

Glitter & Doom

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Tom Waits Glitter and Doom Tour – 6.26.08 Fox Theatre, St. Louis, MO.

Alas, friends, comrades and fellow musicians – I can finally check off one item on that long list of things to do before I die: Last Thursday night – my longtime friend, co-worker and music aficionado, ‘Tito’ and I witnessed Tom Waits in concert at the beautiful Fox Theatre in St. Louis. It was everything we could have hoped for despite the floodwaters that threatened our journey as highway closings were narrowly avoided towards the Iowa / Missouri border. Thankfully Mother Nature let us pass without so much as a raindrop – or what could have amounted to an incredibly long detour. (Though the black murkiness of the mighty Mississippi loomed ever so near the road the entire distance of the trip – and partially submerged farm buildings made the landscape a grim sight to behold.)

But back to Mr. Waits – who made us wait patiently (well, almost patiently) in our seats until 9 pm before taking the stage. This – a minor inconvenience – as the Fox Theatre is lavishly decorated in an Indian motif that rendered the atmosphere breathtaking. With all the velvet carpet and marble pillars – the winking ruby-eyed lions sculpted out of bronze and intricately cut stone ornaments carved right up to the sky-lit ceilings, one was never at a loss for passing the time in quiet observation. We soaked it all in and conversed with the friendly folks around us as well. (Side note: Waits attracts a crowd unlike any gathering I have been a part of before – there were oddball representatives from every niche of society. This is a topic unto itself.)

Tom took to the stage under eerie lighting – one part moonlit night, one part junkyard spotlight and two parts jukebox barroom glow. It was as surreal as Blue Ruin tobacco and Crows-Wing leather playing cards. The Fox Theatre is not a smoky roadside grease-barn on the outskirts of L.A., but Mr. Waits took great pains to make it seem as if he had just stumbled in off the desert highway caked with dust and in need of a whiskey sour. He quenched redemption in the form of a boot-black microphone all the while stomping on a contraption throughout the show geared up to set off the mechanical clang of a school-bell – one ring per stomp. For the next two-plus hours – we were treated to the glitter and doom that is Tom Waits.

As you can expect – his band was a crew of sublime musicians you probably never even knew existed. Omar Torrez dazzled with beautiful flamenco-styled guitar intros built into

traditional Waits material. Vincent Henry had an arsenal of so many woodwind instruments surrounding him one never knew which he would summon at a given time – except that any of the numerous unidentifiable sounds being laced throughout the music was more than likely coming from that side of the stage. The stand-up bass and drums chugged along like a belching steam locomotive through mountainous terrain. (I also noted that the drummer put away his brushes for much of the set list – a little unusual – but effective in delivering a crack to the usually bristling swagger and swing of the material.) The band assembled rehearsal-style – in a circle – Mr. Waits revolving like a drunken marionette center-stage – ringmaster of a deranged carnivale.

There was no shortage of enthusiasm – both onstage and in the crowd – but seldom have I witnessed such polite and keen listening as at this show. The audience almost never stood – but held unwavering vigil in their seats stage-side as though deep in the grips of a fever dream. Waits barked out tune after tune – often using his voice as the singular percussive instrument that it doubles as. It was well into the set before the stories came – but you knew they would – and as Tom frolicked about at the piano he treated us to some biting anecdotes like the cantankerous old man at the bar who wants to show you his own twist on the quarter and shot-glass trick – for a dollar.

I generally never make a concentrated effort to remember the set-list – but I decided this time to give it a try. What songs I didn't recognize – I named with an appropriate lyrical reference to look up later. ('Lucinda' I had titled as 'William the Pleaser' right off the bat as I couldn't recall the first song.) I later compared my mental notes to someone who posted the night's set-list online – and I fared pretty well.

Some notable standout songs: Falling Down (Tom taking this one back from Scarlett Johansson and Bowie who covered it recently – and a very good rendition they did too, I might add.) Get Behind the Mule – which was unrecognizable for the longest time – nearly a jam of guitar and banjo. Cemetery Polka – The song that instantly made a Tom Waits fan out of me from the very beginning. I hadn't counted on him to pull this one out of his eight-ball bowler. Lost in the Harbour – because of the complex but beautiful passages of this song I wouldn't have thought it could be pulled off live – but what the hell do I know? It was delicious. What's He Building? As creepy and disturbing as the studio version – possibly more so – because we were witnessing the weirdness. The encore featured Anywhere I Lay My Head – as intimate a version as if we were all in Nightingale's (2nd Ave – NYC). Waits invited the crowd to sing along on the closer Innocent When You Dream and that alone was worth the price of admission. (A sing-along to Tom Waits?! Yes – it

happened, I kid you not.)

When the lights went up – Tito and I knew we had witnessed quite a spectacle. Glitter and doom indeed.

Footnote: Though some fans did not appreciate it – I welcomed the anti-scalping approach to selling tickets for the show. Two tickets max per person – and for will-call pickup, ID and the credit card used to purchase the tickets had to be presented at the box office. This approach served the dual purpose of foiling the money-grubbing scalpers and allowing fans who couldn't camp out at the box office or sit online to wait for tickets to go on sale the day of the show to secure seats. I had all but resigned myself to the fact that the show would sell out in seconds – when in fact over a week later there were still some left for the taking. Cheers to that!

A big thank you to Tito for supplying the vehicle, taking care of the gas and ensuring we had plenty to eat and drink before the show (the sneaky bear even picked up the tab for that). All I had to do was drive and show up. The eight hours of our road-trip conversation ended far too soon and bookmarked the 24-hour total trip duration – almost to the minute.

And of course thanks also to my lovely wife for securing the tix and a nearby hotel. She's the bomb when it comes to that stuff.

Big smiles all around! – joe

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1. Lucinda
2. Way Down in the Hole
3. Falling Down
4. Black Market Baby
5. All the World Is Green
6. Hi Ho
7. Get Behind the Mule
8. Day After Tomorrow
9. Cemetery Polka
10. Hang Down Your Head
11. A Little Rain
12. Lucky Day

13. Johnsbury, IL
14. Lost in the Harbour
15. Make It Rain
16. Lie to Me
17. On the Other Side of the World
18. Singapore
19. Dirt in the Ground
20. What's He Building?
21. 16 Shells
22. Rain Dogs / Band Introduction

Encore:

1. Goin' Out West
2. Anywhere I Lay My Head
3. Innocent When You Dream