

folk songs at a Delaware boarding school to dementia onstage at the Cellar Door. How does Wainwright see his own changes?

"I would say there's probably been a lot more emphasis on humor. There was humor there but it was submerged; it's out front now. The other thing about the songs, the serious nature—I still think my songs are serious, but maybe that's more submerged."

Over the years, Wainwright has made the fairly common slide from an acoustic, "folk" sound (he credits Ramblin' Jack Elliot as his major early influence) to fairly hard rock. There's no doubt that his music is more "interesting"—if that means commercially accessible—than it was 8 years ago. (He tells me *Final Exam* is getting a lot of airplay.) His early songs were willing to fool your brain, but you had to put your brain within reach. His newest music comes looking for you, with a driving beat. What about words?

"The words are very important, and I like it if people—if the words can get to them. But overall, I've come to the point where if somebody asks me what I do, I say I'm an entertainer. 'Cause people are paying money to come and see me, and my responsibility is to entertain. If, in the act of entertaining them, I happen to inform them, or move them, or alienate them, or whatever it is that I do—that's great, too. That can be very exciting. But the overall thing is I'm an entertainer, and I think that's a very honorable profession."

We talk about critics and reviews again; Wainwright is very wary of them.

"The longer you play," he explains, "the more input you get about yourself; I can really understand how people get to the point where they don't read reviews about themselves. The good reviews can be just as confusing as the bad ones; when I first came out people

started to say I was one of the new Bob Dylans." He rolls his eyes. "Something like that is so—ridiculous; if you dwell on it..." He shakes his head.

"I'm aware of what my audience generally thinks of me," he continues. "We have a relationship, and I suppose it would be great if I could just clear my head of everything, every review I've ever read of myself, every comment that somebody has laid on me backstage, every heckler that's ever yelled something—but there's no way I can do that."

Fresh out of boarding school, Wainwright shook his fist at the sky and yelled for revenge in a piercing nasal whine. He is now, to my surprise, a pretty good singer; he has learned to shoop, growl and boom with the best of them. The humor is up and the anger is down. If he has a theme right now, perhaps it is not vengeance but anxiety; a thread of sardonic queasiness runs through "Final Exam," "Fear with Flying," "The Heckler," and not surprisingly, "Natural Disaster." He still knows how to be grim as hell, but even when he's grim he's flip:

*Strewn along some runway  
Or squashed against a mountain  
There are so many other ways  
I'd rather go and count them*

It should be mentioned, though, that he has one unabashedly emotional song, "Pretty Little Martha;" it's played absolutely straight with no accompaniment except Wainwright on drop-thumb banjo.

As for the anger and revenge: "I'm not as angry as I was; I guess it's as simple as that. Although—I don't even know if that's true. I guess I just don't choose to express whatever anger it is I have. Again, I'm older now. I'm a not-so-angry, not-so-young man. there's

still anger there, everybody's angry, but I don't feel I have to write what it was like to go to boarding school. Because I already did that. I'm excited about making good rock and roll records."

Isn't that a long way from Jack Elliot? "Everything changes," says Wainwright. "I can't not change. There's probably gonna be a lot of different things. Maybe I'll wind up making voice and guitar records. I've had fantasies about—" (long pause) "—becoming a Senator." He laughs. "Ah, not really. It might be fun to try to write a musical comedy. I'm up for anything."

By his own admission, Wainwright's evolution from "School Days" to "Watch

Me Rock I'm Over Thirty" has something to do with a drift away from "poetry" toward "entertainment." He almost says that the show is more important than the substance. I think back to a song on *Album III*, released in 1973:

*Welcoming change  
Changes arrange your  
arrangement  
Well, they're supposed to  
Believe it or not,  
notwithstanding your lot  
The lot that you've  
got stands for you  
Please remember my song  
Please remember my song ●*

## Van Zandt on Life as a Joke That May Not Be Very Funny

By Mike Joyce

ON STAGE TOWNES VAN ZANDT often spices his set with jokes in a "here's another one you won't like" monotone. On his recently released live album on Tomato records he slides out of Bo Diddley's "Who Do You Love" with a tale of two drunks who are arguing over whether it's the sun or moon that hovers above them and illuminates their path. Convinced of their respective views, they decide to settle the matter by conferring with yet another wino, who, as you may have guessed, disqualifies himself on the grounds that he's new in the neighborhood. Van Zandt delivers the punchline with the enthusiasm and expectation of Rodney Dangerfield.

Off stage Townes is equally subdued. When he last appeared in DC at the Childe Harold he spoke of some of his

influences with all the interest of a condemned man. It was only when I mentioned the reclusive Lightning Hopkins that a sly smile crossed his otherwise expressionless face.

"Reclusive," he cracked. "No, not at all, all you have to do is lower yourself to the level of pitiful. I've met him about twenty times and I think he even knows who I am now."

In light of Van Zandt's peculiar recording history one can easily understand Lightning's memory lapse. From the beginning Townes' work has been closely associated with Kevin Eggars, who founded Poppy records and now heads Tomato. "Kevin was starting a record company," Townes recalls, "a people's record company and I'm a people's folksinger and he could never get his distribution straight. He didn't have enough

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