"The Ghosts of Saturday Night"
Tom Waits and his Relationship to American Culture

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Tom Waits' changing relationship with American culture It identifies and chronicles three phases of his career

1 His use of certain identifiable American images, both in his music and his personae, in order to evoke nostalgia This period is strongly characterised by the obvious influence of the Beat writers, specifically Jack Kerouac

2 A transitory and experimental phase During this period, he released a trilogy, the postmodern tone which runs through this work afforded him the detachment necessary to help him to break free of his self-created neo-Beat image

3 This period can be seen as the culmination and combination of the two prior stages While he is decrying the state of America on Bone Machine, he is doing so in a specifically American form, the jeremiad The form thus contradicts the text

This thesis will show that while his treatment of America changed, dependent upon personal and cultural shifts, his focus was unerringly on American culture

All lyrical quotations have been copied exactly, when possible, from the liner notes Otherwise, line breaks have been inserted according to the singer's phrasing

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Introduction

There are two commonly circulated stories regarding Tom Waits' break into the music business, both originating, in all probability, from the man himself. The first, more conventional story, has Waits working as a doorman at the Los Angeles Troubador. On occasion, he also sings on stage. Herb Cohen chances to hear his very part-time act and signs him right away. The second version takes place at Ben Frank's, a popular club on Sunset Strip. There he meets Cohen, his future manager, who is impressed, not by his musical abilities, but by his choice of shoes. These two accounts of Waits' rise to fame are an accurate reflection of his relationship to American culture. The first version, the almost archetypal discovery of the young talented unknown, works within the framework of traditional American ideology. The second version, infused with his ironic sense of humour, serves to undermine and distance Waits from that mythology. Throughout his career he continues to work at once within and without American mythologies.

Waits' career can be generalized into three distinct segments, all of which depend upon his changing relationship with American culture. His first album, Closing Time, appeared in 1973, coinciding with Bruce Springsteen's first release, Greetings from Asbury Park. "By 1973 the rock music hierarchy was as established as any mid-European monarchy. It was, as ever, a year of debuts. Bruce Springsteen was only one of a dozen 'new Dylans' the period threw up. That same year Tom Waits was off the blocks with 'Closing Time.' Hard to believe now, but back then, critics were betting who of the two was going to be the next superstar!" (Humphries 25). Springsteen provides an illuminating foil to the path of Waits' career. "Both men had an individual songwriting style quite at odds with the prevalent rock mood. Springsteen's fiery brand of rock revivalism echoed the first chill thrill of fifties rock 'n' roll, while Waits was at a whole other ball game, pitching for non-rock influences like Gershwin, Shearing and Sinatra" (Humphries 31). They shared the consistent focus on America, but approached it from different perspectives, and played to a different assumed audience. Bob Dylan's influence on Springsteen's music was publicized upon his entrance into the musical arena, and while the producers at Elektra attempted to bring Waits' music into line with the other bands on the label, there was no hiding the fact that he was out of step with many of his contemporaries. Waits was far more indebted, more notably in the first decade of his career, to the Beat poets, to "Mickey Spillane, Perry Mason, Damon Runyan and Nelson Algren" (Humphries 52), to "Stephen Foster, The Gershwins, Cole Porter, Hoagy Carmicheal" (Humphries 117), than to any of the popular influences of the time.

From Closing Time to Blue Valentine, Waits' work is replete with nostalgic American imagery. During this time, he projected a Beat character, a hard-drinking chronicler never short of witty, amusing observations. Although his songs tended to deal with the dark side of America, his use of nostalgic images and humourous quips pushed the tragedy into the realm of the romantic, versus the realistic. Heartattack and Vine signalled a transition away from the romantic and the nostalgic as well as a break from his well-established Beat persona. The production and release of this album coincided with several significant factors in his life, not the least of which were his marriage to

Kathleen Brennan and his decision to leave Elektra Heartattack and Vine is an odd mixture of abrasion and sentiment, and serves as a bridge between the first and second sections of his career From here he moved into the trilogy Swordfishtrombones, Raindogs, and Frank's Wild Years

During the four years it took to produce these albums, Waits began very conscientiously experimenting with arrangement and instrumentation and exploring new lyrical styles and themes These albums are characterized by a strong sense of irony and self-conscious artistry not apparent on previous work He moves into a postmodern area, wherein his echoes and mimicry of American history lose their nostalgic overtones, and instead take on what Linda Hutcheon terms "parody" He is simultaneously connected and disconnected from his work The distinctive voice of his previous albums is lost in a flood of imagery, allusion and experimentation with narrative position Although Frank's Wild Years is technically the third of the trilogy, it has a stronger thematic connection to his ensuing album Bone Machine than to its two predecessors

Waits described Frank's Wild Years as "a Biblical story one's man's redemption and baptism and all that" (as quoted in Humphries 96) In relation to Bone Machine, the most important feature of Frank's Wild Years is its reliance on Christian literature and beliefs It is during this album that Waits' sermonistic voice appears, and it is further developed on his live album Big Time, which was released between the final album in the trilogy and Bone Machine While Frank's Wild Years is dependent upon the morality play for its form, Bone Machine is dependent upon the jeremiad

Waits' career up till this point can be seen as a steady moving away from American mythologies and ideologies, while remaining very much within their paradigm His earlier work featured a nostalgic reworking of 1930s and 1940s imagery, with more than a smattering of Beat and other literary influences of that era With the trilogy, those images remained, but they no longer constituted the bulk of his work His addition of other influences weakened his commitment to American nostalgia and romanticism, in the process he also left behind the Beat character for which he was so well known during the 1970s With Bone Machine he moves one step further from American mythology, yet by employing the jeremiad, a rhetorical device steeped in biblical prophecy, first employed in America by the Puritans and retained and refined by subsequent generations, he paradoxically asserts his commitment to it He uses the voice of the preacher to reveal the present ills of America, with the ever-present threat of apocalypse lending a dire sense of urgency to the preacher's message Framed in the jeremiad, the Second Coming is the last of many prophecies fulfilled, and it is a specifically American apocalypse of which Waits speaks He is not necessarily concerned with global extinction, but the death of American culture The jeremiad, however, is a typically ambiguous form, and what may seem to be a punishment meted out from the Heavens can actually be viewed as circular evidence that Americans are God's chosen people It has long been prophesied that at a certain time God will bring down the Day of Judgment If it were American activity which precipitated the apocalypse, the Americans are not guilty of any sin, to the contrary, they have acted as the hand of God To further add to the jumble of conflicting premises, the sin which will precipitate the apocalypse, and thereby assert America's favoured position in God's Kingdom, is the denial of God In the 1990s Waits is writing for a much more cynical audience, while the jeremiad appeals to America's new type of cynicism there is also hope implicit in the form

While the substance and artistic intentions of Waits' work have changed much since 1973, he has consistently worked within American mythologies His career can be divided into three increasingly complex sections (1) the nostalgic and romantic treatment of American images, (2) detachment from these images through irony and parody, and (3) the outright denunciation of American culture with the simultaneous detraction implicit with the use of the American jeremiad

Chapter One

"Stumbling onto the Heart of Saturday Night"

The Nostalgic Treatment of American Culture

The white American middle class public of today are, most of all, scared The culture of victimization has taken on epic proportions, far superseding recovered memories and the omnipresent sexual harassment Americans today live in a constant state of fear They fear random violence, planned violence, teen violence, car-jacking, house invasion, workplace shooting, and murder on the schoolground They fear the David Koreshes , the Timothy McVeighs, and the Ted Kaszinskis They fear drive-by shooting and gang-related activities Race relations are shaky at best They know O J is guilty At the same time, they are wary of their elected government, and they distrust established forms of authority They know their country is run by immoral, corrupted, self-serving individuals The white American middle class public knows that even the church is rife with scandal and hypocrisy They fear the country is falling apart America is staggering under burgeoning debt, companies are closing, Americans are unemployed The class structure is changing The middle class will disappear and they will disappear with it, absorbed into the ranks of the very poor Forget Venice America is sinking

The actual reality of these fears is immaterial Common perception will shape common reaction The fact that most gun-related deaths and injuries are at the hands of friends and family doesn't change the fact that most Americans support the Second Amendment If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns That loaded handgun in the bedside table will defend against home invasion That loaded handgun on the front seat of the car will guard against car-jacking Maybe if everyone were armed, if every crime carried the threat of an immediate and untried sentence of death, there would be no crime And maybe if every country had nuclear weapons, the threat of nuclear war would be banished It's not logical, it makes no sense, but it doesn't matter Perception is the key And right now, the white American middle class perceives their country is worse than ever before The time to market nostalgia in America has never been better than the latter portion of the twentieth century

Enter the young Tom Waits As a baby boomer, the inclusion of nostalgic imagery was almost second nature, and a surefire attraction to his audience of peers According to Richard Louv in his cultural analysis America II, the baby boomers

> seem the most attracted to nostalgia, and there is good reason During the late 1950s and 60s, the dominating urge, especially for the baby boomers, was to head away from home Home represented traditional values, and these values had seemingly failed For so many in that time, the placid and affluent suburban neighborhoods could not be rationalized with the carnage in Vietnam, with assassinations and race riots, with the unhappiness of so many parents who appeared to have it all and yet were clearly discontented Home, in Henry Miller's phrase, was the 'air-conditioned nightmare ' In any case, the nation was economically secure enough One could always go home, always get a nine-to-five, if things got rough
>
> Then the economy began its long skid, and the single-family home, that symbol that had been viewed by so many young adults of the 1960s with such repugnance, was no longer within economic reach For the first time a generation could not look forward to a more affluent life than their parents And along with this was the growing suspicion that the search for personal fulfillment did not necessarily lead to a better life Beyond

> personhood was community, and it could not be found. Community was the lowest of priorities to modern architects, with their love of glass boxes, and to developers, who slapped houses up as if they were so many milk cartons in a row. But the methods used by the counterculture to seek community did not work either: flashing the peace sign at passing muraled Volkswagen vans could carry them to 1969 and no further. Then came the pursuit of est and real estate, and the Moral Majority with its assurances of parental guidance and stern, traditional values. And finally, the hunger for home.
>
> We could not go home again, but we could move to some fresh place that stood for something lost. We could surround ourselves with the molded, electronic, particle-board sensations of what we think is home. If we could not go home again, if home had been paved over or had never existed, then we could create it. It could be in the new countryside, in a new city, with a gabled roof and a prefab, polyethylene Victorian gazebo; it could be walled off, with its own private Keystone Kops; it could be a place of community or a place of repression; it could be in the West, the South, next door. It could be paradise bought.
>
> (7-8)

Waits is very much like those postmodern architects who think nothing of pairing a Georgian entranceway with some art-deco tilework in an effort to summon the spirit of days-gone-by. Consistency be damned! Anything goes, so long as it kindles the cosy homefire of nostalgia. This postmodern framework permits Waits to create lyrics with a rather eccentric eclecticism. Nostalgic images must meet only two requirements: they must be separated, either temporally, culturally or geographically from the here and now of white middle class America, and they must be in some way connected to the history, or the perception of the history, of the United States. Although his lyrics evidence his "fascination with the dark underbelly of America . . . the sad hooker and the rising cost of prophylactics . . . [the] bum to whom home was a cardboard condominium" (Humphries 42), his images meet the requirements of nostalgia. The fact that his characters are largely hard-luck stories only increases the sense that things were better "back then " While the homeless of today shiver, huddled on cold sidewalks, hands extended for sporadic change, Waits' down-and-outers have "slept with the lions, and Marilyn Monroe" ("Jitterbug Boy", Small Change) They don't need a monthly handout from the government, they live on their wits and the money they made at the track Criminals are strictly small-time and/or created by circumstance In either case, they are honourable Armed with only knives, or maybe the odd 38, their violence is never senseless Those gunned down either deserved it, like the cop in "Romeo is Bleeding" who despicably left Romeo's brother to die "like a dog beneath a car without his knife", or, like Romeo himself, they "die without a whimper, like every hero's dream, just an angel with a bullet, and Cagney on the screen" ("Romeo is Bleeding", Blue Valentine) Against the backdrop of an abundance of nostalgic images, and America's voracious appetite for such, Tom Waits sells the romanticized image of the American underclass to the American middle class, a little trick he picked up from his Beat predecessors In keeping, however, with the cynical mood of America, the irony of this strategy is not lost on Waits, nor does he attempt to ignore it

Jack Kerouac wrote about the "one and noble function of the time, move" (133) while maintaining a residence in his mother's home William Burroughs sought his own type of freedom in drugs and among "unsuccessful burglars, penny-ante thieves, small-time gamblers and grifters" (Morgan 83), but relied on his wealthy parents throughout his life to support him and bail him out of numerous situations Both Kerouac and Burroughs wrote books based closely on their own experiences, yet neither acknowledged the paradox of writing from the point of view of a peripheral character while maintaining strong ties to an affluent middle to upper class home. It might be noted that the fact that their families supported them actually allowed them to "research" and write their novels. Following in their footsteps, Waits tried to live the life of his characters; it is doubtful, however, that he ever felt he became one. Unlike On the Road or Junky or Queer, Waits creates and maintains a detachment from his characters. Even the way he presents himself is suspect. While he created a number of personae for himself, perhaps the best known being the wise-cracking piano-playing hard-drinking Beat rapster, he manages to project a sense of detachment there as well. He is a chronicler, but acknowledges that it's all fiction, even if he was there. His sharp, often cynical wit which runs throughout his lyrics creates a pervasive sense of irony and a certain shiftiness to his work which is not evident in the work of the Beats. The listener is never sure how to take him, and this doubt stems from the fact that Waits acknowledges the conflict within marketing romanticized underclass images to a nostalgia-seeking middle class white America.

