

# FORUM

University of Edinburgh  
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts  
Issue 05 | Autumn 2007

<b>Title</b>	Musical Apocalypse: Tom Waits' <i>Bone Machine</i>
<b>Author</b>	Angela Jones
<b>Publication</b>	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
<b>Issue Number</b>	05
<b>Issue Date</b>	Autumn 2007
<b>Publication Date</b>	12/12/2007
<b>Editors</b>	Jack Burton & Hanna Sommerseth

*FORUM* claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise *FORUM* as the original publisher.

## **Musical Apocalypse: Tom Waits' *Bone Machine***

Angela Jones – (University of Western Australia)

Apocalypse derives from the Greek *apocalypsis*, meaning the act of uncovering, unveiling, or revelation (Frye 135, Derrida 64). It has been suggested that originally apocalypse did not embody the concepts of violence and destruction, which we now come to associate with it;<sup>1</sup> however, at least since its inception as a distinctive genre, it has also come to entail an “end-of-history scenario” which involves not only revelation but catastrophe, destruction, and disaster (Boyarin 42). While the apocalyptic theme or genre continues to inform and inspire a number of different media and discourses into the twenty-first century, the representation of apocalypse within popular music remains a largely overlooked field of enquiry.<sup>2</sup> Therefore in this paper I would like to discuss Tom Waits' 1992 CD, *Bone Machine*, as a popular musical rendition of the apocalyptic theme, in order to explore what the apocalyptic might *sound* like, were it to be rendered musically. To do so, I will be drawing on Jacques Derrida's essay “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” in which he formulates an idea of the apocalyptic as “*tone*”: the “revelator of some unveiling in process” (84). This idea of an apocalyptic tone destabilizes and undermines some of the dominant assumptions central to narrative-based understandings of Apocalypse; and indeed, my analysis aims to foreground the ways in which *Bone Machine* enables an original and, at times, subversive musical perspective on what has proven to be a remarkably resilient cultural theme.

### **Derrida's “Apocalyptic Tone”**

To begin with, it is necessary to clarify what Derrida means by an “apocalyptic tone;” however, he is explicitly resistant to providing an absolute definition. On the contrary, he suggests that as soon as any conventions were established, the apocalyptic tone would be precisely that which disrupts and destabilizes them. The tone consists of only so many interruptions and fluctuations: “a *Verstimmung* multiplying the voices and making the tones shift” (83). Nonetheless, for the sake of illustrating what he means by an

apocalyptic tone, he allows us to “imagine” that there is such a thing as “*an* apocalyptic tone, a unity of the apocalyptic tone” (83). In this (impossible) case, he contends:

Whosoever takes on the apocalyptic tone comes to signify to, if not tell, you something. What? The truth, of course, and to signify to you that it reveals the truth to you; the tone is the revelator of some unveiling in process. Not only truth as the revealed truth of a secret on the end or of the secret of the end. Truth itself is the destination, and that truth unveils itself as the advent of the end (84).

The apocalyptic tone is that which signifies that it reveals the truth – whatever that truth might be. That is, the tone reveals that it reveals; it signifies that it is in the act of unveiling and that this unveiling is the ‘truth.’ This revelation, however, is a process that is endless; the end never comes, or rather, is always, already coming. Far from revealing *the* truth or *the* end, the apocalyptic tone constantly defers and obfuscates, unravelling and disrupting ostensibly straightforward transmissions to reveal the sites at which they break down, and moving in the in-between spaces where clear-cut distinctions intersect and collide. Indeed, what Derrida is effectively arguing for in this essay is not some idea of a preordained Truth or God that will be uncovered at the end of this revelatory process, but rather that the process itself *is* the revelation, the unveiling gesture is apocalyptic. Thus, what is apocalyptic here is not something that will be uncovered at the very end, and which the revelatory gesture seeks to show through its unveiling, but rather the tone itself, the tone that signifies that it is in the act of revealing. *The tone is a gesture in terms of delivery, and this gesture is apocalyptic.*

