

CONCERT REVIEW

Tom Waits

(Wiltern Theater; 2200 seats;
\$19.50 top)

With his current tour in support of "Frank's Wild Years," an LP of music drawn from his theatrical play of the same name, Tom Waits, musician, actor, barroom poet and pied piper of the American underbelly, steps out of the streetlight and into the spotlight as a performer of riveting and uncompromised brilliance.

Opening Saturday of his three-night hometown stand at the Wiltern unleashed a gale of ideas that blows most other tickets right off the stage.

Waits' set evolves from the seedy corner lounge of your nightmares, where the drinkers come in at daybreak and the walls crawl by noon. At midnight you've reached the place in Wait's head where the music comes to life.

The stage is nearly dark, the band members barely visible, the only light an angry red from sharply angled panels. The keyboard player wears a fez. The intro is skewed, rumbling bass and menacing saxophone. Waits runs out in a cheap suit carrying a bullhorn and sings "Hang On St. Christopher" through it.

Waits' voice sounds like it comes from an old radio. It sounds like a memory. The band rolls and blares like a blind panel truck with a loose wheel careening through wet streets. Waits moves like a palsied puppet, strings jerking his knees up and his chin away and down. Caruso in a porkpie hat. The night is in his pocket from the first minute.

When the second song is "16 Shells From A Thirty-Ought Six," a harsh, obscure tune from the "Swordfishtrombones" album on which the band's cacophonous attack comes incredibly close to disaster, it is clear there will be nothing safe about the evening.

With acting credits piling up (the films "Rumblefish," "Cotton Club," "Down By Law," "Ironweed" and three months starring in "Frank's Wild Years" with Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater), Waits loads his show with characters — a hellfire preacher from Dallas, a sly, caustic lounge singer ("You people are great. I'd rather be with you people than the finest people in the world"), a gleeful carnival barker.

And, of course, there's Frank — the desperate loser from an anonymous California coastal town (the fictional Rainville) who sets out to take the New York showbiz world by storm. It's Frank Sinatra in the luckless land of the masses — and his shining moment, his champagne and confetti Times Square serenade (Waits' songs "Straight To The Top" and "I'll Take New York" are dark, brilliant parodies of the big time) disintegrates into a nightmare as the band's timing goes awry, the Times Square chimes go berserk, and a caged bulb swings crazily, casting dangerous shadows around the stage as the dream fades.

From that peak, Waits goes to an onstage refrigerator, gets out a Beck's Beer with a light in it, and becomes Frank after his wild years, when he's trying to make it stick as a used-furniture salesman in the San Fernando Valley, with a wife who has a Chihuahua with a skin disease. Inevitably, it doesn't last. One night he off-handedly incinerates the whole setup. ("Somehow the gasoline and rattan furniture got all mixed up together, and they say there was a match involved.")

Stage version is darker and wilder than on "Swordfishtrombones," and in line with Waits' present incarnation, much funnier, for what is most surprising about

Wait's performance dimensions is his wit — his act is loaded with dry, razor-sharp repartee and off-the-cuff stories.

His voices, too, are an endless resource — one minute he's John Lee Hooker, then it's Frank Sinatra at the bottom of a bottle, then Louis Armstrong and Ethel Merman meeting in Hell.

Obscure musical influences rumble through like winds down the alley of an ethnic neighborhood — there are North African horns, Cuban rhythms, American Carnival organs, Irish drinking song sentimentality (Waits boldly led the audience in an unlikely singalong of his "Innocent When You Dream," which falls into the latter category).

Pawnshop instrumentation of his last three albums, from which the new show is entirely drawn, is a tribute to his independence and unhesitance to go after his effect — there are train whistles and bells, various pump organs, even an Optigon, the kind of home organ that creates an orchestra with a floppy disk.

Granted, his jagged and explosive vocals will keep the majority of record buyers away from his work. And he continues to favor them, even though the lush romanticism of the "One From The Heart" soundtrack (a duet with Crystal Gayle) proved his pipes could bring mainstream sales.

But with the current LP and tour, Waits ascends from the admirable integrity of his cult status to the uncrowded platform of showbiz genius. Give the rain-soaked prince his crown. And, to borrow from his lyrics, may the tossed coin land on the edge of the bar, so that he'll keep on talking to us.

Daws.