Architects, when designing a building, take advantage of certain structures and embellishments to create the impression of another era. High ceilings, alcoves, and hardwood floors, for example, are redolent of the 1930s and 40s. In a similar manner, Tom Waits can draw from a bank of previously romanticized images which evoke a sense of history more dependent upon perception than reality. One of the most potent images is that of the automobile.

Generally speaking, the American car connotes American freedom. In The Hunt for Red October the defecting Russians discuss what they will do upon arrival in the United States. One of them states a desire for a recreational vehicle, and fantasizes about being able to cross into any state without prior governmental approval. For him, the recreational vehicle is a symbol of American freedom. In addition, certain cars are shorthand for nostalgia linked to specific decades. Any 1950s model is evocative of an innocence since lost. The decadence of the 1960s can be summed up with John Lennon's psychedelic Rolls Royce. The affluence, the vulnerability and the disillusionment of 1970s America is reflected in the bus-length gas-guzzlers of that era. Who can look at a 1970s Cadillac without wondering about the culture that produced such an enormous car? Who can look at it without wondering how it survived the energy crisis? The car is also inextricably linked to youth and to rock and roll. "As in Chuck Berry's 'No Particular Place to Go,' the classic implied audience for fifties rock 'n' roll was a teenage couple cruising in the very private space of the car. . ." (Curtis 43). This connection persists to this day, with the image, for example, of the low-riding 1970s "gangster" car, windows darkened, pulsating rap music.

The car, both in On the Road, as well as in Waits' lyrics, is linked to two central and related ideas: freedom and religious enlightenment. Kerouac's freedom goes far beyond the conventional American definition. Enfranchisement, freedom of speech, freedom from religious or racial persecution are concepts so basic they need no allusion. Kerouac is taking freedom a step further, and exploring the complete freedom of the individual, specifically, the male individual. Individual freedom as expressed in On the

Road means freedom from responsibilities heretofore taken for granted, such as providing for your offspring, or taking your wedding vows with a modicum of seriousness Kerouac translates this type of freedom into mobility, and in fact, this mobility takes on a spiritual aspect On The Road is your basic religious quest Sal believes he can find The Answers on the American highway He becomes a "disciple" (194) of the "Saint of the lot" (193), Dean Moriarty He learns that mobility is the end-all and be-all, far superseding all other considerations The responsibilities of marriage and family represent an impediment to self-discovery, as well as the temptation to abandon the "one and noble function of the time, move" (133) Dean is able to achieve the status of "HOLY GOOF" (sic) because despite the fact that "the wives of his disciples had him on the carpet for the sexuality and the life he had helped bring into being," he was "digging the street Bitterness, recriminations, advice, morality, sadness -- everything was behind him, and ahead of him was the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being" Dean, with his "tremendous revelations pouring into him all the time" is "BEAT -- the root, the soul of Beatific" (195) Sal Paradise turns the road trip into a philosophy, a religion, through which to interpret and understand life "Where we going, man?" Sal asks Dean "'I don't know but we gotta go'" (238) is the answer In a world where the ultimate answer lies in movement rather than destination, the car is of immeasurable importance It is Kerouac's notion of freedom and enlightenment, as expressed in On the Road, which informs Waits' use of the car

The car, with its long and honourable history in popular music and the American heart, is the obvious mode of transportation on this spiritual journey The symbol of the car has itself undergone a process of evolution in conjunction with changing attitudes of the day, but it has never lost its romantic image Jim Curtis points out an interesting change in the use of the car in popular lyrics

> Contrast, for example, "Fun, Fun, Fun" and "Sweet Little Sixteen " Although the lyrics of both songs deal with a fun-loving teenaged girl, Chuck puts his girl in a social situation and keeps her there After her fun, she will be 'back in class again ' The Beach Boys, on the other hand, put their girl in what seems to be a social situation, but which turns out to be a fantasy They seem to create a crisis when their girl's father takes away the keys to her Thunderbird -- but the crisis turns out not to be a crisis at all when the singer offers her more fun, fun, fun Similarly, in the contest between the Ford and the Cadillac in Chuck's 'Maybellene,' he has a tough rival, and only the intervention of a rainstorm saves the day But no class distinctions ever exist in the Beach Boys fantasies, and nobody has ever beaten the Little Deuce Coupe, and to hear them tell it, no one has ever come close [Fun] defines away social restrictions
>
> (105-106)

Chuck Berry's cars dealt, usually in a humourous fashion, with the restricted world of the 1950s white teenager The character in "No Particular Place To Go" laments, after the fact, "can you imagine the way I felt? I couldn't unfasten the safety belt " Jim Curtis considers this line a "deft metaphor for the sexual frustration of the fifties The fact that people rarely used seat belts in the fifties makes this situation a matter of choice on Chuck's part, and hence all the more indicative" (74) The Beach Boy's "Little Deuce Coupe" and the "T-Bird" in "Fun, Fun, Fun" suggest subsequent liberation

Bruce Springsteen later revived the issue of class using the car as symbol Springsteen, however, is angrier than Chuck Berry ever dared "Used Cars" is set, not surprisingly, on a used car lot In the words of the son,

> My ma she fingers her wedding band
> And watches the salesman stare at my old man's hands
> He's tellin' us all 'bout the break he'd give us if he could but he
> just can't
> Well if I could I swear I know just what I'd do
> Now mister the day the lottery I win I ain't ever
> gonna ride in no used car again
> Now the neighbours come from near and far
> As we pull up in our brand new used car
> I wish he'd just hit the gas and let out a cry and
> tell 'em all they can kiss our asses goodbye
> My dad he sweats the same job from mornin' to morn
> Me I walk home on the same dirty streets where I was born
> Up the block I can hear my little sister in the front seat blowin'
> the horn
> The sounds echoin' all down Michigan Avenue
> Now mister the day my number comes in I ain't
> never gonna ride in no used car again
>
> (Nebraska)

Springsteen's cars become symbols for the inequities suffered by the American working class The cars which appear in Tom Waits' songs were borrowed from Jack Kerouac As Springsteen and Waits are contemporaries, differences in era do not explain their divergent use of the symbol of the car

In the same situation -- driving a long distance at night -- the Springsteen character notes that

> In the wee wee hours your mind gets hazy
> radio relay towers lead me to my baby
> Radio's jammed up with talk show stations
> It's just talk, talk, talk till you lose your patience

> Mister State Trooper please don't stop me
>
> Hey somebody out there listen to my last prayer
> Hi ho silver-o deliver me from nowhere
>
> ("State Trooper", Nebraska)

The Waits character, on the other hand, finds serenity

> These diamonds on my windshield
> Tears from Heaven
> I'm pullin' into town on the interstate
> I got me a steel train in the rain
> And the wind bites my cheek through the wing
> And it's these late nights, and this freeway flying
> Always makes me sing
>
> ("Diamonds on my Windshield", The Heart of Saturday Night)

Even the seamy part of town is filled with wonder and life "The orange drive-in, the neon billin' and the theatres fillin' to the brim" contrast sharply with the stark "New Jersey Turnpike 'neath the refinery's glow" which Springsteen, in another song, refers to as a "lunar landscape" ("Open All Night", Nebraska) Waits' character arrives "home at last", while Springsteen's character prays to be delivered from "nowhere" As pollsters have repeatedly discovered, the gap between the working and middle classes is much greater than an income disparity Springsteen's lyrics appeal to the working class sensibilities and the working class experience Waits, however, is aiming at that group which claimed On the Road, that veritable celebration of self-indulgence and irresponsibility, "defined" their generation It is doubtful that the working class youth had the time to contemplate which piece of literature best defined their generation. The middle class however, increasing in affluence and in number, wanted to produce

> the best-fed, best-dressed, best-educated generation in the history of the world living proof of the success of the American experiment. If their prolonged education was partly the consequence of the economic need to keep them out of the job market for as long as possible, it was also the result of a real commitment to produce a generation which would be better prepared to handle its place in history. It was a generation that was told, over and over again, in so many different ways, that it was unique.
>
> (Grossberg 174)

The disparity between the working class and the middle class experience in the 1970s is illustrated in a scene from the 1975 film Dog Day Afternoon. After an attempted bank robbery, the lead character, Sonny, finds himself trapped inside the building, with the police and a growing crowd waiting outside. A television reporter is allowed to conduct a telephone interview. Fishing for an answer he can politicize, he asks Sonny why he robbed the bank. After a puzzled silence, Pacino's character answers, "cause this is where the money is." The middle class reporter has had the education and the leisure to imagine that this is ultimately a political issue. Sonny's experience is much more immediate he needed money, so he went where the money was. The difference between Sonny and the reporter is the difference between Springsteen's and Waits' audiences.

So while Springsteen is reminiscing about how "he met Wanda when she was employed behind the counter of the route 60 Bobs Big Boy fried chicken" and assuring her to "sit tight little mama I'm comin' round I got 3 more hours but I'm covering ground" ("Open All Night", Nebraska), Waits, in typical Dean Moriarty fashion, is leaving the woman in his life for the road. She is dismissed matter-of-factly and unapologetically, "Goodbye, so long, the road calls me dear, and your tears cannot bind me anymore, and farewell to the girl with the sun in her eyes, I'll kiss you and then I'll be gone" ("Old Shoes (And Picture Postcards)", Closing Time). No hard feelings. No surprises. The road is the one place of any relevance and significance. Women can offer pleasurable diversion, solace, or both, but they are, like everything else except transition, transitory. "Ol' '55", which highlights the temporariness of relationships and the religious feeling associated with the road, could easily be the sequel to "Old Shoes".

> Well my time went so quickly
> I went lickety-splickety
> Out to my ol' '55
> As I pulled away slowly,
> Feeling so holy, God knows I was feeling alive
>
> (Closing Time)

The car is integral in his search for the greater truth which is to be found on the road. The road, of course, transcends the car. In "Ol' '55", there's a sense of a higher calling. The man has no choice. As he says, "it gave me no warning/ I had to be on my way". This notion that the highway is actually a road to God is American through and through, and can arguably be traced backwards to the "frontier mentality". Waits was just one of many singers to reflect in his lyrics an American obsession with mobility. Around the same time as Waits' seminal album, James Taylor wrote "Highway Song".