This apocalyptic gesture culminates for Derrida in the word “come” or “*viens*,” which is both the ultimate limitation and the site of an opening – an issue I will return to in my discussion of *Bone Machine*’s fourth track, “All Stripped Down.” What makes Derrida’s essay so compelling for a ‘reading’ of *Bone Machine* as a musical representation of apocalypse is the way it disrupts understandings of the apocalyptic genre which are dependent on genre-specific imagery or a familiar narrative trajectory (wherein the apocalypse is equated with ‘The End’), in order to focus on the apocalyptic as a distinctive mode of delivery or tone.<sup>3</sup> This, in turn, allows for a discussion of *Bone Machine* which does not simply engage with the (admittedly abundant) eschatological imagery of the lyrics, but rather with how the sound of the album and Waits’ vocal delivery might be heard as apocalyptic. I would like to briefly engage with the album as a

'whole' – its overall sound, production and artwork – before moving on to examine how such elements can be interpreted as constructing an apocalyptic tone on two tracks: *Earth Died Screaming* and *All Stripped Down*. While I will be attending to the lyrics in each case, what I am primarily interested in foregrounding is how the organization of sounds on *Bone Machine* can be heard as delivering a popular musical re-presentation of apocalypse; and I believe that Derrida's formulation of the apocalyptic as *tone* provides an illuminating vantage point from which to do so.

### ***Bone Machine***

The cover artwork of *Bone Machine* features a black-and-white, close-up image of Waits' face frozen into a contorted howl, surrounded by a blurry black-and-white background. The sense of shadows and depth created by the interplay of darkness and light, combined with the blurriness of the shot, makes it appear as though he is momentarily suspended in a deep, dark tunnel before being sucked down into a vortex of glaring white light. He is wearing what looks like a skull-cap with horns, his eyes covered by protective goggles like the kind one would wear when operating a blow torch. The goggles reflect nothing but more light, like that of the light behind/below him, contrasting with the black pit of his mouth, framed like a smaller, blacker version of the tunnel surrounding him. The soundless scream and blank goggles suggest a kind of gaping emptiness: a void. Unlike Edvard Munch's famous painting, *The Scream*, the surrounding space around Waits is not buckling and warping through the intensity of the screamer's anguish. There is none of the technicolour brilliance of Munch's painting here either: darkness and light have been reduced to nothing more than shades of black and white. It is, indeed, a void.

Across the upper and lower right-hand corners the words "Tom Waits" and "Bone Machine" are scrawled in spiky white letters; the scratchy, almost child-like lettering, occasionally mixing upper and lower case, printed in a brilliant white against a black background. The letters are smudged and blurry at the edges, glowing like a faint satellite transmission or an SOS; you can almost hear the words crackling and hissing. From the back-cover image of Waits wearing protective goggles and gloves, his profile blurring, smoke-like, into a white background, wielding his guitar like a weapon or a tool; to the

images of industrial machinery, engines and smoke that recur throughout the CD booklet. The sleeve-artwork can be seen as evoking an aura of white-heat, sheet metal and crackling electricity: a machine. Yet, as the title suggests, it is an animalistic machine, a *bone* machine, and I would argue that in fusing seemingly disparate entities or ideas, drawing attention to the points at which ostensibly clear-cut boundaries and distinctions merge and intersect, *Bone Machine*, like Derrida's apocalyptic tone, can be heard as "the revelator of some unveiling in process."

Sonically, the album registers this idea of an ongoing, simultaneously corrosive and revelatory tone by constructing and dismantling dialogues between multiple discourses and genres, playing with the intersection at which noise coheres into recognisable musical structures, and music dissolves back into the noise from whence it came. Much of the album is produced in such a way that it sounds as if it is in the process of falling apart while it is being built: tracks bleed into one another, lyrical and melodic motifs recur throughout the album, and songs are recorded so that they seem to be growing out the remnants of the last, making it difficult to tell where one track ends and the next begins. One review at the time of *Bone Machine*'s release described this effect:

Many of the songs begin with rough sounds of instruments struggling to find their place before locking in step to play together, and just as many end with the instruments collapsing separately. The percussion, often played by Waits himself, is (to put it mildly) loose, though oddly compelling. The effect is similar to listening to street recordings of parade music, where the sounds build slowly, come together, and then pass by (Pick 160).

