

READER

SAN DIEGO'S WEEKLY

Vol. 3 No. 27

July 18 to July 24

From Bouncing to Hooting to Playing the Road

Lou Curtiss and Stephen Swain

(Ed: The following interview was conducted on January 13, 1974 by Lou Curtiss, owner of Folk Arts, 1741 11th Ave. Since this interview, Tom Waits appeared at the San Diego Folk Festival, has gone on his second tour with Zappa, and will be appearing at the Folk Arts August 23 and 24.)

Tom Waits evokes a nostalgic feeling for the good old days without sacrificing originality. He has a keen interest in the music, events, and beat culture of the late 50's yet his songs and performance stand up in today's music market.

Tom is a collector and researcher of bawdy stories and songs and participated in a workshop dealing with these topics at the 8th annual San Diego State Folk Festival, where he also appeared as a concert performer.

His songs speak of hot cars with flames on the side, suburban means to drink coffee houses (looking like the ones he started out playing in) and all of those things mourned for in nostalgia films, books, etc. Yet if you never lived in those days or don't want to remember, they still give you a kick of being new, exciting and different. Tom's an original. A nice guy who's getting somewhere without forgetting where he and his listeners have been.

THE HERITAGE (a folk club in Mission Beach began in the early 60's and closed in 1972):

Lou Curtiss: I know you're from Chula Vista, Hilltop High School. I remember the first hoots at the Heritage. (Hoot is an amateur night where prospective singers perform for free.)

Tom Waits: Right before Bob Labau took over and I was coming down and hooting. I started with Bobby Dylan songs. Was singing a lot like that, but I wasn't writing anything. I was trying to learn some more tunes, more tradit-

ional stuff, to be able to sit in at the Heritage a little better because it didn't seem as though

songwriting was in vogue at the time. I was doing Mississippi John Hurt and that sort of thing.

LC: And you got your first weekend at the Heritage somewhere along that time.

TW: The first weekend I had at the Heritage it was Bob Labau and Tom Waits and we split the bill a couple of times after that. It was

Bob Webb, at first, who gave me a weekend there. I'd been hooting for quite a while and I had a girlfriend who got a job waiting tables too.

So she was kind of putting a good word in for me with Bob and finally he came around and said, "We'll risk it." And I was the doorman and that was one of the important steps for me because I got to listen every weekend. It was

one place you could run into someone you haven't seen in three or four years and that was usually the place you went when you got back in town to see who was in town.

All these people that used to hang out there. When the Heritage

closed it was hard for a long time to even make contact with them and now you can make contact with them at Folk Arts. Some of those nights at the Heritage were just as entertaining as what was going on inside. There was like two shows. There was the people that would come down at night, wouldn't even go inside sometimes.

LC: The joke telling session. Did you ever think of maybe becoming a comedian, a humorist?

TW: It's a better word. It's hard sometimes to get up and just introduce a song as "This one is called..." I feel real shaky about not trying to get a chuckle or two out of an audience. I guess it's

important to make an audience feel at ease. At the same time I think it has to be a spectacle and entertaining as well. You can't get too loose. It's just kind of like sitting

around your living room, but people don't have to pay in their living room and they want a spectacle. I like to pull of some off color, jokes whenever I can. I think the audience feels a lot more at ease if you do.

LC: Now earlier, were you involved in music back in the South Bay?

TW: Various groups, mainly junior high, Doug Surfairs, and Ventures, and Beach Boys, and that sort of thing. Nothing like what I'm trying to do now. Actually, the first songwriters on record, I guess, were James Brown and Ray Charles. The first album I ever bought was "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag." I was going to Farrell Jr. High and James Brown was my idol at the time. But the first real songwriters I came into first-hand contact with were around San Diego. All local people at the Heritage and the Candy Company and the Buck Door and eventually Jack Tempchin, Ray Bieri, and Ted Sajak (credited by LC as being San Diego's first folk songwriter, not living a recluse in Oregon). There weren't that many, but the ones

that were playing here were all worth listening to.

LC: You were just playing guitar then, what got you to switch over to the piano?

TW: I had a couple of friends that played piano and we had one at home but I wouldn't go near it because it scared me to death. I just didn't know how to approach it. I finally broke down and invested a couple of hundred dollars in a piano. Started sitting down, fooling around with it and after about a year or so I started writing on it. Now I write primarily on piano. It provides a lot more freedom for me.

LC: I hear some familiar licks in your piano playing, a little Floyd Cramer involved in there.

TW: Yeah, a little bit of that.

LC: Maybe some ragtime?

TW: I'm real ragged. To use the word ragtime would be about right.

LC: I realized right away that I was I'm just real pedestrian in how I writing standpoint, so when it comes to performing I try to do my best. I am by no means a pianist, but I can pull it off.

TW: At first I met Herb Cohen and he signed me to a songwriting contract. I met him at the Troubadour and then in turn, and myself, took the tape to Asylum records and I was signed for recording. So that's where I am now. I'm under contract for an album a year.

LC: What does it feel like to get into a studio with all this super equipment that you've never seen before?

TW: It was kind of frightening. You just realize how much you have at your disposal. I was fortunate enough to have pretty much my own room in the studio. I had a good group and we got along fine. We had like a week and a half, two weeks of rehearsal and then went right into the studio.

LC: How long did it take to do the album?

TW: About four weeks. One thing I realized right away that I was of being explicit enough in the studio to tell a musician exactly what you want rather than just say "Let's see how it sounds," and give him full rein. Because any time, competent musician in L.A., a



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THE FIRST ALBUM: *Closing Time*

LC: Now, what do you think about the whole deal of making an album and all this stuff? How did it work out?

TW: I'd been living here in San Diego and taking the bus up to the hoots at the Troubadour, sitting out in front and waiting, going up and doing four songs on Monday night as often as I could. They allow you one night a month. At first nobody really knew my face or my name so I could do it twice

or three times. The Troubadour is kind of like a market place, like a slave auction. Everybody's trying to sell what they do.

LC: How did you get in with Asylum records?

studio musician, can play any number of different styles so you have to know exactly what you want and I guess that's the hardest thing. Because you realize that you have all this equipment, you're open for 24 tracks, you can just shoot your rocks. The hardest thing is to be discrete. Definitely a learning experience. I was pleased with it.

TOURING

LC: You've been on the road a lot. How many tours have you done?

TW: I've done two. First one, I went out with a (four piece) group. We rehearsed a week and split to the East coast. I'd played in various groups but it was the first time I was really faced with having a backup band and that was real exciting for me. We did mainly



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