> I had a little woman in Memphis
> She wanted to be my bride

> She said 'settle on down, travelin' man
> You can stay right by my side'
> I tried so hard to please her
> But I couldn't hold out too long
> 'Cause one Saturday night, I was laying in bed
> And I heard that highway song
>
> (Mud Slide Slim)

Even Springsteen, after getting "a union card and a wedding coat" at nineteen ("The River", The River), succumbs to his "hungry heart", and leaves the family "Got a wife and kids in Baltimore, Jack, I went out for a ride and I never came back" ("Hungry Heart", Hungry Heart) Even Springsteen, that bastion of the working class neighbourhood, admits that "we were born to run"("Born To Run", Born To Run) America, as we know it today, was founded on the search for something better Centuries later, the search is still on The call to the road, or even the call to the sea, as mentioned in "Shiver Me Timbers" (The Heart of Saturday Night), supersedes all earthly connections There's no arguing with historical precedence, there's no arguing with God, and there's no arguing with the call to leave This is a culturally sanctioned urge, imbued with a sense of nobility and holiness "I know Martin Eden's gonna be proud of me, many before me have been called to the sea" Transience is treated with as much fervour, conviction and blind faith as any religious belief

1980 was a transitional year for Waits He was hired as the on-site songwriter for Coppola's film One From The Heart Coppola's soundtrack

> marked his coming of age as a writer Until his full-time involvement with Coppola, Waits had simply supplied songs spontaneously For every album, he'd write 20 or so for consideration, then sift them down to the required 12 By his

> own admission, most of his writing owed a healthy debt to the odd aperitif One From The Heart was different The inherent discipline demanded by film scoring and by Coppola gave Waits a lasting confidence and imposed some much needed order onto his chaos
>
> (Humphries 65-66)

While on the set, he met script editor Kathleen Brennan They were married in August of that year In addition, Waits was growing out of his nearly 10 year relationship with Elektra Heartattack and Vine was his last album on Geffen's label, although they released a final compilation of previously recorded material, entitled Bounced Checks, in 1981

Heartattack and Vine is indicative of the changes this year brought Up until this album, Waits moved comfortably within the safe and reasonably marketable boundaries of his Beat persona Any desperation on the part of his characters was alloyed with his always amusing witticisms Instrumentation was basic and usually acoustic piano, upright bass, snare drums and high hat being typical Although he is still writing about underclass characters, the romance has been replaced with stark reality, Lou Reed style "Downtown" is reminiscent of "Take a Walk on the Wild Side"

> Frankie's wearing lipstick Pierre Cardin
> I swear to God I seen him holdin hands with Jimmy Bond
> Sally's high on crank and hungry for some sweets
> She's fem in the sheets but she's butch in the streets

The amusing subculture figures of past albums are nowhere to be found on Heartattack and Vine These characters are truly the dregs of society They don't possess the wit that has redeemed Waits' characters to this point The humour in "The Piano Has Been

Drinking" or "Bad Liver and a Broken Heart" (Small Change), for example, overshadows the alcoholism. The characters are not pathetic, but bathetic. The drunk that laments that "you can't find your waitress/ with a Geiger counter/ and she hates you and your friends and you/ just can't get served without her" ("The Piano Has Been Drinking") can not be taken seriously. Likewise, when Waits breaks jubilantly into the opening verse of "Pasties and a G-String": "Smellin like a brewery/ looking like a tramp/ ain't got a quarter/ got a postage stamp" (Small Change), the images of dereliction are absorbed by the humour. This type of humour is conspicuously absent on Heartattack and Vine. The closest Waits ever gets is in "Saving All My Love For You". At first, it seems to be a slightly sentimental song about lost love. The speaker seems sincere when he says "I'd come home but I'm afraid that you won't take me back/ But I'd trade off everything/ just to have you near". The ensuing lines, "I know I'm irresponsible/ I don't behave/ And I've ruined everything that I do/ I'll probably get arrested/ When I'm in my grave" are humourously melodramatic in a typical Waitsian fashion. They decrease the reality of the situation, removing any real tragedy from the character. At this point, the song seems comparable to "Bad Liver and a Broken Heart" with its grossly exaggerated heartbreak. The humourous quality of the lines is severely compromised, however, by the following verse: "I paid fifteen dollars for a prostitute/ With too much makeup and a broken shoe/ But her eyes were just a counterfeit/ She tried to gyp me out of it/ But you know that I am still in love with you". This character atypically goes beyond "the bottom of a bottle of bargain scotch" ("Bad Liver and a Broken Heart") to assuage his sorrow, a move that compromises his sincerity, integrity, and honourability. Heartattack and Vine signals a break from his previous work Not only are his characters portrayed in a much grittier fashion, his instrumental and vocal styles on this album are also much harsher The acoustic accompaniments have given way to electric, even his signature piano has been replaced by a Hammond organ, and distortion techniques are used liberally His vocal technique on this album was summed up memorably by a New Musical Express critic "Waits' voice no longer sounds like it's simply been lived in -- more like it's been squatted in by 13 separate Puerto Rican junkie families with tubercular in-laws" (as quoted in Humphries 72) Waits was changing, his audience was changing, and his music was changing Heartattack and Vine was his first step toward a break from his carefully cultivated neo-Beat image This album reflects the fact that Kerouac now had a place as "an idol, but not a role model" (Humphries 78) both in Waits' life, as well as the lives of his audience

Waits told interviewer Brian Brannon, "I feel like a jack hammer, I love to holler and stomp my feet and throw rocks But there's another side of me that's like an old man in the corner that's had too much wine I'm probably too sentimental for my own good sometimes" (Online) This dichotomy is evident on Heartattack and Vine, and continues to appear on his ensuing albums While Heartattack and Vine contains some uncharacteristically disturbing images, it is also home to such tender songs as "Ruby's Arms" and "Jersey Girl" "Ruby's Arms" is a boy-leaves-girl song, but in contrast to previous songs with this theme, the boy feels regret, sadness, even helplessness and anger Just as in "Old Shoes", "Ol' '55", and "Shiver Me Timbers", the man has no choice but to go Instead of finding freedom in this imperative, however, this soldier expresses a sense of helplessness and meaninglessness This relationship meant very little, but this is no longer a cause for celebration

> There's nothing I can do now
> As I say goodbye to Ruby's arms
> You'll find another soldier
> And I swear to God
> By Christmastime
> There'll be someone else to hold you

This man's "heart is breaking", not only because he must leave his love, but because he knows that ultimately their time together was of very little significance – he was of very little significance – and will be replaced in short order Images of mobility, "the hobos at the freight yard," are paired with frustration, impatience and anger "Jesus Christ, this goddam rain/ Will someone put me on the train" The use of the passive voice in this request emphasizes his sense of helplessness and futility In past songs, this relinquishment of responsibility was presented in a positive light The newly married Waits, however, has begun to see things in a different way "Jersey Girl" is a song he wrote specifically for Kathleen Brennan Interestingly, it was covered by Springsteen shortly after its release, in fact, in 1981, Waits joined Springsteen on stage for a collaboration (Humphries 73) It explicitly rejects much of what he previously romanticized

> Got no time for the cornerboys
> Down on the street makin' all that noise
> Don't want the whores on Eighth Avenue
> Cause tonight I'm gonna be with you
>
> You know she fills me with all her joy
> When I'm wrapped up in my baby's arms

My little angel gives me everything
I know someday that she'll wear my ring

So don't bother me cause I got no time
I'm on my way to see that girl of mine
Nothing else matters in this whole wide world
When you're in love with a Jersey girl

The sincerity and sentimentality of "Jersey Girl" is a radical departure from the man who wrote "I can see by your eyes/ It's time now to go/ So I'll leave you to cry in the rain" ("Old Shoes (And Picture Postcards)", Closing Time) In 1980, Waits was 31 years old, and beginning to come into himself His work reflected a new confidence and maturity The importance of Heartattack and Vine was its experimental nature Never again were Waits' lyrics and arrangements as abrasive as on this album, but because he was making a break from a very established persona, it was necessary to be fairly extreme Once he showed himself and his audience what he was capable of, he was free to continue with experimentation His next three albums, the trilogy of Swordfishtrombones, Rain Dogs, and Frank's Wild Years, have been touted as his most brilliant works

Up until Swordfishtrombones, the strength of Waits' lyrics lay in his skill as a raconteur From Closing Time to Heartattack and Vine, Waits was creating a world for his audience into which he was the portal As a storyteller, his own character was inscribed into the text, furthermore, Waits made efforts to behave in a way that would ensure identification with the world he was depicting "I think it's time I took you all on an improvisational adventure into the bowels of the metropolitan region," he tells the audience during one of his many comical interludes on Nighthawks at the Diner From 1973 to 1980, that is exactly what he did, in his inimitable style Three years after his divorce from Elektra, Waits released Swordfishtrombones, the first of a trilogy With this album, his fans knew what they had always suspected Waits' talents superseded those of the storyteller

Chapter Two
Small Change Gets Rained On
Irony, Parody and Redefinition

Swordfishtrombones, Raindogs, and Frank's Wild Years are generally accepted as a trilogy, implying connection and continuity. In his undergraduate thesis, Curtis Hayes believes the character of Frank to be the link between these three albums (1). There is a song on Swordfishtrombones entitled "Frank's Wild Years", but the connection is only nominal, and there is no mention of Frank at all on Rain Dogs. Steve Oney refers to Waits' work on the trilogy as "the scavenger school of songwriting" (131), which is as good a way as any to refer to the conceptual connection between these albums. Waits had had a good ten years exposure to the emergence of postmodernism and its effects on art before he released Swordfishtrombones, the first of his trilogy. A strong postmodernist current runs through these albums.

The conscious artistry of this album begins with the title. The obvious question is, of course, what are swordfishtrombones? "It seems very pretty . . . but it's rather hard to understand! Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas – only I don't know exactly what they are!" (Carroll 142). Lewis Carroll's Alice is commenting on "Jabberwocky", but she may as well have been commenting on the word "swordfishtrombones". Just as generations of readers have been, Alice is drawn in by the whimsical and nonsensical images of this poem. The chimerical nature of the Jabberwocky, the Jubjub bird and the frumious Bandersnatch compels Alice to become more involved. Only Alice's ideas can provide the meaning for this poem. When Waits creates a nonsensical title for his album, he is encouraging audience involvement in the same way as Lewis Carroll. The word "Jabberwocky", however, is completely an invention of the author's imagination, while "swordfishtrombones" is synthesized from several components with referents in the real world.

The word "swordfishtrombones" reflects the album's preoccupation with the line between fiction and reality. In the act of displacing and rearranging actual words with their own meaning and connotations, Waits has created another entity altogether, one which transcends the words and meanings from which it is created, one (like the Jabberwocky) which holds residence only in the imagination. It is important to note that the title track is singular: it is one swordfishtrombone. All the songs, as well as their interplay which creates the album as whole, are swordfishtrombones. The songs run the gamut from "Gin Soaked Boy", a blues piece in the tradition of Howlin' Wolf, to "Town With No Cheer", a slow moving dirge based on the plight of an actual town in Australia, to "Johnsburg Illinois", a sweet and sentimental song about his wife. This eclectic selection of songs is tied together by their common identity as swordfishtrombones. The deconstruction and reconstruction of established ideas, images and musical styles to create a separate set that supersedes its components – that is a swordfishtrombone.

Implicit within the idea of the swordfishtrombone is a concern for the boundaries of fiction and reality. Creating something separate out of pre-established ideas places Waits squarely in the postmodern tradition, which "offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either . . ." (Hutcheon 23). The title track demonstrates an awareness of this issue.

The lyrical narrative of "Swordfishtrombone" is uncharacteristically non-linear. In the first verse, the soldier goes "to sleep at the bottom of / Tenkiller lake". This would seem to signal his demise. However, he is clearly alive in the second verse, which briefly chronicles twenty-seven years of his life. In the third, a miscalculated romantic entanglement results in a twenty year prison term. There are two ways, both characteristic of postmodern techniques, to interpret the contradiction in these verses. Either the sequencing is out of order, Pulp Fiction style, or Waits has presented three different versions of a story. The last two verses support the second interpretation.

> Now some say he's doing
> the obituary mambo
> and some say he's hanging on the wall
> perhaps this yarn's the only thing
> that holds this man together
> some say he was never here at all
>
> Some say they saw him down in
> Birmingham, sleeping in a
> boxcar going by
> and if you think that you can tell a bigger tale
> I swear to God you'd have to tell a lie

Waits so casually offers two verses which drastically change the nature of this composition. The addition of these verses moves Waits out of the realm of the narrative into that acutely self-aware and self-reflexive zone of the meta-narrative. It is a story aware that it is a story, and with this acknowledgment both creates and undermines its own authority. According to Linda Hutcheon, this type of paradox is a defining characteristic of the elusive post-modernism [1] Similarly, authorial power is simultaneously relinquished and asserted Not only does he include, he invites audience participation in the creation of the narrative The postulations of "some" contribute to the story itself, and imply a certain timelessness and authorlessness associated with mythology The fact, which is all the more obvious for its oral form, remains that this is Waits' song In 1983, Waits was no newcomer to the music industry, he had long since created a recognizable signature which is unavoidably inscribed in "Swordfishtrombone" Part of this signature is his use of nostalgic images, but just as his songwriting has become more sophisticated, so has his use of this device

The acknowledgment of Waits' art as art, rather than seamless narrative, brings an element of parody into his images of the past In A Poetics of Postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon redefines "parody" as it specifically relates to postmodernism It is

> not the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit The collective weight of parodic practice suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity In historiographic metafiction this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity
>
> (26)

This album resounds with echoes of the past which are too varied, however, to re-create any one era Rather, they "offer a set of references that not only remain meaningful to the public but also continue to be compositionally useful " It is a "way of making the

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[1] On page 13 of A Poetics of Postmodernism, Hutcheon states

> I think the formal and thematic contradictions of postmodern art and theory work to do just that to call attention to both what is being contested and what is being offered as a critical response to that, and to do so in a self-aware way that admits its own provisionality

link between art and what Said calls the 'world' . . ." (Hutcheon 34). Waits uses slang phrases, musical phrases, specific images and characters in the same way that postmodern architects have used flying buttresses and glass bricks.