The album *sounds* as if it is self-reflexively stripping itself back and exposing its own processes: a skeletal framework that is registered through an emphasis on rhythm and hollow-sounding acoustics. The shambling percussive backbone of the songs is pushed up in the mix, turning the songs inside-out and making rhythm the raw focal point. But all this skeletal framework reveals, in the end, is itself: an unstable structure constantly in the process of being built up and stripped away.

### ***Earth Died Screaming***

This emphasis on rhythm as an unstable ‘skeletal structure,’ is set up with the album’s opening track: *Earth Died Screaming*. This track is recorded so that the percussion fades in, with the ostensibly random tinkering and clanking growing louder to create a sense of sonic spatiality, with the sound gradually moving from the background into the foreground. It is as if a small procession, rattling cans and tapping sticks, is emerging from a distance and rapidly moving in to surround the listener. As the percussion reaches its maximum volume the auditory impression is that “The Boners” – the name given to the percussionists in the liner notes – are upon the listener, surrounding him or her,<sup>4</sup> and it is at this point that a bass and electric guitar are added to the mix and a rhythmic structure ‘emerges’ from the seemingly random percussion. The sound fills out, and the lyrics begin:

Rudy’s on the midway  
And Jacob’s in the hole  
The monkey’s on the ladder  
The devil shovels coal  
With crows big as airplanes  
The lion has three heads  
And someone will eat the skin that he sheds

As the title suggests, *Earth Died Screaming* lyrically sets up the apocalyptic theme in fairly unambiguous terms, alluding directly to *Revelation* and other Biblical prophecies in its evocation of the end of the world. Hence, the cataclysmic floods and storms, mutants and beasts, forecasts of doom and devastation, all piled up on top of one another to create a hysterical picture of a world going to ruin. In an interview with the film director Jim Jarmusch, Waits even went so far as to cite secondary sources for the character of “Rudy” who appears “on the midway” in the opening line, claiming that it belongs to one of “the lost books of Bible”: “the Book of Rudy” which, he argues, is “still being held in a library somewhere in Russia” (182) However, I am less concerned here with the significance and authority of these allusions than with their use within a performative popular musical context. And, as we shall see, this transposition into a pop musical context is rendered explicitly in the transition from verse to chorus.

As the chorus of *Earth Died Screaming* begins, the song appears to shift gears without actually changing key or timing; a second bass guitar is added to the mix and the

instruments lock together to form a steady percussive beat. Waits' voice rises into a higher register and bellows:

Well the earth died screaming  
While I lay dreaming  
Well the earth died screaming  
While I lay dreaming, dreaming of you

Compared with the raspy vocal delivery and the rambling percussion and instrumentation of the verses, the chorus is a veritable 'sing-along,' its catchy tune and repetitive lyrics reminiscent of the kind of chant one might sing at a sporting event. Indeed, there is almost a joyfulness or playfulness to the chorus which is exemplified by the line: "While I lay dreaming of you." Waits' voice hangs on this last line ("dreaming of you"), converting it into a croon, and doubling up as a *soto* backing vocal, further cementing the rather sentimental twist this final line adds to the song.

"The earth died screaming while I lay dreaming of you"? In what context could this be taken as anything other than a startlingly flippant or whimsical response to the end of the world? The most obvious answer is: within a popular musical context, and it could no doubt work to cement the antiquated belief that popular music is 'narcissistic,' 'standardized,' 'sentimental,' and utterly incapable of dealing with the kinds of 'real' issues raised in other, more serious art-forms.<sup>5</sup> Or perhaps this "standardized" lyric is being held up or "framed" for ridicule, quoted in an act of "postmodernist irony;" a step-up from standardized lyrics only insofar as it is "a more sophisticated way of avoiding the question of modern life" (Scruton 493), but narcissistic and sentimental all the same. Or, finally, it could be an instance of what Frederic Jameson refers to as "pastiche" or "blank irony," wherein the "satirical impulse" has been lost (5); no longer "avoiding the question of modern life" so much as missing the question altogether.

