strident sound of fingers moving up and down the strings of a guitar.

Once I figured out that this man was a song-hunter whose main intention was to present the true essence of his compositions without music-studio embellishments, the tracks of the album became easier to listen to. But the question remained. What were the songs of *Bone Machine* about? With my limited knowledge of English, as usual, I turned to the rhythm, and the quality of the sound to find an answer.

"A Spanish iron cross": The sound-aesthetics.

There is a certain hypnotic quality in *Bone Machine* (Jacobs 2006: 163), a primordial sound that bothers the ear at first but invites the listener to explore the songs that carry it. It is a dangerous, addictive and sinister sound that has the power to attract, notwithstanding its immediate unfriendly character, including its silences and noises.

The album was the first collection of new songs by Tom Waits since the release of *Franks Wild Years* (1987), the record that closed an ideal trilogy that began with *Swordfishtrombones* (1983) and continued with *Rain Dogs* (1985). Compared to them, *Bone Machine* doesn't have the European and theatrical tinge that linked their songs. However, the wish to push sonic boundaries into new territories is inherited from the trilogy and makes the album the ideal successor to the sound experimentation inaugurated in the previous decade.

The trilogy defined what Luc Sante calls the 'line B' of Waits' music production – 'line A' being his 1970s piano driven compositions that fused the tradition of Tin Pan Alley with beatnik spoken metrics (Sante 1999: 69). 'Line B' is the result of the confluence of the new song-writing philosophy, a new approach in arrangements and new disparate influences, from rock music (Captain Beefheart), to German Operetta (Kurt Weill), and American avant-garde (Harry Partch). Waits opened his music to the sound of heavy drumming and unusual acoustic instruments such as the pump organ, the glass harmonica, the bullhorn or the bass marimba. More importantly, he allowed his musical explorations to include the use of objects that are not necessarily music instruments: sticks, chairs dragged across the floor, broken abandoned tools, metal machinery. "I think something is gonna come out of this garbage world we're living in, where [...] 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 some value. What can we do? Bury it and live on it?" So he said in 1992, declaring his Luddite attitude toward aseptic computerized recording innovations and his desire to produce sounds in the most immediate and natural forms (Hoskyns 2009: 307).

Novelist Paul Auster says that writing is a physical experience with a tactile quality. While he writes his books by hand, the author reads his compositions for the first time as the words come out of the pen held by his fingers (Hutchisson 2013: 132-134). Similarly, Waits said, "I like having music going through my fingers" (Richardson 1992: 60). This physicality is reflected in the percussive nature of most of the tracks of *Bone Machine* and the inclusion of the 'conundrum', a made-up instrument described at times as a Spanish iron cross or a Chinese torture device (Jacobs 2006: 165), which the singer bashes with a hammer in a sort of therapeutic

discharge of rage (Hoskyns 2009: 387).

The driving rhythmic component of the songs is emphasized by the subtle employment of a very limited number of instruments for most songs. Guitar and double bass are present in almost every song. A piano appears in "Dirt in the Ground", "Whistle Down The Wind" and "A Little Rain", alongside horns, in the first, and a violin and an accordion in the second. Every note is maintained to the essential, there is no room for virtuoso playing or solos, just bare accompaniment. It is a very measured arrangement that has nothing to do with the simplicity and immediacy of novice musicians, like one finds in the early Velvet Underground or later in punk music. Rather, only experienced musicians can attain such a level of control and subtlety in delivering a song. To quote Sante again, Waits can count on a group of loyal supporting musicians that can produce any sort of texture: "tell them 'Christmas in the sewers of Budapest after the Martian invasion of 1962' and they're there" (Sante 1999: 69).

If the sound-aesthetic of the preceding trilogy was surrealism, the aesthetic in *Bone Machine* is musical minimalism. A form that allows the silences mentioned in the previous section to add rather than detract from the music. Take for example the bass line in "Murder in the Red Barn", played by Larry Taylor who carefully avoids some notes, momentarily disappearing while the obsessive notes of a banjo insist on the main line of the song. Or the whispered saxophones of "Dirt in the Ground" that fade away at the end of the refrain. Or, again, the electric guitar riff of "Such a Scream" that drops every now and again, without following an apparent structure, as if the guitarist is taking a quick break to drink or smoke. All these ploys can be referred to as the 'hair in the gate', an expression borrowed from the world of movies that Waits likes to use. It indicates hairs or objects that get in the way of a film projector and appear on screen (Hoskyns 2009: 349). It is an imperfection that makes the work of art more interesting and for a moment the audience's attention is taken away from the main narrative (Jacobs 2006: 168).

Listening to this music, the movies of Jim Jarmusch come to mind as its visual correspondent. The filmmaker's essential dialogues and long silences allow the viewer to concentrate on long shots of desolate urban landscape. These don't add much to the plot but are suggestive of the general atmosphere of the world the characters live in. A personal friend since the first half of the 1980s, Jarmusch is the director who gave Waits his first major role in a movie with *Down By Law* (1986) and also directed the video of "I Don't Wanna Grow Up" from *Bone Machine*

YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zo4Y0TxW41g>



Taken to its extreme, Waits' minimalism is best represented by the 1986 live rendition of "Walking Spanish", a rhythm'n'blues track from *Rain Dogs* that he is able to deliver on stage with the sole accompaniment of a hammer rhythmically beating on an anvil

YouTube link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-O87GJrv0



In *Bone Machine*, this minimalist approach to music with its stripped down melodies and rhythm had an astounding effect on a 16-year-old ear with little knowledge of English, suggesting dark stories from the underground. I didn't know exactly what these stories told, but the sound was telling me that the singer was not celebrating love. I also knew that the singer wasn't sad or desperate. He might have been angry and disgusted with something, but his voice didn't betray grief or anguish.