In addition to the "glass brick" echoes of American history, Waits began experimenting with instrumentation.

> I use 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.
>
> (Waits as quoted in Oney 129)

Waits refers to his postmodern experimentations as "organized noise" (as quoted in Oney 129). He is appealing to a relatively small audience who will hear that organization and will understand the artistic intentions. His commitment to artistic growth and exploration resulted in decreased popularity and, at times, critical denunciation. Geoffrey Himes, a music critic, proclaimed:

> "Swordfishtrombones" and its four successors yielded very little satisfaction. Waits' overstated singing, minimalist melodies and self-conscious arrangements negated the natural ease and emotional connection of his best work.
>
> (Online)

However, it was undoubtedly this dedication to artistic experimentation that would later catch the eye of Robert Wilson and William Burroughs and lead to their collaboration, Black Rider.

Although Frank's Wild Years is the final installment of this trilogy, Rain Dogs is truly both the culmination of his work since the early 1970s and an indication of what was to come Tracks such as "9th and Hennepin" harken back to his earlier albums, which were marked with his sharp wit and sense of humour "Blind Love" and "Walking Spanish" provide a hint of a serious flirtation with Christian imagery which would show up most markedly on Bone Machine The images in "Singapore" and the musical accompaniment to "Cemetery Polka" expose his taste for the carnivalesque, which would make a strong and disturbing return on Black Rider As on Swordfishtrombones, he continues to ransack and rearrange a number of American images, and he continues to experiment with unconventional instruments and arrangements Rain Dogs is a pivotal album It forms the centre of what Waits was and what he would become

One of the most striking features of this album is its lyrical density Each song is a complex maze of imagery, rife with both external and internal allusion, and further complicated by his use of arcane slang phrases His lyrics manage a poetical compression, he takes full advantage of the connotations contained in a single image, and he piles these connotations one upon another to powerfully impress upon the listener a sense of the time and space of the song Very few of these songs are narratives in the traditional sense, rather, each song is comprised of a series of images which leave the listener with more of an atmosphere than a story

The leitmotif of Raindogs, in one word, is decay an all-encompassing term which includes the elements of insanity, compulsion, addiction, sleaze, loss, despair, and, of course, death The album begins with the lines, "We sail tonight for Singapore/ We're all as mad as hatters here". That tone continues throughout. The second track, "Clap Hands", begins "sane, sane, we're all insane/ the fireman's blind, the conductor's lame". "Cemetery Polka" is a celebration, of an ironic and wry sort, of decay:

> Auntie Mame
> Has gone
> Insane
> She lives in
> The doorway of an old hotel
> And the
> Radio's playing opera and
> All she ever says
> Is go to Hell.
>
> Uncle Bill
> Will never leave a will
> And the tumour is as
> Big as an egg
> He has a mistress
> She's Puerto Rican
> And I heard she has
> A wooden leg.

"Tango Till They're Sore" has the narrator planning his own funeral:

> Make sure they play my theme song
> I guess daisies will have to do
> Just get me to New Orleans
> And paint shadows on the pews.

"Big Black Mariah" refers to the black wagon previously used to collect prisoners in England, but it also refers to a hearse: "he's got a wooden coat this boy/ Is never coming home/ Here comes the Big Black Mariah". And on, and on, and on. Waits treats these images with such casualness and detachment, however, that -- without detracting from their tragedy -- they take on a parodic tone He has simply added another level to their meaning Again, as Hutcheon defines it, parody is "repetition with critical distance"

Waits creates this critical distance by combining, and therefore to some extent equating, disparate images and ideas contained therein The abundance and the variety of images compromises Waits' connection to any of them As the author, he can be linked to all of them, but because there are so many, his commitment is diluted and suspect Just as a postmodern architect can never be identified as Georgian or Victorian or Classical, although he incorporates these styles into his buildings, Waits avoids identification with any of the images with which he builds Considering his performance history, this is a startling break It not only changes the nature of his music, it threatens the coherence between Waits and his art, a coherence upon which his career was very much based "Waits has sung of the displaced, the dime-store loser, and the hobo for so long that he seems to have taken on a composite persona, drawn from his crazy cast of characters" (Martin Online) Beginning in a serious way with the trilogy, the focus of Waits' art shifts No longer is it a unified whole, with his greatest creation -- himself -- at the centre, it enters the postmodern quagmire of images The art is divorced from the artist and can therefore be explored and examined as a separate entity That said, it must also be acknowledged -- in a paradox typical of postmodernism -- that although Waits' music can stand alone, Waits is also ineluctably and inextricably connected to his creations

In "Diamonds and Gold", Waits evokes a number of ideas Although he bids "goodbye to the railroad/ And the mad dogs of summer/ And everything that I know", Waits' signature is unavoidably inscribed in the text He will never be able to leave everything that he knows He can, however, incorporate new characteristics and thereby weaken the link

> Small time Napoleon
> Shattered his knees
> But he stays in the saddle for Rose
> And all his disciples
> They shave in the gutter
> And they gather what's left of his clothes

While Waits has not entirely dispensed with his preoccupation and identity with subclass characters, this verse illustrates how he begins to move away from this role In addition to the typical Waitsian evocation of the world of the gangsters, Waits also introduces romanticism, heroicism, chivalry, and the Christian imagery that will become central to later work Just as quickly as he is putting these images forth, he is also undermining their power Equally well known for his triumph and his heroics as for his ignominious defeat, Napoleon is the perfect figure In this verse, Napoleon is stoic and chivalric, but he is also "small time", and injured Two songs later, he will re-appear, definitively crushed, "weeping in the Carnival saloon" ("Time") For now, though, he not only retains some vestiges of honour, he is also identified as a Christ figure Christ, like Napoleon, is also an appropriate figure in this verse Paradoxically, only his death and defeat could achieve what he attempted during his lifetime He is both victor and vanquished Waits makes reference to "disciples," a word which can not be separated from Christian mythology This word contains the same sort of ambiguity as do

Napoleon and Christ. On the one hand, the disciples were the honoured and trusted inner core of Christ's followers, on the other hand, Judas was among their ranks. The verse seems to make a reference to the story surrounding Christ's arrest, as chronicled in the Book of Mark: "And they crucified him, and divided his clothes among them" (15:24). In Waits' verse, his disciples, no better than vultures, are apparently scavenging whatever clothing was left behind. Napoleon and Christ are heavily laden with their own connotations, and the listener who is lost in the thicket of image, meaning and connotation has very little chance to notice the presence of "the well-dressed hobo" (Humphries Penthouse review). Waits has flooded this song, and others on Raindogs, with these significations, and so has drawn attention away from his own well-established persona, broken the connection between his own identity and his art, and created that "critical distance" necessary to add the parodic level to the songs.

Postmodern artists, Waits included, have borrowed, then rearranged and recomposed, images from the past. The completed whole has both a dependent and an independent relationship with its components. His pre-trilogy work has been characterized as having

> mined the post-war fault line of Kerouac and the Beats, focusing on the loners and losers that littered America's highways and byways. 'Foreign Affairs' had 'Potters Field', its epic atmospherics -- all deathly strings and orchestral cadences -- straight out of Sam Fuller's classic noir B movie Pick Up On South Street, and 'I Never Talk To Strangers', a divine duet with Bette Midler, recreating an idiom everyone thought died with Tin Pan Alley.
>
> (Martin Online)

The repetition apparent in the pre-trilogy work is distinguished from the repetition during the trilogy by the subsequent inclusion of critical distance and the exclusion of nostalgic sentiment. His earlier work was simultaneously humourous and sentimental, while his later work has an undertone of cynicism and doom -- Bone Machine is outright apocalyptic. The songs released during the 1970s had an almost elegiac tone. He has always drawn images out of American history, but he does so much more reverentially during the first part of his career. Foreign Affairs, released in 1977, contains the track "Jack and Neal" -- an acknowledgment and a tribute to the influence of the Beats on his work. The last line of this song places the narrator in the car with Jack and Neal: "and somehow you could just tell *we'd* be in california soon" (emphasis added). Eight years later, on Raindogs, "9th and Hennepin" is an unmistakable reference to his Beat years, but this time he insists on distance both from the narrative and the form.

Ironically, Waits distances himself from this Beat-influenced form by using it, and calling attention to the fact that he is doing so. "9th and Hennepin" is clearly meant to remind the listener of his own earlier Beat persona. It even contains a concrete reference to a specific time and place in Waits' life. 9th and Hennepin, Minneapolis, if Waits himself is to be believed, was home to a donut shop where he spent time with Chuck E. Weiss, pre-1980 (Buzz Online). The title alone, then, recalls the image of Waits during his Beat years. He has moved beyond the combination of upright bass, snare drum and high hat, but all the same, the musical accompaniment on this track is relatively sparse, consisting only of piano, clarinet, double bass and a few percussion instruments. The song is spoken like a poem, which emphasizes its debt to the Beat tradition. The opening lines are true to his earlier humourous improvisational style: “Well it's 9th and Hennepin/ All the donuts have/ Names that sound like prostitutes”. These are not coincidences. As in his other songs, he is very deliberately evoking an image of the past, but this time, his glass brick is himself. With absolute self-awareness, he is echoing his past style, and in doing so, is creating a schism between then and now. The images in this song are at times so melodramatic and cliche-ridden as to be comical, and this only widens the gap that parody creates:

And no one brings anything
Small into a bar around here

They all start out with bad directions
And the girl behind the counter has a tattooed tear
One for every year he's away she said, such
A crumbling beauty, but there’s
Nothing wrong with her that
$100 won't fix, she has that razor sadness
That only gets worse
With the clang and the thunder of the
Southern Pacific going by

Still, in a manner he has obviously mastered with this album, the ludicrous does not eclipse the beauty or the tragedy.

He also maintains a narratorial distance, which parallels the distance created with the meta-narrative. The “I” in this song is just an observer:

I hide on the stairway
I hang in the curtain
I sleep in your hat

Personal observations are hidden by affecting a shift to the second person "As the clock ticks out like a dripping faucet/ Till you're full of rag water and bitters and blue ruin/ And you spill out/ Over the side to anyone who'll listen" The lines are spoken with so much authority there is no doubt of their originating in first-hand experience In order to show a very deliberate narratorial move away from such experience, however, Waits chooses the pronoun "you" in favour of "I" The last two lines, "I've seen it all through the yellow windows/ of the evening train" also insist on narrative distance, and contrast directly with the last line of "Jack and Neal" This Waits is not in the car travelling with Jack and Neal to California, this Waits is on a train, separated from that world by the yellow window of the observer He is travelling in a different direction, he has a different destination

With the trilogy, Waits went through a transition similar to Bob Dylan

> By 1964 a Bob Dylan song had come to mean a style of writing that was recognizable, like a signature Dylan was to become increasingly uncomfortable with the role in which 'Bob Dylan' had been cast, and he attempted a whole series of disclaimers of his imposed status as a prophet, a folk Messiah, a spokesman for his generation The problem was that it appeared as if such disclaimers also would have to be disclaimers of the name Bob Dylan, which he had so urgently and carefully nourished as the basis of his career Eventually, he was successful in resolving this problem by making 'Bob Dylan' stand not for any imposed role
>
> (Scobie 51)

The type of "imposed status" was different, of course -- Waits was known as a proponent and a component of ragged existences -- but the role was no less fixed and no less integral to his success. With the trilogy, Waits eases out of this role. The characters in his songs continue to be gathered from the very edges of society, but he no longer presents himself as one of them. He also incorporates numerous other images and allusions which serve to diffuse the focus and detract attention from himself. Again like Dylan, Christianity serves to facilitate the break from his previously established persona, unlike Dylan, his personal faith and sincerity is questionable.