To begin with, I do think the line "While I lay dreaming of you" is being framed and distanced from the rest of the lyrics, but not in terms of semantic meaning. Rather, the framing is enacted in the *delivery*, and this is essential to understanding how popular music, and hence a popular musical rendition of Apocalypse, is unique or different from other kinds of texts. When listening to the song, the line does not obviously jar or sound 'false,' and I do not find it to be delivered ironically or playfully. In fact, where Waits'

delivery through the verses is wizardly and dramatic, as if playacting the role of apocalyptic prophet, in the chorus his voice rises into a pained, guttural bellow suggesting a shift in emphasis: the apocalyptic imagery he relays does not rattle him so much as the realisation that the “earth died screaming, while I lay dreaming of you.” And the way Waits croons this final line, holding the “you,” not only suggests sincerity (according to the conventions of certain pop music genres) but also indicates that this line is different or special – that this may, indeed, be *the* dominant sentiment to the song.<sup>6</sup>

In moving from one language to another – from the apocalyptic language of the verses to the love lyrics in the chorus – Waits’ vocal performance could be interpreted as a way of drawing attention to his own delivery, and to the tension between the meaning of words when spoken/written and their meaning when delivered musically. In order to understand how this works, it is necessary to recognise how *sung* language is different from the same language when used in other kinds of contexts. As popular music theorist Simon Frith argues: “to sing words is to elevate them in some way, to make them special, to give them a new form of intensity” (172). That is, to sing words is already to have framed them, to hold them up and use them in an unusual way. In putting words to music we are taking them out of their everyday context and putting them in a performative, musical context in which meaning is not just semantic but sonic, determined not only by what the words ‘say’ but also by how they are delivered. Thus, what a word signifies in a book, on a billboard, or in ‘everyday’ speech, may take on an entirely different meaning when sung. According to Frith it follows that: “There is [...] an inevitable tension in the popular lyric between its colloquial vernacular language and its use in a “heightened,” elevated way, framed by music. A pop song is ordinary language put to extraordinary use” (168). This “tension” would not be possible unless there was a disjunction between words as spoken or written, and words as sung or performed, and what they signify in these different contexts. The “tension” is what bridges this disjunction, and it is possible for singers or songwriters to make this tension more or less noticeable by drawing attention to the delivery – to the way in which the tone of an utterance frames and impacts on the meaning of the lyrics.

This idea of “tension” is also important to Derrida’s explication of an apocalyptic tone. Indeed, as Derrida suggests, the tone of an utterance (whether written or spoken) is

a form of tension: it is that which bonds one thing to another, the signifier to its “original reference” (68). Derrida continues: “The tone’s pitch is tied to tension; it has a bond to the bond, to the bond’s more or less tight tension” (69). This pitch signifies how tight or loose the tonal bond is which secures a name to its thing. Thus it is apparent that tone can be disguised; it can be made more or less inaudible or neutralized, in order to secure the tension between sign and thing, and so guarantee the straightforward transmission of an utterance. On the other hand, by being made explicit (for example by the slackening of tension, or by a feverish pitch), tone can also get in the way of a transmission, hence increasing the possibility for miscommunication and subjective interference.

Derrida argues that tone must be considered “distinguishable from all discursive content” (84), and that such an “attention to tone, which is not just style, seems rather rare to me” (66). On the contrary, I would argue that Derrida’s formulation of tone, and his insistence on tone as distinct from, and potentially disruptive of, “discursive content” is not particularly foreign or strange to those popular music studies which have attempted to move beyond the strict analysis of pop lyrics. As Frith has consistently argued, while pop lyrics are certainly important to audiences, critics, and the musicians themselves, and are deserving of critical analysis,<sup>7</sup> it is nonetheless imperative to recognise that in popular music the words are only one part of the way a song communicates, and their meaning depends very much on the way in which they are used: how they are sung or delivered in the context of the other sounds that form part of the song’s entire delivery (Frith 163-4). Frith writes:

in listening to the lyrics of pop songs we actually hear three things at once: *words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves “meaningful,” signs of persons and personality (Frith 159).