Indeed, it was the singer's unmistakable voice that revealed much of the meaning of these songs. Waits in *Bone Machine* engages with the whole range of his vocal skills (Christiansen 2015: 82). The whispered low tones of "Black Wings" and "Earth Died Screaming" announce sinister happenings. The high pitch of "Jesus Gonna Be Here" suggests a call out or a proclamation. The sharp tone of "Murder In The Red Barn" and "In The Colosseum" convey a sour message. The man singing at the top of his voice in "Going Out West" and "Such A Scream" hints at delinquent, possibly sexual, misconduct. The falsetto of "All Stripped Down" and "Dirt in The Ground" keeps you on the alert as if something is about to break. And the peaceful yet throaty tone of the slower songs – "Little Rain", "Who Are You", "Whistle Down The Wind" – points at nostalgia and loss.

"Just like they say in the Bible": A big hope.

Most of the intuitions about the songs' meaning that took shape from the sound were finally confirmed as years went by and as both my English and interest in song lyrics improved. The impression that something sinister was told in the lines of the songs was attested to by the fact that many tracks deal with death. However, the feeling that the singer is not depressed was also supported by the fact that the subject of death is raised with a grotesque and biblical tone that generates a fantastic, entertaining effect. The stories in the album are not an intimate confession of some personal troubled thought, but pure fiction.

The theme of death is strong, particularly in the tunes Waits co-wrote with his wife Kathleen Brennan. Asked what his wife brings to the lyrics of his songs, Waits answered "a whip and a chair. The Bible. The Book of

Revelations." (Maher 2011: 213). That explains the description of the apocalypse in "The Earth Died Screaming" or lines like "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbours house / Or covet thy neighbours wife" in "Murder in the Red Barn", and "Now Cain slew Abel / He killed him with a stone / The sky cracked open / And the thunder groaned" in "Dirt in the Ground".

The references to the Bible connect Waits to a rural old-time America that was almost absent in previous works and would reappear significantly in later albums. In the bigger picture of the singer's body of works, *Bone Machine* is then another building block of the great unifying storyline of a marginalised America, an underworld of outcasts, forgotten people and lowlifes that began with his debut, *Closing Time* (1973).

Writing about the promise of American life, Greil Marcus said that Americans "hardly know how to talk about the resentment and fear that lies beneath the promise" (Marcus, 1975: 20). Waits has embraced resentment and fear and built his stories upon the failed promise of the American Dream. Even if his works rarely contain an explicit political message, a recurring depiction of social alienation is the carrier of a critique that encourages his audiences to ponder over enduring problems like class, poverty, disparity, lack of social justice. His lyrics somehow display the incoherence and inequality of a society built upon the promise of happiness for all.

The America told in his works is an unsung America, a literary 'Other America' that has its origins in the celebration of the common man and his everyday life inaugurated in the nineteenth century by Emerson and Whitman. Despite the injustices and its frightening dark side, the country that is sung in the works of Waits is progressive, open to diversity, inclusive and protective of the weak. It is a place where invisible people have a voice and are animated by one grand American spirit of hope. Hope in Waits' music is strong in tracks that draw inspiration from black music genres that offered musicians an escape from their material world and a bridge to an emphatic imagined human or transcendent audience. Music is the very source of hope for the hopeless in America, even for the down-and-outs of Tom Waits. *Bone Machine*, despite its dark tones, is no exception to that, especially thanks to the quasi-religious fervour unexpectedly present in a collaboration with Keith Richards: "That Feel", the last song of the album which is "a testament to endurance of the spirit and the indestructible worth of one's humanity" (Hoskyns 2009: 394).

"How the hell did we get here so soon": Twenty-five years on.

Listening to *Bone Machine* today, trying to reminisce feelings of a quarter-century ago, makes me realise that from the initial shock to the finding of a hopeful meaning, the road was long. What took place in between the original exposure to a message of death and its later replacement by human hopefulness is the story of personal growth and change that comes with aging. At sixteen, the dark side of the music that Steen Christiansen classifies as "Gothic" (Christiansen 2015: 73) exercised its charm on me. The wickedness in Waits' voice was the fertile ground for images of skulls, decomposed bodies, demonic creatures, and all other feral visions on which the masculinity of many teenagers rests upon. At the age of forty-one, I retain little interest for the spooky dimension, mostly because I now believe that tangible human experience has much more to offer than the fantastic. Yet, *Bone Machine* hasn't lost its appeal for me. It still resonates as a source of inspirational music and has not been relegated, like several others, to the category of a mere teenage developmental milestone.

The album has remained at the back of my mind as a fundamental piece of my own musical education. It has

been a point of reference to which I return as my music information gradually advances. The record initially taught me important lessons in what song-writing can be and how beautiful a song can sound when delivered with essential arrangements. It later unfolded pictures of a forgotten, marginal America that seemed to come from a Lead Belly or a Harry McClintock song or a photograph by Robert Frank, the artist that according to Jack Kerouac “sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film”. Waits was able to catch a similar sad poem onto tape that is at the same time a celebration of life and of a man’s willingness to live on.

Discovering pieces of this history of American culture helped me navigate through those difficult songs and understand where they originated. Every bending note of the album traces back to the epic of the blues and makes a timeless American masterpiece out of *Bone Machine*, one that still contains enigmas in the interstices of its noises and silences whose solutions I will never grow tired of looking for.

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