Rain Dogs provides indications of Waits' interest in Christian imagery. "Walking Spanish" explicitly compares the crucifixion of Christ to the execution of an inmate on death row. There is also, as mentioned previously, Christ as the ambiguous figure of the conquered hero in "Time". "Blind Love", however, is the most important of the religious songs on Raindogs because it ties directly into Frank's Wild Years, the final album in his trilogy. "Blind Love" is a secular hymn, and as such, it is linked to the history of popular American music. In the 1950s, The Platters, among others, were singing

> secularized hymns in which highly romanticized love, cued by the massed violins, has replaced salvation as a source of happiness. The titles alone of two are indicative: 'My Prayer' and 'Heaven on Earth.' Although 'My Prayer' comes from the thirties, it fits in with their other songs, for the singer prays, not for salvation, but 'to be with you.' Likewise, 'Heaven on Earth' will come into being when the singer is with his beloved.
>
> (Curtis 60)

"Blind Love" deals with searching for salvation. Like earlier songs of its type, it seems to be addressed to a woman. "Now you're gone/ And it's hotels and whiskey and sad luck dames". There is a fall from grace and a refusal or an inability to regain lost ground.

> and I don't care if they miss me
> and I never remember their names
> They say if you get far enough away
> You'll be on your way back home
> Well I'm at the station
> And I can't get on the train

The way to salvation is finally found Ostensibly about a woman, "you" could easily mean religious faith

> I wonder where you are
> And I whisper your name
> The only way to find you
> Is if I close my eyes
> I'll find you with my blind love
> The only kind of love is stone blind love

"Blind Love" is a forerunner of Frank's Wild Years, which is a morality play Just like Faust, "Blind Love" and Frank's Wild Years follow predictable steps to a predictable ending There is the initial trespass, usually based on some sort of mortal sin, a simultaneous indulgence in and struggle against sin and temptation, a realization of the great cost of those sins, and finally -- if possible -- salvation "Blind Love" is the short version, Waits more fully explores this form on Frank's Wild Years

In 1984, just three years prior to the release of this album, Springsteen came out with Born in the U S A His anger with the inequality between classes was nothing new, but it had always been an undirected, inert anger This time, Springsteen placed the blame directly on his country "My Hometown" reflects the disillusionment Americans -- or at least Springsteen's audience --- were feeling

Now Main Street's whitewashed windows and vacant stores
Seems like there ain't nobody wants to come down here no more
They're closing down the textile mill across the railroad tracks
Foreman says these jobs are going boy and they ain't coming
back
Your hometown

Last night me and Kate we laid in bed
Talking about getting out
Packing up our bags maybe heading south
I'm thirty-five we got a boy of our own now
Last night I sat him up behind the wheel and said son take a good
look around
This is your hometown

One of Springsteen's greatest talents is expressing, in a simplistic, unambiguous fashion, the dissatisfaction of a large portion of Americans His albums serve as a barometer to measure the levels of tension and anger in his audience, and more generally, the American public Even by the superstar standards of "The Boss", Born in the U S A enjoyed great success The eighties were a decade of growing general cynicism Nothing was immune from suspicion and/or denunciation George Bush and Dan Quayle were enjoying their one term in the White House, and arousing suspicion of incompetence The Teflon president Bush was not The Bush administration -- specifically the president and the vice-president -- were to be remembered for their blunders and gaffs Neither of them seemed to have even a rudimentary grasp of their first language, with Bush's proclamation of his "anti-racist, anti-Semitic" beliefs, and Quayle's infamous misspelling of "potato" In many ways, America seemed to be inviting mockery and satire and disrespect, and perhaps the most flamboyant targets were the evangelists

> [R]eligion is becoming a circus. These bible-thumping jamborees seem like worship time at Jim Morrison's 'House of Acid.' There is arm waving, speaking in tongues, gospel singing and plenty of 'hallelujahs.' Some days, one can even catch a performance of the channel's Christian rapper, complete with M.C. Hammer-style dancers. The sets, I mean pulpits, are reminiscent of some Dr. Seuss tale gone bad, complete with Rustoleum gold altars and almost neon backdrops.
>
> Dare we even mention the players themselves. The ringleader is a garish apparition of blue eye shadow and cotton candy-colored curls who sporadically, and usually inappropriately, breaks into song or laughter. Providing back-up is a seemingly endless parade of pompadoured pledge-seekers who sing, preach and 'take testimony' from washed-up celebrities on guest spots. Perhaps the most entertaining, not to mention downright scary, feature is the casting out of demons. That's right, real-life exorcisms, complete with seizure-like reactions in the followers. The sick and maligned simply can make their way to the front of the church, and with just a hand to the forehead and a quick abracadabra, the believers fall to the floor completely 'healed.'
>
> This is not religion. Filling a packed auditorium with paid audiences and whipping them into semi-hypnotic frenzies with chanting and singing is not 'church,' but some sort of evangelistic Lollapalooza that is a cross between Mama's Family and The Exorcist. This is scary stuff.
>
> (Cater Online)

How could Waits possibly resist working with a subject that was linked to such garish and inflammatory images? Although he largely resists the temptation to become garish and flamboyant on Frank's Wild Years, his live version of "Way Down in the Hole", released only a year later, provides an indication of Waits' attraction to the role of evangelical preacher. In between verses, he improvises a preacher's shtick to an audience who happily plays along.

> That red-horned, lousy low-life underneath our boots.
> Praise the Lord.

> I don't know what it is -- two dollar?
> That demon-meister -- three dollar?
> That prince-devil -- just see if you can come up with a figure that
> matches your faith
> He says, 'how much has Jesus done for you?'
> And we gotta go in
> With our hydraulic system and blast him out
> People, can I get an amen?
>
> Well people, I got to speak about something [crowd cheers]
> Can I get an amen? [crowd amen]
> Can I get a hallelujah? [crowd hallelujah]
> Praise the Lord [crowd praise the lord]
> Have mercy
> The Lord is a very very busy man [crowd cheers]
> But I do what I can

Frank's Wild Years is billed as the final installment in his trilogy In fact, bound by his new-found persona as the evangelical preacher, this album has more in common with Bone Machine and Black Rider While Waits may never be able to completely replace his Beat persona, his preacher comes in a close second It both confronts American Christianity and it appeals to Waits' sense of the carnivalesque The year Waits released the final album of the trilogy was the year Oral Roberts – the man who claimed that a 900 foot Jesus appeared to him –

> told his television audience that God had appeared to him in March of 1986 and told him that he must raise $8 million within the next 12 months or he would die The money was supposed to provide scholarships for medical students who attended Oral Roberts University In the January broadcasts, Roberts claimed he has [sic] raised $3 5 million but he must have another $4 5 million before March 31 -- or he would die! Apparently, the gimmick worked, because in April Roberts announced that he had received the $8 million Now it has become clear that the medical college will be closed due to financial troubles and no scholarships will be distributed
>
> (O Timothy Online)

The social and political atmosphere in the 1980s provided the right climate for the emergence of Waits' dalliance with Christianity and evangelism

Frank's Wild Years is a parody, as opposed to a satire, of many basic tenets of Americanism He is not only appealing to America's much denied but ever-present puritanical tendencies with the form of the play, he is also exploring the much asserted but never-present American Dream Essentially, he is aiming at the very roots of American society This album houses two opposing mythologies which work against one another Frank does what he is supposed to do -- he leaves home in pursuit of his life-long dream Although he is just a small-town boy from Rainville, this is America, and anyone with sufficient talent and perseverance can succeed This is the land of equality This is the American Dream But Frank's Wild Years is not a story about how a young and talented nobody from small-town America made it big in New York City Frank's Wild Years is a morality play, and it is Frank's pursuit of the American Dream that is his mortal sin The conflict between puritanical sensibilities and American ambitions reflects a growing disillusionment with the promise of America, and Waits is not the only one to express this dissatisfaction Bright Lights Big City, for example, was made into a film around the same time as Waits' play/album The hero sets out to seek fame and fortune and instead falls prey to the depraved demons of the city He denies and/or forgets his pure and earthy roots in small-town America -- often symbolized by the pining and mistreated girlfriend he left behind The hero then comes to the realization that the loss of himself is too great a price to pay for success Salvation ensues On the one hand, according to the mythology, America provides an opportunity to succeed that anyone with half a work ethic should pursue On the other hand, and also according to the mythology, "there's no place like home" These two irreconcilable ideologies conflict and combine to form a separate mythology, one which relies heavily on the structure of the morality play

> we must perform
> The form of Faustus' fortunes, good or bad
> To patient judgments we appeal our plaud
> And speak for Faustus in his infancy
> Now is he born, his parents base of stock,
> In Germany, within a town called Rhode
> At riper years, to Wittenberg he went,
> Whereas his kinsmen chiefly brought him up
> So much he profits in divinity,
> The fruitful plot of scholarism grac'd,
> That shortly he was grac'd with doctor's name,
> Excelling all who sweet delight's disputes
> In th'heavenly matters of theology
> Till swol'n with cunning, of a self-conceit,
> His waxen wings did mount above his reach,
> And melting, heavens conspired his overthrow
> (Marlowe 275)

Substitute "Rainville" for "Rhode", and a natural talent for music with a doctorate in theology, and the stage has been set for Frank's Wild Years

Similar to Raindogs, this album has an overtone of breakdown and decay, which, in this case, is closely linked to specific American images and echoes Waits couldn't have chosen a better figure to evoke both splendour and deterioration than the lounge singer The lounge singer is readily identifiable in an American context The lounge singer is Elvis, who emerged from the dusty fields of the American South to become beautiful, sensual, successful, true-blue patriotic served-in-the-military American royalty -- The King. The lounge singer is also the fat, broken-down, pathetic Elvis, the slave to his own appetites for food and drugs. Elvis, the found-dead-in-the-bathroom Elvis. When Waits mentions Las Vegas, he is invoking a dichotomy that will not escape the American audience. "[T]hose days when Vegas was not a 'theme park' but WAS a place of neon splendor with no other purpose but to drink, pick up chicks and rob the casinos. . ." (*Rat Pack Homepage* Online). Las Vegas can not be separated from the romantic inscriptions of past decades anymore than it can be separated from its seedy and seamy present. When Waits names his title hero "Frank", he is encouraging the audience to make the unavoidable connection to Frank Sinatra. By 1987, the world had witnessed Sinatra change over the years: from suave "blue eyes", to a slightly overweight, slightly pathetic middle aged man trying to hold on to an obviously dying career, to a decrepit old man dying slowly in a hospital bed. Sinatra, all by himself, is the embodiment of American decline from greatness. Waits, however, increases the pathetic nature of his image by equivocating him with Frank, the small-town accordion player with big dreams.

While it may be hard to take an accordion player seriously, *Frank's Wild Years* is anything but funny. Billed as "Un Operachi Romantico In Two Acts", this play/album is just as serious as any opera -- just as serious as Faust. In fact, any humour in the presentation of this album actually serves to increase the tragedy. The liner notes to this album provide the reader/listener with background:

> 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 dawn like a wrecked ship's 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, 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 fresh and clean

The opening passage -- with its awkwardness, odd details and melodramatic tone -- is the only humourous segment on the album Waits has prepared his listeners to expect more of the same, increasing the shock at the tragedy he actually delivers This album at once chronicles the disillusionment of a fictional character and the disillusionment of a nation In this context, the subtle presence of the garish evangelist, far from providing humour, acts as evidence of the decline of America

In this spirit of eminence and subsequent degeneration, overt Christian imagery is evident from the beginning, with the first song entitled "Hang On St Christopher" St Christopher, the patron saint of travellers, is relegated to the "passenger side" for this crazed and violent trip While Frank tries to incorporate his faith into this fast-paced life, he already is finding it difficult

> hang on st christopher now don't let me go
> get me to reno got to bring it in low
> put my baby on the flat car
> got to burn down the caboose
> get 'em all jacked up on whiskey
> then we'll turn the mad dog loose
> hang on st christopher on the passenger side
> open it up tonight the devil can ride yeah

The religion on this album, like the lounge singer, can be taken as an image of glory or corruption. "Way Down in the Hole" is one instance in the morality play when his faith breaks through. It is analogous to one of Faustus' moments of self-doubt. It is also an example of the double-edged religious imagery on this album. On one hand, it is Frank's sincere plea: "you gotta help me keep the devil/ way down in the hole . . . ." On the other hand, its tone is showy and evangelical:

> . . . if you walk with Jesus
> he's gonna save your soul
> you gotta keep the devil
> way down in the hole
> he's got the fire and fury
> at his command
> well you don't have to worry
> if you hold on to Jesus' hand

If Frank does not take these admonishments and warnings seriously, he can not be blamed. Patrick Humphries, commenting on the character in the play, refers to this character as the "berserk, blind evangelist" (97). Waits' evangelist has much in common with his hawkster character in an earlier song: "You got it, buddy, the large print giveth and the small print taketh away" ("Step Right Up", Small Change). The evangelist is in the business of salvation; his authenticity is suspect. Frank apparently ignores the fire-and-brimstone warnings of the preacher, and perseveres in his quest for fame. The songs following "Way Down in the Hole" are "Straight to the Top (Vegas)" and "I'll Take New York".