And, as Derrida suggests in his essay, any one of these things – words, rhetoric or voice – “can always contradict, deny, make drift, derive, or derail the other” (Derrida 84). Thus the idea that the tone of a song’s delivery is capable of impacting on the meaning of a lyric, and potentially destabilising what that lyric might mean when written or spoken, is not at all unfamiliar to popular music.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, in arguing for *Bone Machine* as a popular musical transposition of the apocalyptic genre, I am not only talking about the lyrics, although lyrically a song like “Earth Died Screaming” certainly fits the characteristics commonly ascribed to the apocalyptic genre:

There was thunder  
There was lightning  
Then the stars went out  
And the moon fell from the sky  
It rained mackerel  
It rained trout  
And the great day of wrath has come  
And here’s mud in your big red eye  
The poker’s in the fire  
And the locusts take the sky

Indeed, in terms of the conventions of the apocalyptic genre *Earth Died Screaming* does everything ‘right’: the imagery is all there, the end of the world is announced, there are explicit allusions to the opening of the Seven Seals in *Revelation* – even ostensibly obscure secondary sources are cited (the Book of Rudy). But this in itself does not make *Earth Died Screaming*, or *Bone Machine* as a whole, any different from other art-forms’ renditions of Apocalypse. Rather, what makes *Earth Died Screaming* significant as a popular musical re-presentation of apocalypse is its delivery, which draws attention to the tension between tone and content and thus interrupts and scrambles a semantic reading of the song’s lyrics.

### ***All Stripped Down***

This idea that the apocalyptic tone is capable of intercepting the seemingly straightforward transmission of a song’s lyrics, and imbuing them with a decidedly less straightforward meaning, can also be heard on *Bone Machine*’s fourth track, *All Stripped Down*. As with *Earth Died Screaming*, *All Stripped Down* emerges out of the clanking and banging which threads throughout the entire album, gathering momentum gradually so that it is uncertain precisely where the song actually begins. A shaker gives a

prolonged rattle and then, virtually unnoticeably, the noises become less congested and scatter out into a fairly coherent pattern; with Waits performing a call-and-response pattern with himself throughout the entire song:

Well the time will come  
When the wind will shout  
All stripped down, all stripped down  
And all the sinners know  
What I'm talking about  
All stripped down, all stripped down  
When all the creatures of the world  
Are gonna line up at the gate  
All stripped down, all stripped down  
And you better be on time  
And you better not be late  
I want you all stripped, all stripped, all stripped down

Like many of the tracks on *Bone Machine*, *All Stripped Down* lyrically takes up the theme of revelation, the overall message of which was summarized by Waits in an interview as “you can't get into heaven until you're all stripped down” (Jarmusch 182). And in terms of the lyrics, this is certainly what the song is about. It constructs a fairly traditional oratory on salvation and redemption, urging “sinners” to put away their lust for all things sensual (“Well take off your paint/Take of your rouge”), earthly and material (“Well you know in your heart/What you gotta bring...No big mink coat/No diamond ring”), and instead “Let your backbone flip/And let your spirit shine through.” However, the song is delivered in a manner which works to obstruct such a reading of the song's meaning via its lyrics; for while the ‘first’ voice – a high-pitched, hyperactive take on a soul falsetto – delivers his lines of love and devotion with feverish enthusiasm, the tone of the ‘second’ voice – a low, leery, growl repeating the lines: “all stripped down/all stripped down” – is increasingly fraught with sexual innuendo. Each voice intercepts the other, derailing the meaning of each other's utterance through the tonal difference between them, and “all stripped down” is effectively converted from a seemingly innocent call for salvation and redemption, into a call for something far less innocent. Indeed, there is almost a predatory quality to the second voice which changes the tone of

the entire song, so that the very idea of revelation takes on a distinctly sleazy twist alongside its spiritual associations.

