



**The Black Rider**  
Tom Waits  
(A & M)

Tom Waits continues to confound with his latest release, *The Black Rider* (2), another foray into theatre. Waits' actual albums over the past decade (his last one, *Bone Machine*, *Rain Dogs* and *Swordfishtrombones*) have been remarkably consistent, but soundtracks and musical plays like *Frank's Wild Years*, *Big Time* and now *The Black Rider* have cluttered his output.

A collection of demented junkyard pastiches, *The Black Rider's* clash between its innocent carnival atmosphere and Waits' perverse accompaniment is interesting, and the lyrics are as weird and wonderful as ever. This guy is undoubtedly an American original. But as a piece of music this is extremely unpleasant stuff, formless and loaded with filler. Waits seems to be daring us to keep listening. You win, Tom. Only Waits' fanatics--if such creatures do exist--need apply. Nonetheless, that the man can keep making such a godawful racket on a major record label remains an inspiration.

But *The Black Rider* wasn't a complete bust: at one point Tom is laying on the loverman schmooze in that voice that drives the little girls wild and actually gives out his phone number and says, "Call anytime." So I did. I decided to call up Tom and ask him why his new album is such a stinker. I picked a prominent American area code and dialled the seven digits. The following--an X-Press exclusive--is a conversation between me and an annoyed American.

**Him:** Hello.

**Me:** Hi, is Tom there? I'm supposed to see him tonight on a downtown train.

**Him:** Oh Jesus, another goddamn--

**Me:** Hey, we're supposed to go out west where the winds blow tall. I'm bringing a Jersey girl and--

**Him:** [hangs up]

**Duets**  
Frank Sinatra  
(EMI)

Duet albums are more about marketing than music: a bunch of bankable names slapped together with little consideration given to musical compatibility or simply if they'll sound ridiculous together. It's the musical equivalent of an all-star game. Hoping to stuff a few stockings, Frank Sinatra and Elton John linked up with a host of singers and released two identically titled albums just prior to the holidays.

Frank Sinatra's *Duets* (3.5) is especially ill-conceived. These aren't actually duets at all: the singers never shared the studio with Sinatra. Perhaps Sinatra's parts were recorded first and then the guests simply sang along, since

**Duets**  
Elton John  
(MCA)

Sinatra generally seems oblivious to the fact that there's another singer accompanying him. In recent years, Sinatra has become increasingly self-mythologizing, living, breathing nostalgia. The underlying message of this collection of staples (complete with a cover painting of the young, heart-throb Sinatra) is clear: the old Sinatra is irrelevant, just

pretend he's young and beautiful. With 1980's *Trilogy*, Sinatra accepted the aging process and asserted his continued vitality. Here, he seems to have accepted his obsolescence and is content to reminisce.

But as far as nostalgia goes, it doesn't come any better. Probably because this really is a very quirky album, more so than anyone involved with it had any idea, I'm sure. Bono and Sinatra? It's absolutely bizarre. The expert accompaniment is lively and inventive, while pure enough in its execution to never sound like self-parody. And, needless to say, the songs are pretty resilient.

Depending on how cynical you are, Sinatra's *Duets* is either a pathetic display of coat-tail riding by a washed-up irrelevance or a delightfully, if unintentionally, surreal piece of nostalgia.

Elton John's *Duets* (3) is clearly a more collaborative affair rather than a collection of hired guns. John is good at what he does: schmaltz. On the up-tempo material he flounders in house beats and other contemporary trappings (excepting "Teardrops" with k.d. lang), but on the slower fare he can stretch out and emote: "Love Letters" with Bonnie Raitt, who seems to get better with age; "Born to Lose," which makes the best of Leonard Cohen's one-dimensional capabilities; and his live duet with George Michael on "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me," which generates genuine, hammy heat. All the standard objections apply: he can't keep his hands off the studio gadgetry, when he happens upon a good melody he often rams it home without shame, his hair looks ridiculous. Tuneful, pleasant and completely and totally disposable.



**Super Black Market Clash**  
The Clash  
(Sony)

*Super Black Market Clash* (3) includes all of 1980's *Black Market Clash*, plus an assortment of more odds and ends. The early stuff exudes all the band's original arrogant spirit, but the songs are only of marginal interest. The progression of the album is quite depressing, moving into dance remixes of "Rock the Casbah" and "The Magnificent Seven." It's a little like watching Elvis get puffy and croak. *Super Black Market Clash* is neither awful nor essential. Fans will be satisfied.

**"Land," single**  
Crash Vegas, Hothouse  
Flowers, Daniel Lanois &  
band, Midnight Oil, &  
The Tragically Hip  
(MCA)

"Land" (2) is a benefit single performed by the members of last summer's Another Roadside Attraction tour: Crash Vegas, Daniel Lanois, Midnight Oil, The Tragically Hip and Hothouse Flowers. The proceeds of the single's sales go to the Clayoquot

**Red House Painters**  
Red House Painters  
(Polygram)

Red House Painters immediately recall those other connoisseurs of ethereal gloom, The American Music Club. Red House Painters' sound is less expansive, less detailed and even more glum--it also must be said that they're considerably less interesting. *Red House Painters* (3), one of the group's two albums from 1993 (this is the more manageable 45-minute affair), moves at a glacial pace and may actually be the most depressed album ever released. The more direct appeal of songs like "New Jersey" and a radical reinterpretation of "I am a Rock" provide relief, though, and the album is hypnotic and absorbing (or self-absorbed). The album's sense of mystery extends to its booklet--no pictures of the band, no thank-yous, no credits, nothing but a couple of gloomy photos. Engrossing stuff--if you're in the mood.

**RATINGS:**

5-holy  
biscuits  
4-la-ti-da  
3-not bad  
2-not  
good  
1-bleah

Defense Fund protecting Canadian rain forests. A noble cause, but as is often the case, the music is secondary. Voices pop in and out of the mix in polite order, not unlike, say, "We Are the World." "Land" simply sounds to much like a benefit song: embarrassing earnesty, no interplay between the artists, a lame song (though I do give it extra marks for having guitars). Preachy and dull. If you believe in the cause just donate the money; don't let your good conscience con you into buying a bad record.

**Correction**

In the "Top 20" best-of appearing in the last issue of the X-Press two artists were accidentally bobbed: The Juliana Hatfield Three's *Become What You Are* appeared at number twenty on the list, rather than Liz Phair's *Exile in Guyville*. Phair's original rating of 3.5 should have been upgraded to 4, while Hatfield's original rating of 4 should have become 3.5.