The connection to Sinatra is never stronger, nor more ironic, than at this point in the album Waits sings in his best Sinatra croon, the difference in vocal styles and timbres adds to the degenerate image he is creating of Frank Rather than sounding Sinatra smooth and mellifluous, his voice is as gravelly and cigarette-addled as the aged Katherine Hepburn's Each song is meant to be understood in juxtaposition to a predecessor "Straight to the Top (Vegas)" invites a comparison with "Straight to the Top (Rhumba)", while "I'll Take New York" bears more than a passing resemblance to Sinatra's cover of "New York, New York "

The second time Frank sings "Straight To The Top", he has spent some time "dancin' in the slaughterhouse" He has gone "a little crazy" ("Blow Wind Blow") Like Faustus, Frank is tortured by the manifestations of his own dreams and desires His attempts to escape are defeated every time, and even the "dreams" to which he turns for solace are riddled with ambiguous and sinister images "We're running through the graveyard/ and we laugh my friends and I/ we swore we'd be together/ until the day we died" ("Innocent When You Dream") Frank becomes deeply disillusioned

> It's more than a swindle this crooked card game
> It's more than sad times it's more than sad times
> none of our pockets are filled with gold
> nobody's caught the bouquet
> there are no dead presidents we can fold
> nothing is going our way
>
> ("More Than Rain")

In contrast to the rhumba version, the lines of the second "Straight To The Top" have nothing to do with ambition, motivation and the pursuit of a dream Frank has joined St

Christopher "on the passenger side". He has spun completely out of control. Lines such as "I know that I will never stop" bespeak not determination, but hopelessness and horror. Desperation begets desperation, and he finds himself in a cycle he can not break: "she knows that I am broke/ so that I must play" ("Temptation"). The differences in the circumstances surrounding each version of "Straight To The Top" stain the Vegas rendition with a grim irony that would not be so remarkable if it were presented in isolation. "I'll Take New York" is presented in much the same fashion.

"I'll Take New York" is an unquestionable reflection of Sinatra's version of "New York, New York". The content and sentiment of these songs are similar, and Waits has unabashedly borrowed the well-known chorus line rhythm which drives the song. In isolation, "I'll Take New York" would be, like "New York, New York", an upbeat song, but Waits' song is part of a greater context, both in its connection to the rest of the album and its connection to the Sinatra song. The audience has no choice but to perceive it simultaneously in both contexts, both within and without its fictional world, and both serve to emphasize Frank's failure. Paradoxically, both Sinatra's success and subsequent decline increase the sense of Frank's ruin. Sinatra's fortune provides a backdrop of comparison, a foil that highlights downfall with prosperity. The image of Sinatra as an aging lounge singer only adds to the images of dereliction surrounding Frank. These two opposing comparisons work together without detracting from each other. The fictional Frank vows "I'll take New York/ I'll make it happen". The real Frank dreams of being "king of the hill --- top of the heap". As the audience knows, Sinatra realized that dream, while Waits' Frank has been unable to rise from his mire of insanity, depression, anger and frustration In fact, on the stage Frank never even leaves the park bench, except in clips of memory and dream In "I'll Take New York", Frank plans to "pop the cork", "drink Manhattans", "break into the best/ champagne" and "hit all the bars", while Sinatra simply wants to "wake up in the city that never sleeps" These frequent references to alcohol lose their celebratory spirit and take on a greater meaning of dereliction when, during "Train Song", Frank admits that he "drunk up all [his] money" Frank has hit the bottom, and now he must emerge, although not unscathed, from the hell into which he has been dragged

When Frank receives the "Telephone Call From Istanbul", he receives the information that will jolt him out of his insanity and into a more stable -- if not happier -- melancholy His "baby's coming home today" This reminder of the life he left, to his detriment, is what will bring him to his implied salvation Frank needs contact with his previous life, his civilized existence, to fully understand the price he has paid for his fame The bizarre images of "Telephone Call" provide evidence both of the extreme frenzy of his mind as well as his struggle to restore order The first verse provides a frightening glimpse into Frank's surreal reality

> All night long on the broken glass
> livin' in a medicine chest
> mediteromanian hotel back
> sprawled across a roll top desk
> the monkey rode the blade on an
> overhead fan
> they paint the donkey blue if you pay
> I got a telephone call from Istanbul
> my baby's coming home today
> will you sell me one of those if I shave my head
> get me out of town is what Fireball said

While the phone call does not deliver order per se, it does effect a shift in Frank's thinking. For the first time, leaving town is a viable option.

The last two songs before the final reprisal of "Innocent When You Dream" are haunted with the malignant spirit of the American Dream. Through the character of Frank, Waits has explored America's disillusionment with the mythology of equal opportunity. In "Cold Cold Ground" Frank takes out his anger over his failure in the city on the mythology of the security in rural roots. This song contains numerous rural images, all of which possess an air of menace, violence and death. The comfort and nostalgia have been wrung out of the traditional images.

> ...there's a ribbon in the willow
> and a tire swing rope
> and a briar patch of berries
> takin' over the slope
> the cat'll sleep in the mailbox
> and we'll never go to town
> till we bury every dream in
> the cold cold ground

Rather than providing life and sustenance, the land is linked to the grave, and Frank "[waits]" for some undisclosed horror "in the arms/ of the cold cold ground". Frank's salvation from the demons of the big city is linked to a return to his rural background. Frank, however, discovers that "it was a train that took me away from here/ but a train can't bring me home" ("Train Song"). The comfort he expected to find, according to American mythology, in the small town has been buried "in the cold cold ground"

Placed as it is on the heels of the continued insanity, despair and disillusionment of "Cold Cold Ground" and "Train Song", the 78 version of "Innocent When You Dream" becomes a macabre tip of the hat to the nostalgia which was so much a feature of Waits' earlier work In the context of this album, the crackle of the 78 does little to evoke the innocence of which he sings The refrain "you're innocent when you dream" brings to mind a line from an earlier Waits song "are those dreams or are they prayers?" ("Time", Raindogs) Even with the 78's evocation of past years, it is hardly a celebration of innocence

Waits moves away from romantic images of American history with the trilogy Frank's Wild Years not only strips the romance from traditionally romantic images, such as the 78 rpm vinyl record and New York City, it also infuses cynicism into two mainstays of American ideology Frank not only fails to live up to his aspirations in the city, he also fails to find comfort in the return to his home town Frank is damned either way, a fact emphasized by Waits' insistent use of Christian imagery Alongside songs such as "Temptation" and "Way Down in the Hole", Frank's despair and insanity parallel traditional Christian descriptions of the descent into Hell Frank's hell, however, is not a flaming inferno, but the American cities of New York and Las Vegas Frank's plunge into Hell is precipitated not by any biblical mortal sin, but by his pursuit of the American dream His attempt at redemption, the return to his hometown, fails to bring any true happiness, offering instead only the stability of melancholy and the acceptance of his failure

Frank's Wild Years closely follows the format of a morality play and it lays the foundations, both in its form and in the introduction of his preacher character, for later albums. As always, Waits speaks in a specifically American voice. Frank's sin and redemption are constructed of two opposing, yet equally powerful, American mythologies. The simultaneous embrace and rejection of the redemption found in the return to small town America reflect the conflict between the two ideologies into which Frank attempts to fit. This play appeals directly to an American public, raised to believe both in ambition and the American Dream, as well as the sanctity and near-holiness of the small town.

Chapter Three
"I Don't Wanna be Filled with Doubt"
The Separation From and Return To American Ideology

In his book The American Jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch traces the course of this oral and literary genre which Waits employs, either consciously or unconsciously, on Bone Machine The jeremiad, that "prophetic view that unites sacred and secular" (Bercovitch 40) has been a useful, influential and enduring American form First employed in America by the Puritans, the jeremiad was then adopted and adapted by ensuing generations who have seen fit to employ the rhetorical hallmarks of this genre to a variety of ends Based upon the assumption that the migration from Europe to America was a latter-day exodus, and that, therefore, Americans were God's Chosen, the jeremiad ascribes sacred properties to secular political events Prophecy is central to this genre the history of America is seen as prophecy fulfilled, while the future is prophecy yet to come Not surprisingly, apocalypse is a consistent feature of the jeremiad Bone Machine is typical of the jeremiad in this facet Waits is bemoaning a culture in decline, and the manifestations of this downfall are the events and attitudes which will precipitate the apocalypse Although this album arguably contains Waits' strongest anti-American sentiment to this point, he continues to work within the paradigm which stipulates that Americans are God's chosen race Despite the fact that contemporary American culture is headed for self-annihilation, Americans are still working within God's course, what appear to be transgressions are actually actions which will bring the ultimate prophecy, apocalypse, into being

With Bone Machine, Waits joins the crowded ranks of American writers who have simultaneously savaged and celebrated American culture Waits is writing within a long American literary tradition Bercovitch points out that many American writers, however subversive, have been unable to avoid the influence of the jeremiad

> I do not mean to blur the differences between these writers, much less to reduce their works to ideology On the contrary, I invoke them precisely because of their well-known divergence from "popular culture," in order to indicate the pervasive impact of the American jeremiad Let me say at once, to avoid all misunderstanding, that all our classic writers (to varying degrees) labored against the myth as well as within it All of them felt, privately at least, as oppressed by Americanism as liberated by it And all of them, however captivated by the national dream, also used the dream to reach beyond the categories of their culture [There is a] second, more important reason for insisting that tradition was the expression of a particular society Chaucer wrote openly from within his culture American writers have tended to see themselves as outcasts and isolates, prophets crying in the wilderness So they have been, as a rule American Jeremiahs, simultaneously lamenting a declension and celebrating a national dream
>
> (179-80)

Regardless of content and changing artistic vision, Waits has always worked very much within American culture On Bone Machine, Waits fuses together indisputably Christian references, such as biblical passages and gospel phrasings, with the apparently secular Hollywood movie industry The marriage of the secular and the sacred comes not from Waits, nor even from any persona, but from the implied audience and subject the American masses The sin of which they are guilty and the attitudes and the events which are the harbingers of God's will -- for they are the same -- is this mistaken identification of the secular as sacred God's chosen race, the American people, are simultaneously moving away and toward God The substitution of the secular for the sacred signals the end of true spirituality, but at the same time it functions as the event which will precipitate the apocalypse and assert the real presence of God in America In his use of the jeremiad, Waits can address current American attitudes as well as lend an implied survey of Christian American history Whether or not he used the form consciously does not matter It is a uniquely American genre, and its survival from the time of the Puritans to its appearance on a Tom Waits album stands as evidence of the survival of the assumptions upon which it is based Although the substance may have changed throughout the years, the rhetorical style has remained intact The jeremiad continues to be a relevant form with which to address the ills of any decade or century in America

By the 1990s, Waits' audience had grown to include not only the baby boomers who had faithfully stayed with him through the years, but also their children These children, by and large, had not only assimilated their parents' disillusionment, but nurtured it and defined themselves with it There was nothing else to provide definition Often raised without the constraints and guidance of religion, of parental commitment to marriage and family, of parents themselves, they were left to create their own value system, which stemmed from the one stable force in their lives television and cinema In "But First, a Word from Our Sponsor," James E Twitchell explores the current saturation of all forms of media with advertisements His observations can very easily be generalized to other cinematic images " [W]hat we crave may not be objects at all but their meaning For whatever else advertising 'does,' one thing is certain by adding value to material, by adding meaning to objects, by branding things, advertising performs a role historically associated with religion" (201) The problem, of course, was that they were looking to an inherently untruthful medium for truth and guidance The result was the unshakable cynicism that is born from the belief that truth is relative and subjective, that facts, mythologies and fictions are synonymous and equally valid in all cases, that there is no meaning to life Gordon Downey, of The Tragically Hip, captured this scathing, abstract cynicism, which is so dependent upon cinematic images for both its inception and expression, in the 1994 release "So Hard Done By"

