

Tom Waits

Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards

ANTI-

Ah the congress of wonders, the carnival of the senses that is Tom Waits. For 33 years he's been building the new American songbook full of his matchless noir art, recently mixing galled primeval blues, Brechtian theatre and junkyard soul, where double helical gears grind and hellhounds moan.

Waits shows all his radial teeth on "Orphans." Separated into the louder "Brawlers," quieter "Bawlers" and anomalous "Bastards," the three-disc set is narrative, sonic sublimity: Delta blues, garage grunge dirges, Hawaiian lullabies, empty lounge heartaches, marching Irish waltzes, Scottish madrigals, beat-box percussion.

Sounds like Waits was really building something as he was recording these songs—some astounding Rube Goldberg contraption of outsized complexity and physical presence, full of beveled floodgate gears and steam pipes, a backfiring, scrap-yard tone-machine "with suicide doors."

There's the spike-hammering fuzz-toned blues of "2:19;" the tango with a bowed handsaw and wine glass percussion of "Little Drop of Poison."

"Buzz Fledderjohn" though, perhaps best sums up why *Orphans* requires mass adoption. Waits details with singular acuity, while leaves rustle and a dog howls on cue, the wealth of curiosities, just over the fence: "...paper's full of stabbings, the sky's full of crows, she's singing in Italian while she's hanging out her clothes, carp in the bathtub and it's raining real hard...I ain't allowed in Buzz Fledderjohn's yard..."

The Shins

Winning the Night Away

Sub Pop



James Mercer is one of pop's best lyricists.

That's not to say all his

words remain compelling stripped of the shimmering song-craft to which they're tethered. They don't. But Mercer's sung lyrics, soaring atop his Brian Wilson-meets-Robert Smith melodies, port listeners to otherworldly realms like waking dreams.

He seems to describe the trip in "Spilt Needles," one of the many gems off *Winning the Night Away*, The Shins' third full-length: "It's like I'm pressed on the handle bars of a blind man's bike, no straws to grab, just the rushing wind on the rolling mind..."

Cataloguing creative pressures amid the whoosh of success that's drafted his band? If so, it's done nothing to dampen The Shins' intimate iridescence.

Winning shows the band at their most evocative, with a production that enabled more space in the mix than its more stripped-down predecessors.

There's less sugary pop than on their lauded debut *Oh, Inverted World*, but that's a good thing for the gained diversity. Tracks like "Phantom Limb" sound like Chinatown-era Luna; while the flanged keyboards, melody-lagging guitar and synthesized honk of "Sea Legs" bells a slippery space-jam.

The pin is thread throughout Mercer, winking at any pop culture appropriation, nails it, again, from "Spilt Needles" singing, "we'll set you up with some odd convictions, because you're finally golden, boy."

JEF STOTT

SoukSonik

Six Degrees Records

The driving tabla rhythms and beguiling pitch-bending ouds in Jef Stott's *Arabesque*, electronic sound collages on *SoukSonik* immediately conjure images of wind-sculpted Saharan "dune fields" and the sand sea "ergs" of Morocco and Algeria.

A nomadic, propellant soundtrack, and nice seductive twist on down-tempo chill-out, *SoukSonik* evokes the foreboding intensity, sheer scale and awesome beauty of the great deserts. Plaited with traditional Arabic instruments but buoyed by club rhythms, the disc links the landscapes and cultures from Istanbul's ancient medinas to the labyrinth "souk" bazaars of Marrakech.

Ear-tickling ancient melodies merge seamlessly with the sleek, ambient pulse of the modern night-owl. The result is transporting. An auricular trade route scored for the 21st century adventurer, the cinematic intensity endemic in this five-song digital EP offers a perfect sonic backdrop—an aural delight day or night—for globetrotting, progressive listeners with borderless tastes.

Stott, a San Francisco-based DJ and musician, has been producing travelogues of global cultural exchange for years, primarily playing and mixing beats in bands—Lumin, Stellamara, Som'ma—and scoring for films and television. The former anthropologist studied traditional stringed and percussion instruments with master musicians of Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and Turkey. He's transported listeners to the places of origin of the cumbus, bendir, daff, saz and oud—in-toning their mystical, seductive, far-flung powers, ever since.



DAMIEN RICE

9

Heffa; Vector; Warner Brothers; 14th Floor Records

Various shades of dusk brought the better moments on Damien Rice's *O*, his platinum-selling, largely home-recorded solo debut to pleasing fruition. Rice certainly knows how to react to emotions musically. Yet too often on *9*, his latest release, Rice resorts to replicating despair like muscle-memory, substituting shadow-theatre for trauma, melodrama for emotional depth.

Austere, hushed intros and whispered verses trail off into vocal interludes so stripped of artifice and energy—"9 Crimes," "The Animals Were Gone"—that Rice, in attempting to deliver such unfiltered doom, ends up evoking merely the emptiness, or the ambience of despair, of a will shot-through.

The desolation is palpable—it's the whole vibe—but the impact falls flat. Evocative lyrics would enliven, but a tendency toward stony opaqueness and pillow talk leaves little room for richer narratives to cohere. A master class in Leonard Cohen seems overdue.

Lines like "Do you brush your teeth before you kiss? Do you miss my smell?" from "Accidental Babies," are words best left in the journal.

His talent and vision—obvious. The snap rhythm of "Coconut Skins" offers a wry take on romance with some clear, simple truths: "time is contagious, everybody's getting old."

But the lyrics from "Grey Room" might best explain Rice's sophomore lapse: "...nothing is lost, it's just frozen in frost."



Wiley (AKA Eskiboy)

Tunnel Vision (Volumes 3 and 4)

Boy Better Know

Wiley, the DIY pioneer of London's hip-hop "grime" scene, who showed such cool charm on his 2004 solo debut *Treddin' on Thin Ice*, enters 2007 distracted.

The "grimewar" that erupted between MCs in 2006 continues to tug the whole genre into an artistic nosedive: An uber-aggressive pissing match prevails, with noisy, anxious beat-making and high-speed verbal assaults.

Wiley's inability to ignore this cacophony—as evidenced by this *Tunnel Vision* series, a five-volume set of mixtapes released on his own label—is disappointing, particularly when he should be leading the scene into new creative territory, versus tail-chasing with his less talented rivals.

Time may have moved the storyline: Wiley first narrated his embrace of creative sanctuary from life on the road (streets) in East London's Bow estates (projects) several years ago.

But his baller-on-the-mend, self-effacing rhymes about on-road ambition, "pies" and "paper" on "Treddin'" were transcendent, suffused with the humility of a conscious-raised MC compelled to do right.

That hotpot fusion of raga, two-step, Atari Asteroids' bleeps and cascading breaks like the synchronized tumbling of so many kitchen knives, remains, as does Wiley's Brit-hop, Jah-Cockney—think Dirty South—phrasing.

He's said *Playtime is Over* (April, Big Dada) will be his last solo disc—hopefully not. It may show Wiley found the creative space to re-rail himself. Meanwhile, queue up *Treddin'* as a must-have.



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