Thus the act of revelation, of stripping things back and unveiling, takes on a meaning here which is both sexual and spiritual, creating a tension between the two that becomes more pronounced as the song continues. As I have already argued, according to Derrida it is the *act* of unveiling that is apocalyptic, the *gesture* “that lets be seen what up to then remained enveloped, secluded, held back,” and the example he provides here is of “the body when the clothes are removed or the glans when the foreskin is removed in circumcision” (65). Indeed, Derrida implies that this tension between the sexual and the spiritual in the apocalyptic act of revelation is built into the ancient Apocalypses, writing: “*apokalupsis*, disclosure, discovery, uncovering, unveiling, the thing lifted from, the truth revealed about the thing: first of all, if we can say this, men’s or women’s genitals, but also their eyes or ears” (64). On *All Stripped Down* this dual meaning of revelation as both sexual and spiritual unveiling is played out in the tension between tone and lyrics, so that it would be almost impossible to hear the lyrics sung without noting the sexual thrust implicit in the act of revelation. Moreover, this tension is not framed as a simple opposition – between sexual and sacred – but rather as a continuation, as if the limit or extreme of one is where the other begins. Thus what the act of revelation reveals, in this instance, is its own limitations; however, rather than constituting an absolute end-point, the limitation is here understood as an opening: the point at which something else – another tone, for example – intrudes or breaks in.

This idea of limitations is crucial to Derrida’s explication of the apocalyptic tone (after all, this is precisely where eschatological discourse aims to lead: “the *eskhaton*, the end, or rather the extreme, the limit, the term, the last” [68]), and culminates in the tone’s seductive “come” or “*viens*.”<sup>9</sup> Like “revelation” or “unveiling,” this “come” is imbued with both a sexual and spiritual meaning that is framed less as an opposition and more as alternate dimensions of the same word, and which in both its sexual and spiritual sense can be read as apocalyptic. James Berger contends that as a euphemism for orgasm “come” denotes “a site where language stops, both for reasons of internal logic and of social prohibition” (14), and as such can be read as apocalyptic:

[M]erely the self-shattering experience of orgasm is apocalyptic, and, as *jouissance*, it has assumed an important role in critical terminology as a trope of radical inexpressibility... When we come, our personalities disperse, our autobiographies are suspended, we are over, are coming, have come. What is revealed or unveiled in orgasm? Exactly what is revealed in any apocalypse: nothing, or nothing that can be said (14).

Derrida plays on this sexual meaning of “come” in much the same way as he does with “revelation,” without being overt, but making his inspired reading of “Come” in the Biblical *Revelation* quite astonishing nonetheless. As in its sexual sense, the spiritual meaning of “come” or “*viens*” designates the ultimate limitation: that which cannot be spoken, which does not belong to discourse, to the realm of the familiar, or to ordinary, lived time.

“Come,” or “*viens*” forms the crux of Derrida’s argument; it is the limitation of both his own demystification of the apocalyptic tone and of the apocalyptic tone itself. As John Caputo suggests, for Derrida “*viens*” is “the apocalyptic word *par excellence*, if it is a word at all” (95). “Come” is the site of an intersection, an in-between space, but it is an unstable site which defies an absolute location or definition. “Come” eludes analysis; it cannot be explained in terms of existing paradigms or discourses of “philosophy, metaphysics, onto-eschato-theology” (93). Derrida argues: ““Come,” opening the scene, could not become an object, a theme, a representation, or even a citation in the current sense, and subsumable under a category, whether that of the coming or of the event” (93). Rather, “Come” crosses from one to another, whilst not being determined by either. Like music, it designates a space of movement, belonging to neither addresser nor addressee, and hence complicating the notion of a secure, identifiable origin or destination.

Derrida evokes the transitory, fluid nature of the “come”s as a choir or “exchange of appeals and responses that precisely is no longer an exchange. The voices, the places, the journeys of “come” traverse the partition [paroi] of a song, a book of citational and recitative echoes, as if it [ça] began by responding” (92). I find that such a description could just as well apply to the play of voices on *All Stripped Down*, with each voice intercepting, complimenting and subverting the other. In the end, the difference between these voices does not lie in the semantic meaning of the lyrics, but is, as Derrida concludes, “tonal” (94). The song closes with the voices collapsing into one another –

they no longer mark out a coherent space for themselves in the rhythm of the song, but rather appear at the edges of each other's articulations, as if they are but variations of the same voice (which indeed they are, given that Waits performs both of them). In a sense, one could say that each voice completes the other, except that this completion only offers up further possibilities for the voice of the other to intercept and derail it. Which is to say, whatever meaning might be read into *All Stripped Down* lies in the movement and play of the tonal differences between the voices: the spaces where they intersect, collide and depart.