> Interesting and sophisticated
> refusing to be celebrated
> it's a monumental big screen kiss
> it's so deep it's meaningless
>
> It was true cinema a clef
> you should see it before there's nothing left
> in an epic too small to be tragic
> you'll have to wait a minute
> cause it's an instamatic
>
> yeah that's awful close
> but that's not why
> i'm so hard done by
>
> (Day For Night)

Significantly, the reason is never revealed He himself, like many of his generation, does not know why he is "so hard done by" In this song, Downey laments the lack of a greater force to give meaning to human existence However, as he has never known a greater meaning, he is unable to articulate its loss His expression is dependent on the shifty and meaningless medium of cinema

If Gordon Downey summed it up for "Generation X", Paul Simon supplied a similar, but more mature version of this unease

A man walks down the street
He says, why am I soft in the middle,
Why am I soft in the middle
When the rest of my life is so hard?
I need a photo opportunity,
I want a shot at redemption,
Don't want to end up a cartoon in a cartoon graveyard
Bonedigger, bonedigger

You know, I don't find this stuff amusing anymore

("Call Me Al", Graceland)

There is a little less anger, a little more resignation, but Simon also connects a greater meaning to a "photo opportunity" and refers to what T S Eliot called "hollow men" as "cartoons" "quiet and meaningless / As wind in dry grass" (Eliot 77) By the end of "Call Me Al", Simon has tentatively suggested that meaning may be found in the "angels in the architecture, spinning in infinity hallelujah " On Bone Machine, Tom Waits captures the sense of terminal meaninglessness as expressed by Downey, the mellowed fatalism of Paul Simon, and beneath the more frightening sermonistic songs exists a layer of hope for salvation

It is tempting to categorize Bone Machine as satire, especially in juxtaposition with the parody of his previous album As always, however, he is not so easily compartmentalized While it is clear that he uses the evangelist's lack of credibility to increase the satire that does exist on this album, he is also delivering some serious sermons on the state of America as the millennium draws to a close In 1992, it is not surprising that he links America's cultural downfall to the looming spectre of the apocalypse "Do you believe in self-fulfilling prophecy?" asks Johnny, the main character in Mike Leigh's 1993 film Naked "You know, like Nostradamus? [H]e wrote in one of his quatrains that this goon called Hister would invade Poland So Hitler reads that and thinks, Hitler, Hister, must mean me, and invades Poland So when the guy prophesied that the world would end in 1999, which he did, does that therefore mean that we're fulfilling the prophecy by precipitating the end of the world?" This is the question which lurks just beneath the hellfire and brimstone of Bone Machine

The term "apocalypse" does not always refer to a literal end of the world, or even a literal end of our species Yeats compared the birth of Christ to the "Second Coming" T S Eliot's magi, after witnessing Christ's birth, reflect that "this Birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death" (98) The poems of Yeats and Eliot remind their readers that the ushering in of a new era necessarily coincides with annihilation of its predecessor apocalypse America has seen the shift from polytheism to monotheism, it is now witnessing the displacement of monotheism with atheism The redefinition of meaning from long-standing religious traditions to newer secular systems has led to the expression of doubt This new system of meaning, so wrought up in media images, provides only eternal relativism It offers no judgment and it offers no answers

Waits combines Christian imagery with secular American idolatry, specifically Hollywood, to expose the fallen state of America today Although Jesus appears in satirical songs such as "Jesus Gonna Be Here", Christianity is never the subject of his scorn -- that is reserved for the misguided American Christians, who mistake the word "hallowed" for "Hollywood" In fact, his use of the image of the Christians being thrown to the lions in "In the Colosseum" further suggests his sympathy for unsullied Christianity That being said, he also depicts angels of rather ambiguous virtue Such ambiguity does not detract from the effectiveness of the Christian imagery, on the contrary, it serves to emphasize the dubious morality and lack of any true spirituality in present-day America

> Well the pale face said
> To the eyeball kid
> She just goes clank and boom and steam
> A halo, wings, horns and a tail
> Shoveling coal inside my dreams
> There are no laws
> She's made of cream
> She's such a scream
>
> ("Such a Scream")

There truly "are no laws" in this system of meaninglessness, a theme Waits approaches The transition from religious to secular belief systems have resulted in the perception that boundaries between fact, fiction and mythology have been lifted There are no dictates governing one's beliefs, and *one's* beliefs are all they are Within this system, the only homogenous creed is that there be no homogenous creed Tolerance has been taken to an unbelievable level No one system can be judged better than another, but the unfortunate result of that line of thinking is the corruption of all belief systems In this "I'm OK, You're OK" world, the idea of judgment and absolutes has been discarded Society wades through a muddle of images and feelings, refusing to choose among them

The ambiguous, cluttered image Waits refers to in this song, wherein the boy describes an odd combination of angel, demon, sexual fantasy and mechanization, is to be expected in such an uncommitted culture

America has mistaken the false glitz of Hollywood for the golden streets of Heaven. The cult of Hollywood has grown to such an extent that it has replaced traditional religious salvation, indeed, it has at least partially replaced factual reality. Robert Hughes, in his scathing critique of America, Culture of Complaint, expresses his misgivings about Hollywood:

> Americans, especially the young ones, imagined the 'truth' about the Kennedy assassination resides in Oliver Stone's vivid lying film JFK. How many of them saw anything wrong with Stone's frequent claim that he was 'creating a counter-myth' to the Warren Commission's findings, as though one's knowledge of the past equated with the propagation of myth? Hollywood's treatment of history used not to matter -- that harmless gadzookery about Louis XV, or 'pon my soulery about Lord Nelson, or devotional claptrap about Jesus. But in a time of docudramas, or devotional simulations, when the difference between TV and real events is more and more blurred -- not by accident, but as deliberate policy from the bosses of electronic media -- such exercises fall into a mushy, anxious context of suspended disbelief that old Hollywood pseudo-history never had.
>
> (6)

Hollywood has become more real than reality itself, and the salvation it offers -- celebrities are in a state of grace with their wealth, their beauty, their power, their immortality -- is so much more immediate than the earned and deferred gratification offered by Christianity. For Waits, this confusion is a symptom of a culture in decline, a culture headed towards chaos and ultimate oblivion.

"Black Wings" opens lyrically with a biblical quotation, musically, it is set in a spaghetti western: "Take an eye for an eye/ A tooth for a tooth/ Just like they say in the bible". Against this musical backdrop, Waits could have easily substituted the word "movies" for "bible", he would not have even jarred the lyrical continuity Celluloid images have replaced biblical scriptures Hollywood has exerted such an influence over American ideology that it has displaced and rewritten Christian mythology Waits' mingling of the tenets of Christianity with the very American genre of the Western is not only not a sacrilege, the dilution of Christian mythology has become so commonplace that it could escape undetected Unless, that is, Waits informs the listener Which he does "just like they say in the bible", he adds, just in case anyone missed the reference, and thereby missed the melding together of the two dominant American religions -- Christianity and Hollywood

> Well they've stopped trying to hold him
> With mortar, stone and chain
> He broke out of every prison
> Boots mount the staircase
> The door is flung back open
> He's not there for he has risen
> He's not there for he has risen

Is Waits talking about Jesus, or some steely, sexy character played by Clint Eastwood? In the eyes of the American public, is there any appreciable difference?

The film makers of America have long been involved in the dissemination and the reproduction of history and legend While the Western does not hold a monopoly in this area, this identifiably American genre focuses consistently and specifically on the American West of the mid- to late-nineteenth century It is, therefore, admirably positioned to influence American perception Hollywood is able to provide a much more immediate, not to mention easier, version of reality than any Christian doctrine In Hollywood, salvation is more democratic than in Heaven

In the words of Frederick Jackson Turner, in his landmark essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", "expansion westward, with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character" (32) Migration to the Pacific coast is credited for precipitating the colonists' separation from European cultures and the creation of a uniquely American society "The true point of view in the history of this nation", Turner believes, "is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West" (32) This belief has been romanticized and assimilated into current American mythology The Western movie has both reflected and propagated America's fascination with the frontier The Western, with a liberal dose of romance and nostalgia, resurrects factually shady characters such as Billy the Kid, and recreates them as outlaw heroes, freedom fighters, true Americans Not only does this movie genre rewrite and adjust American history so that it both mirrors and propagates common mythology, it also creates fictional characters which differ little in presentation from historical characters Either way, the black hats come to some sort of justice The use of fictional and non-fictional characters in the telling of a story is neither uncommon nor surprising However, when these stories and characters reflect and inform a culture, that is significant

The frontier mythology, as postulated by Turner, has been assimilated into the American Western The reality of the American frontier, in the minds of many, is synonymous with Hang 'em High Hollywood has transformed historical fact into cultural ideology "Goin' Out West" addresses this metamorphosis, and given the religiously-charged context of Bone Machine, the role of Christianity in this equation can not be overlooked

The West represents a promised land, a land of milk and honey, a land of easy opulence and luxury It is also inseparable from the set and story of a Western movie The character in "Goin' Out West" is responding to the American mythology which has created a new reality based on Hollywood representation

> Well I'm goin' out west
> Where the wind blows tall
> Cause Tony Franciosa[2]
> Used to date my ma
> They got some money out there
> They're giving it away
> I'm gonna do what I want
> And I'm gonna get paid

This character is not only confused about historical reality, but he has also misunderstood the current distinction between Hollywood films and Hollywood itself He is not alone Hollywood may well be the only movie-making locale which has managed to create a mystique that equals, if not surpasses, that of its movies This would not have been possible without the assimilation of the frontier myth into the romantic sensibilities of the American public There is a thriving entertainment industry in New York, but Los Angeles alone retains the aura of promise

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Bone Machine expresses the idea that the perceived promise of Hollywood has replaced the promise of Christian salvation "Jesus Gonna Be Here" bears the musical features of a gospel song, but, just as in "Black Wings", the lyrics provide an ironic counterpoint to the accompaniment " [O]ne identifying characteristic of gospel singing is melisma, the practice of stretching a single syllable over several notes" Another is the "call and response interplay between the lead singer and the backup singers" (Curtis 58) Almost without exception, Waits stretches the vowel sound in every word which ends a line, and although he has no backup singers, his repetition of the line "gonna be here soon", which concludes each verse, provides a similar effect Musically, it is evocative of that music which is marked by "the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinner moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together and crying holy unto the Lord" (Baldwin, as quoted in Curtis 58) The passion and purity of the gospel song is not reflected in the lyrics, to the contrary, the lyrics speak of a relaxation of religious standards and conviction

> I got to keep my eyes open
> So I can see my Lord
> I'm gonna watch the horizon
> For a brand new Ford
>
> I can hear him rolling on down the lane
> I said Hollywood be thy name
> Jesus gonna be here
> Gonna be here soon

Waits takes Jesus out of the religious context, and places him in a specifically American setting this Jesus drives a Ford

These songs set the stage for Waits' scrutiny of religious faith In the background, the preacher persists in instilling a sense of urgency in the search for meaning, reminding the listener of the inevitable

> Your spirit don't leave knowing
> Your face or your name
> And the wind through your bones
> Is all that remains
> And we're all gonna be
> Just dirt in the ground
>
> ("Dirt in the Ground")

In case a reminder of death is not sufficient, he also screams warnings of the Second Coming

> Well the time will come
> When the wind will shout
> All stripped down
> All stripped down
> And all the sinners know
> What I'm talking about
> All stripped down
> All stripped down
> When all the creatures of the world
> Are gonna line up at the gate
>
> And you better be on time
> And you better not to be late
>
> ("All Stripped Down")

Trapped between a society in severe disrepair and the terrifying admonitions of the evangelist, Waits is compelled to embark on a difficult search for faith In the tradition of Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," the ocean in "The Ocean Doesn't Want Me Today" provides a metaphor for faith "I'd love to go drowning / And to stay and to stay / But the ocean doesn't want me today"

If God does have a place in a culture which has eschewed religious values and taken the creeds of equality and tolerance to unpredicted extremes, the way in which He is presented and one's relationship to Him is bound to differ drastically from previous incarnations According to the Book of Genesis, "God created humankind in His image" (1 27) It might be more accurate to say, however, that humankind created -- and continues to create -- God in its image The God to whom Waits appeals in "Who Are You" is a reflection of the chaotic society he describes on Bone Machine He is unpredictable and indefinable At times He is uncaring, at others, pitiable, He is almost always dishonourable His attraction is not his stability, but rather the romance of his "wounded eyes" He is invested with the power of the universe, yet He does not comprehend the danger of that power In yet another similarity to Mike Leigh's film, Naked, Waits portrayal of God in this track parallels Johnny's mistaken belief that Jeremy, who lingers threateningly in the apartment after having raped Sophie, is God Battered, bloodied and bruised, he appeals to him "I know what you told me", he weeps When he reaches out, Jeremy recoils "you're rather disgusting, aren't you?" he says While Leigh's version of God is far more brutal than Waits', both reflect the society each portrays God created in the image of humankind

