

STREET SCENE

Rufus Wainwright carves out his own musical style

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Since tickling the ivories for a Gap commercial, Rufus Wainwright has been a busy man. He's told his story over and over again - growing up the son of folk singers Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle, being an openly homosexual male and writing Broadway-style torch songs. But to Wainwright, it never gets old. "Oh yeah, oh yeah," he said with a sarcastic sigh. "Eleven interviews today. I never cease to amaze myself. My story deserves

to be told over and over," the emotion in his voice rising like a crescendo. Things haven't always been this crazy for Wainwright. His self-titled debut album (DreamWorks) got off to a slow start but things picked up when DreamWorks started pushing the record and the album fought Lauryn Hill's "The Miseducation of..." for the top of critics' year-end lists. "It did quite well when it first came out in terms of critical acclaim. It took a dive for a bit and it's interesting because a lot of that had to do with the record

company because they're such a new company. They were still growing," he said. "I was the second person signed. Part of it was I think people had to see the show first. That's how they got it." One social class who "got it" was teenage girls who prefer his good looks, showmanship and "you've stomped on my heart" lyrics - all knowing he is gay. "It's funny. I really gravitate toward women more than men. I'm sexually attracted to men, but I have a very relaxed relationship with a lot of women. Men kind of scare me (because of sexual tension and all of that stuff)," Wainwright said. "I'm quite shy actually when it comes to all of that stuff (dating). I don't feel threatened with women. That's probably why a lot of women like coming to the show. May be it's sexual, they think I'm cute, or they might like the show. But I'm more relaxed about it."

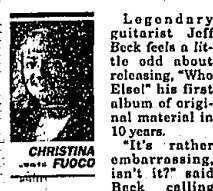
Wainwright's lyrics are tender and heartbreaking. "April Fools" is a bouncy rip on a former lover: "And you will believe in love/ And all that it's supposed to be/ But just until the fish start to smelt/ And you're struck down by a hammer." "In My Arms" featuring background vocals by his sister, Martha, and percussion by Sarah McLachlan's husband/drummer Ash Sood, takes the listener by the heart and twists it like a wet rag. "Looking at hospitals Victorian/ Feeling as helpless as the Elephant Man/ Wish you were here/ to chain you up without shame/ In my arms tonight."

For "Rufus Wainwright," the singer/pianist chose songs from a pool of 57 written within the last several years. "I've been writing it since I was 17 or 18. ... It was quite hard (to choose the songs). There are certain songs that I wish had made it on the record, which will make it on the next one. One song, for instance, "Liberty Cabbage," which was the first song I ever wrote, I hope that makes it on the record." Admitting to not knowing "much about pop," he looked to music industry executive Lenny Waronker and producer Jon Brion to help him choose songs. "I would have loved to have done a record that was all weird, all the bizarre songs that I enjoy that aren't perhaps as accessible with a pop record. But you really have to listen to other people."

Wainwright said he didn't feel bad giving in to the record company's demands. After all, "when you're sitting in some gorgeous office with Lenny Waronker and he's telling you that you're going to sell millions of copies and then you'll be a millionaire, it's not much of a bummer." While some musicians would never admit to getting a record deal thanks to their parents, Wainwright steps forward. Loudon Wainwright gave his son's demo tape to Beach Boys lyricist Van Dyke Parks who helped him ink a deal with DreamWorks. Ironically, Loudon Wainwright said during an interview with The Observer & Eccentric Newspapers last year that he wasn't thrilled about his son diving into the music business. Rufus Wainwright, laughing, called his dad a "liar."

In building his musical career, Wainwright took characteristics from both parents. "I was really influenced by them, more by watching their shows. They put on great shows. They are both diametrically opposed. My father's very brash and kind of loud and funny, whereas my mother's quite soft-spoken and sentimental on stage. I think in songwriting I take more after my mother. On stage, I take after my father in terms of on stage persona and dealing with the audience." His primary focus, however, is to render the listener helpless and take over their senses. "The ideas that I used were to, essentially seduce the listener, whether they liked it or not. Now, especially in these times, that's not being done a lot. There's just plain old songs. This is a melodic kind of thing that is not afraid to be extravagant. I had that in mind."

'Guitar lunacy' rules



Legendary guitarist Jeff Beck feels a little odd about releasing "Who Else?" his first album of original material in 10 years. "It's a rather embarrassing, isn't it?" said Beck calling

mer Group in 1977. As Beck puts it, the two returned to him for financial reasons. They both have families and don't have the luxury of sitting around waiting for me. They can't sit around like the old days when we always just went hungry. He's (Hammer) got plenty of work to get on with in the meantime. I have to choose my moment when I can grab him to write for me. This has all taken time to plot together."

Jeff Beck performs at 8 p.m. Friday, March 26, at the Fox Theatre, 2211 Woodward Ave., Detroit. Tickets are \$32.50 and \$40. For more information, call (248) 645-6666.

Y2K rock

Ted Nugent's retirement didn't last long. He and Metallica's Jason Newsted announced Friday that they will play the Pontiac Silverdome on the eve of the millennium.

"Even though I attempted to retire earlier this year, it sucked," Nugent said. "The creative juices with the Damo Yankees and with my band were unstoppable. When Jason called me to do security for this concert, I decided I should bring my guitar. Instead of just making sure everything went smoothly, I should probably just play."

Bringing the millennium concert to the Silverdome was Newsted's idea. He is originally from Gull Lake, near Kalamazoo.

"Everybody wants to do a big thing on this date, as far as entertainers are concerned. What it comes right down to is if you have to pick a half dozen places to play in North America, chances are two to three of them will be within a 300-400 mile radius of right here," Newsted said.

Ticket prices weren't announced but Newsted said they will be "at least one," meaning \$100. Tickets will go on sale Oct. 23.

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