### Conclusion

As a popular musical re-presentation of apocalypse, *Bone Machine*, like Derrida's apocalyptic tone, can be understood as registering an idea of the apocalyptic as process and movement, wherein the act of revelation is conceived as a continual, often turbulent and confusing, unveiling. The result is an understanding of apocalypse which is not simply an ending to a narrative trajectory, nor which relies on genre-specific imagery or themes; on the contrary, *Bone Machine*'s apocalyptic tone constantly disrupts and destabilizes the eschatological visions and imagery detailed in the lyrics, drawing attention back to itself as a revelatory gesture which nonetheless obscures as much as it reveals. I believe that *Bone Machine* can be interpreted as offering a popular musical perspective on the apocalypse, thus opening up new and subversive ways of engaging with this seemingly timeless (and tireless) cultural theme.

---

<sup>1</sup> Derrida writes the Greek word "apokalupsis," and cites the argument forwarded by Andre Chouraqui that: "nowhere does the word apocalypse... have the sense it finally takes in French and other languages, of

---

fearsome catastrophe. Thus the Apocalypse is essentially a contemplation... or an inspiration... at the sight, the uncovering or disclosure of YHWH and, here, of Yeshoua' the Messiah." (64)

<sup>2</sup> I am using the term "popular music" here broadly, to designate any genre of music that is, according to Georgina Born's definition: "primarily produced and circulated through commercial market mechanisms" (51). I admit that such a definition is problematic, in that it ignores the fact that Waits, as an artist, can be interpreted as resisting or challenging such market forces, and that it basically conflates a number of diverse genres (Waits' music might be better defined as "folk" or "blues"). Even more contentiously, this definition overlooks the way in which many (some might say *all*) genres of popular music have systematically appropriated and exploited African-American musical cultures; however, a thorough interrogation of the manifold meanings and complexities of a term like "popular music" is not possible here. For more on this see Born (1987), Grossberg (1997), and Corbett, J. (1990).

<sup>3</sup> In his influential 1967 text, *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode formulates an understanding of the apocalyptic as a paradigmatic imagining of the End, not only the end of the world and earthly history as literally described in *Revelation*, but also as an imagining of the end of the individual human life span: the "common death" (Kermode 7). Thus the apocalypse works to provide an apparently much needed "sense of an ending" which endows human life and history with narrative coherence. While Derrida does not specifically refer to Kermode's work, I believe that his conception of an "apocalyptic tone" can be understood as challenging Kermode's narrative-based formulation of the apocalyptic paradigm. For not only does the apocalyptic tone not contain a beginning, ending, or anything remotely resembling a narrative structure, but it actively destabilizes and subverts the kind of definitive ending that was so crucial to Kermode's argument as to how the apocalyptic paradigm works to "make sense" of "reality."

<sup>4</sup> This spatial effect, wherein it sounds as if a small group of tinkers are moving in to surround the listener, is particularly strong if you listen to the track on headphones. In an interview with film director Jim Jarmusch (with whom Waits has collaborated both as an actor and musician), Waits claimed that he recorded the percussion outside the studio in the parking lot, using "two-by-fours, anything we could find, logs from the firewood. About nine people. Just different people walking by. We'd say, "Come on, play some sticks!" (189)

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of these kinds of accusations leveled at popular music see Frith, S. (1996) p. 160-163; on popular music as "narcissistic" and "sentimental" see Scruton, R. (1997) p. 457-508

<sup>6</sup> In order to understand how ideas of sincerity relate to pop lyrics, it is necessary to recognise that such ideas rarely attach themselves to song lyrics alone, and nor do they represent strictly musical properties (sincerity is not a musical sound; one cannot *hear* sincerity in the sound of a particular note or chord, although it may be interpreted as such). Rather, ideas of sincerity have to do with the way words are used within a performative context in which both audience and singer play an active role, and where framing and delivery can have just as much effect on the understanding of a song's lyrics as the words themselves. Indeed, Simon Frith suggests that one way in which sincerity is expressed in pop music is through emphasising the tension between lyrics and delivery:

In popular cultural terms, good talkers are mistrusted as well as admired: people who have a "way with words" – the seducer, the salesman, the demagogue, the preacher – are people with power, and the power to use words is a power to deceive and manipulate. Sincerity may then be best indicated by an inability to speak (as in soul convention) or through an aural contradiction between the glibness of the lyric and the uncertainty of the voice (as in much male country music) (168).

As Frith suggests, interpretations and expressions of sincerity within popular music are genre-specific, their meanings negotiated within the particular communicative framework set up between audience and singer. What remains paramount (perhaps irrespective of genre) is the idea of a *tension* between words and delivery; and, as I discuss above, this tension (which may be made more or less explicit) is in fact what will be identified as *tone*.

<sup>7</sup> A brilliant and exhaustive recent instance of this kind of critical analysis is Christopher Ricks' study of Bob Dylan's lyrics: Ricks, C. (2003)

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, many of the qualities Derrida ascribes specifically to an "apocalyptic tone" are the same phenomena which are "naturalized" within many genres of popular music, and have made it so difficult to write about: the multiple, inter-cutting voices, the splicing-together of different discourses and genres, the "jump" in tone signifying delirium and exaltation, and the "slackening" of tone signifying a subversion or

---

perversion of reason and order (Derrida 68-72). It is also worth noting that they are the very same phenomena which have incited, and continue to incite, such alarm among censorship groups since rock n roll's inception as a dominant popular cultural art-form in the 1950s to rap music in the late-twentieth century— a point that is also made by Derrida in relation to the apocalyptic tone (89-90).

<sup>9</sup> Throughout his essay Derrida frequently returns to this idea of limitations in the form of a question: “to what ends...?” The meaning of this question is two-fold: on the one hand it refers to The End, as proclaimed by apocalyptic discourse and invoked by the apocalyptic tone; on the other hand, it also refers to the underlying motive behind such apocalyptic proclamations and invocations. Thus the question becomes: “With a view to what interests, to what ends do they wish to come with these inflamed proclamations on the end to come or the end already accomplished? (67-68).” The apocalyptic tone is where these two ‘ends’ come to meet, which means that Derrida’s own position is implicated; as he announces in the opening line: “I shall speak then of (with) an apocalyptic tone in philosophy (63).” For Derrida, “come” or “*viens*” forms the limit of both the apocalyptic tone and his own demystification of the tone (which, it turns out, are not necessarily distinguishable); however, this limit is, of course, the site of yet another opening. For further discussion of these ideas of limitations and “*viens*” in relation to the apocalyptic tone, see Caputo (1997) p. 88-100.

### Works Cited

- Berger, J. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Born, G. “Modern Music Culture: On Shock, Pop and Synthesis.” *New Formations* No. 2: Summer, 1987: 51-78.
- Boyarin, J. “At Last, All the Goyim: Notes on a Greek Word Applied to Jews.” *Postmodern Apocalypse*. R. Dellamora (ed.) Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press 1995: 41-58.
- Caputo, J. D. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997.
- Corbett, J. “Free, Single, and Disengaged: Listening Pleasure and the Popular Musical Object.” *October* 54, 1990: 79-101.
- Derrida, J. “Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy”, *Semeia* 23, 1982: 63-97.
- Frith, S. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Frye, N. *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1982

---

Grossberg, L. *Dancing In Spite of Myself: Essays on Popular Culture*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997.

Jameson, F. *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*. London & New York: Verso, 1998

Jarmusch, J. "Straight No Chaser." *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits. The Collected Interviews*. M. Montandon, ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005: 167-204.

Kermode, F. *The Sense of an Ending*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Pick, S. "The Fire (and Flood) This Time." *Innocent When You Dream. Tom Waits. The Collected Interviews*. M. Montandon, ed. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2005: 159-161.

Ricks, C. *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Scruton, R. *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.