In a culture where television and film images have come to represent the highest standard of validity and relevance, society has given up looking to God for a sense of stability They now seek experiences which cater to their appetite for the new, the thrilling, the immediate Now “they’re lining up / to mad dog your tilta whirl’ They may or may not know that He is only “pretending to love”, and they may or may not care In “Who Are You”, Waits demands more than the immediate sensations of the “carnival”

> All the lies that you tell
> I believed them so well
> Take them back
> For that fearful leap into the dark
> I did my time
> In the jail of your arms
> Now Ophelia wants to know
> Where she should turn
> Tell me

His questions are answered only by more uncertainty In return for his faith, his “fearful leap into the dark”, he expects to be shown something new which will make sense of the chaos of his world He receives nothing “What did you do the last time? / Why don’t you do that” This higher being, sprung up from the culture of meaninglessness, provides nothing but shiftiness, which reflects the pervasive relativism of the society He attempts to find the essence of this God “Who are you?” he wants to know He finds he must amend this question to reflect His transient and unstable nature “Who are you *this time*?” (emphasis added) Bone Machine looks for solidity among inherently false media images and shifting bafflegab Not surprisingly, he finds little but a deep uneasiness with society

“This kind of cynical press is going to be responsible for a decline in American civilization It’s like the fall of the Roman Empire” (Streisand as quoted in Times Colonist) Waits, in fact, draws a direct parallel between the United States and the

Roman Empire with “In The Colosseum” The belief of American leaders in their invulnerability may very well lead to their downfall

> Gazing on the fall of Communism, conservative columnists wrote about a “unipolar” world -- an exquisitely silly piece of late imperial thinking, if you don't happen to be American -- and George Bush announced that America now presided over “The New World Order ” This uplifting phrase meant nothing Bush was lucky that the Berlin Wall fell and that the Soviet monolith, its underpinnings rotted beyond repair during the Brezhnev years, collapsed during his Presidency Sensibly, he did not intervene, and left the liberation of Eastern Europe to the Europeans and Russians themselves
>
> But at present there is no “New World Order ”
>
> Instead, we have an intractable New World Disorder, laced with Arms Business as Usual
>
> (Hughes 32-3)

The arrogance and supremacy demonstrated by American political leaders is remarkable “ [T]he spiritual leader of Iran, the ayatollah, urged all Moslems to ‘crush America’s teeth in its mouth’, this sounds like just the guy the Americans should sell arms to -- right? The United States simply isn’t making sense (Irving 453) “In the Colosseum” compares America to the fallen Roman Empire

The subject of this song is the rather one-sided fatal spectator “sport” that unfairly pitted humans against large, fierce, presumably agitated and probably hungry animals Waits parallels this horrifying Roman practice with the atrocities perpetrated by the American government and supported by the electorate He depicts politicians as bloodthirsty and psychopathic, and leaves the audience to provide their own illustrations Like any decent horror film director, Waits understands that the conjured images of the viewer’s imagination are often much more powerful than a graphic illustration From the war in Vietnam, to the various "-gates" and other scandals, Americans will not have to think too long before coming up with an incident that supports Waits' assertion that "madness" holds the White House, as well as the American public, in its grasp Bone Machine exposes the events leading up to and surrounding the point at which "the earth died screaming" The surreal and chilling scenario presented in this song is not out of place in this context

> This one's for the balcony
> And this one's for the floor
> As the senators decapitate
> The presidential whore
> The bald headed senators
> Are splashing in the blood
> The dogs are having someone
> Who is screaming in the mud
> In the colosseum tonight
>
> Now it's raining and it's pouring
> On the pillaging and goring
> The constable is swinging
> From the chains
> For the dead there is no story
> No memory no blame
> Their families shout blue murder
> But tomorrow it's the same
> In the colosseum
>
> No justice here, no liberty
> No reason, No blame
> There's no cause to taint the sweetest taste of blood
> And greetings from the nation
> As we shake the hands of time
> They're taking their ovation
> The vultures stay behind
> In the colosseum

Waits' choice of the words "justice" and "liberty" clearly refer to The Pledge of Allegiance, wherein justice and liberty are specifically promised but, according to the song, remain undelivered There are no subtle points here "In the Colosseum" could not be any more straightforward in its denunciation of the state of American politics, policy and society in general

Waits also uses the Pledge of Allegiance to draw attention to America's democratic foundations In a democracy (and even in representative government), the citizens are necessarily implicated in the actions of the nation However, as Americans become more and more disconnected from their political and personal obligations, a detachment which is related to their propensity to mistake media images for reality, less and less responsibility is taken Not only after the elections, but before and during "The number of enfranchised Americans who voted in Presidential elections dropped steadily from a high of 63 percent in 1960 to just half the electorate -- 50 1 percent -- in 1988 The 1992 elections registered a modest upturn 55 percent ", but "it only brought the turnout back to 1972 levels" (Hughes 43) Alexis de Tocqueville, in his influential work Democracy in America, expressed an apprehension that democracy would result in

> 'an anonymous despotism for which no one person would stand responsible' This tyranny, he envisaged, would not oppress the people in the classical manner but would encourage passivity in them and hold them in submission by pandering to their thirst for the material comforts and for a total social equality [T]he large proportion of Americans who, while continuing to demand of their government that it assure their material prosperity, fail to exercise their right to vote in the presidential and other elections would stand as a good measure of confirmation for what Tocqueville perceived as their indifference to the nature of governmental authority so long as it pandered sufficiently to their material interests
>
> (Kennan 238)

De Tocqueville's concerns turned out to be founded, still, he had no idea of the profound impact of television and cinema upon the American public This medium has managed to obliterate not the ability to distinguish between fact and fiction, but the reason for doing so This collective dissociated mental state can only foster widespread apathy, not only for governmental policy, but for everything else as well

The lyrics of the final song, "That Feel", suggest that his search for meaning and faith has been productive "there's one thing you can't lose / It's that feel" This song is out of place in the damning context of Bone Machine, however, its sentiment is undermined in several ways The lyrics themselves hesitate between sincerity and farce

> But there's one thing you can't lose
> And it's that feel
> It always comes and finds you
> It will always hear you cry
> I cross my wooden leg
> And I swear on my glass eye
> It will never leave you high and dry
> Never leave you loose
> It's harder to get rid of than tattoos

Waits demeans the value of "that feel" by associating it with images of deterioration and superficiality The inclusion of the detail of the "wooden leg" harkens back to "Cemetery Polka" (Raindogs), a song rife with degeneration It is the only song on this album which was not written by Waits or by Waits and his wife, Kathleen Brennan It is also the only song in which Waits shares the vocal track Both songwriting and vocal credits are split with Keith Richards, who has worked for years to secure his position as an icon of excess and subsequent dilapidation Their voices warble and crack and repeatedly miss their targets The decrepit singing featured on this song rivals only William Burroughs' vocal contribution to Black Rider These factors serve to undercut the relatively naive and sentimental tone of "That Feel", which in turn draws this song back into Bone Machine With "That Feel", Waits appears initially to offer a happy ending to an album characterised by its apocalyptic and despairing tone Upon closer inspection, however, this last song offers no more hope of redemption than any other on Bone Machine

The redemption, if it can so be termed, is found not within the substance of this album but the form Bercovitch makes an effort, in his description of the jeremiad, to distance himself from his predecessor, Perry Miller, on the subject Miller saw the jeremiad, according to Bercovitch, as "'literature of self-condemnation'" (Miller as quoted in Bercovitch 5) "Not only had the world passed them by, but the colony itself, set on a hill as a beacon to mankind, had degenerated into another Sodom They vented their outrage, Miller tells us, in an 'unending monotonous wail,' a long threnody over a lost cause, in which they came increasingly to acknowledge that New England was sick unto death" (Bercovitch 5) Bercovitch, however, perceives the jeremiad to be not a lament but a rejuvenating and rejoicing assertion of American righteousness

> What if it actually offers a resolution of sorts, a realistic way to deal with crisis and change, and so becomes a source not only of revitalization but of rededication as well? Miller likened the second-generation Puritans to a husband who, while on an errand for his wife, discovers that his wife has forgotten all about her request -- or worse still, denies she ever made a request at all The analogy is accurate so far as it goes But suppose the husband simply refuses to acknowledge the mistake What if he persuades himself that his errand has nothing to do with his wife -- and that in fact he is correct? What if, moreover, he does not harbor that "fantasy" in secret, like Walter Mitty, but proudly

> declares it to others, and for sound, pragmatic reasons -- reasons that conform to the "real" course of events - persuades them too?
>
> I am suggesting that "the process of Americanization" began not with the decline of Puritanism but with the Great Migration, and that the jeremiad, accordingly, played a significant role in the development of what was to become modern middle-class American culture
>
> (18)

Waits' use of the jeremiad over 300 years after the Puritan emigrants arrived in New England testifies not only to the lasting influence of this religious group on the psyche of America, but to the strength of the American culture Although the subject of Bone Machine is the downfall of American society, it is -- as have been all his albums in one way or another -- unerringly focused on it Nor is he alone in his transfixion Clearly, the American mythologies which comprise the culture are thriving, if they were, as Waits' preacher fears, nearing a stage of obsolescence, Waits would still be working at Napoleone's Perry Miller believed the jeremiad to signal the death of American culture, and although the substance tends to support this view, the longevity and the pervasiveness of the form itself denies this assertion

Conclusion

The course of Waits' musical career evidenced a growing tension in the relationship between Waits and his American culture. Albums produced in the 1970s were marked by nostalgia, sentiment and the romanticization of the American underclass. The middle-class audience of this decade were consuming nostalgia, as is evident from numerous parallel cultural phenomena, and as a result Waits enjoyed moderate success despite the fact that his musical styles and influences were a decade or two behind his contemporaries. During this time, Waits created a persona for himself: "he was gaining the reputation of a time-warped Beat, he was living the life he envisaged, just 10 years too late". At the time, he "was only too happy to take up the Beat baton. His own view of America found many echoes in the writings of Jack Kerouac, and he had long drawn on the daemonic energy of On The Road." (Humphries 29). By 1980, however, Waits was tiring of the constraints of his Beat character and the romanticization of America. Heartattack and Vine, released that year, represented a shift in his treatment of his predominant subject: America. The break was abrupt, while this album does feature some sentimental pieces, it also presents previously romanticized images in a harsh and more realistic manner. Following on the heels of Heartattack and Vine, the trilogy of Raindogs, Swordfishtrombones and Frank's Wild Years was a time of intense experimentation. While Waits did not entirely abandon historic America, the 1930s and 1940s were but one source of imagery. Similarly, Waits did not entirely leave his Beat persona in the 1970s, but it was no longer the predominant narrative voice Waits explored many modes of instrumentation, arrangements and lyrical thematics, one of which was Christianity This was to be significant for later albums, specifically Bone Machine While Raindogs contains hints of an interest in Christianity, it is Frank's Wild Years which acts as a springboard to Bone Machine The last album of the trilogy takes the form of a traditional morality play, a "biblical story" as Waits himself put it The morality revolves around recognizable American mythologies, the tension of this album is the result of Frank's struggle between two prevalent American ideologies, both of which fail him He descends into Hell -- not the traditional Christian Hell, but Las Vegas and New York Waits has framed a Christian form of literature in the American paradigm, which he continues with Bone Machine Waits chooses to express his despair for the American nation in a traditional American manner he employs the jeremiad Ambiguity has always characterized this genre, and Waits is allowed to address the godlessness of America while using Puritan rhetoric, the survival of which disaffirms the basic lament of this album Waits' music chronicles both a personal and a cultural relationship to American culture It is clear that he is very much enamoured with it, yet his songs evidence a steadily growing disillusionment and detachment In the opinion of The Edge, "[H]e's the greatest talent of the last 10 years as far as dealing with America in a real way" (as quoted in Humphries 114) Perhaps it is the entanglement in the mythology, rather than the mythology in and of itself, which best defines American society

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"The Ghosts of Saturday Night" Tom Waits and his Relationship to American Culture

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