

# Big Time for Tom Waits: It's a Graveyard Romp

By STEVEN PAGE

Tom Waits plays piano like a skeleton, laying his long, bony fingers across the keys. He dances like a skeleton, limbs bending and twisting in every direction, like a corpse having a party when the cemetery guard is away. Maybe that's what Tom Waits' new film, *Big Time*, really is — a strange and hilarious graveyard romp through the subterranean streets of America.

## Film Review

It takes a while to figure out what the film is about, as it begins with very little concert footage. In fact, the beginning has Waits fiddling with his alarm clock and drifting off to sleep. Then, we are introduced to ... two characters? Three characters? One character? It seems one of these guys is Frank, our pathetic hero. You see, Frank settled down out in the valley, and got sick of it. So, he went on a journey through the sleazy underbelly of the great Amer-



**HITTING THE BIG TIME:** Tom Waits in his fantastic new concert film.

ican inner-city, in search of fame and fortune.

Here we catch up with Frank, hallucinating about the big time, dreaming about a huge show in an oversized concert hall. The music is thick

and funky, and it pulls along like some mad carnival calliope, while Frank stirs in his sleep. Director Chris Blum has done his best to keep the dream-like sensation consistent, concentrating on close-ups of Waits

and, omitting any shots of the audience. Audience? Yes, somewhere in the film is a real, flesh-and-blood concert crowd.

It was October of last year, when Tom Waits played a very similar concert at Massey Hall on the first date of his *Frank's Wild Years* tour. However, whatever story line existed in that concert had remained unclear until I saw *Big Time*. Wow. From the grinding funk of "16 Shells on a Thirty-Ought Six" (complete with amplified foot stomps and Frank's off-tempo banging on the theatre's water pipes), to the poignancy of "Time," or "Cold, Cold Ground," Tom Waits had the audience completely riveted. We wanted to clap after each song. And dance. He really makes you want to get up and dance; you've got to stop yourself from doing the Watusi, for example, to the siren-infested "Hang On St. Christopher."

And how about Tangos? We've got Tangos, too — the swooning "Rain Dogs," which slowly perverts itself into some sort of pagan polka, makes one long for the lost days of the Pig and Whistle.

One of the most memorable moments from Waits' last Toronto appearance was a blistering version of James Brown's "Papa's Got A Brand New Bag." It doesn't, however, appear in the film, or on the accompany album. Mind you, some wonderful alternative cover versions do crop up occasionally, such as snatches of "Chantilly Lace," thrown into "Telephone Call From Istanbul," probably the best piece in the movie. This *must* be the Boogey Man's idea of rock and roll — he even uses a mechanic's lamp as a maraca, and features what should be the most-quoted line in all history: "Never trust a man in a blue trench-coat/ Never drive a car when you're dead."

Frank's shining moments occur when he dons his dinner jacket and does his best Vegas routine. He tinkles the ivories with jarring dissonance, tells jokes, and plays "old favourites" that no one has ever heard. Grinding obscenely, he sings some terrible gems like "Straight To The Top." Then, as Frank sings "I'll Take New York," we see his pathetic fall from sub-grace in living Super-8 colour, complete with coughs, bangs, crashes, sirens, and gunshots.

The film is not just for Tom Waits fans. *Big Time* is so good, it goes up there with Talking Heads' *Stop Making Sense* as one of the best concert films around. Now I've got to thinking, perhaps this is what Led Zepelin tried to do with those dream sequences in *The Song Remains The Same*?

Who knows? All that counts is that this is a terribly intriguing film by one of the most innovative pop musicians of the decade.

## Jim: living with AIDS

By LORRAYNE C. ANTHONY

The impact of AIDS on the lives of its victims, their families, and friends, is documented in June Callwood's latest book, *Jim: A Life with AIDS*.

Callwood, author of *Twelve Weeks in Spring*, is a journalist who currently writes weekly articles for the *Globe and Mail*. She is founding member of Casey House, a hospice in Toronto for people with AIDS.

## Book Review

Through AIDS patient Jim St. James, Callwood not only accounts the physical and emotional impacts of the disease, but the financial aspects as well. She says that people with AIDS become too weak to work, and are soon faced with financial problems. These people must worry about rent money while also struggling with death.

Callwood traces Jim's childhood and his struggle between religion and sexuality. Attempting to escape his homosexuality, Jim got into a marriage which ended badly. He could no longer deny his sexuality, and threw himself into bouts of promiscuity followed by severe guilt, since his religion did not accept homosexuality.

In 1984, when Jim was diagnosed with AIDS, he turned to the faith of the Jehovah Witnesses. They not only turned against him, but forced his family to sever all ties with him. Many of his old friends and lovers were diagnosed with AIDS. As he helplessly watched friends die, constantly being reminded of what lay ahead for him, he found that he could help AIDS victims in a support group. He helped establish the Toronto Persons with AIDS Foundation and now acts as a spokesman for people with AIDS.

A highlight of *Jim: A Life With AIDS* is chapter seven, which gives an accurate and detailed account of the history of the AIDS virus as well as current studies. The book is worth buying for this chapter alone.



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