

MUSIC

Crystal ball

Freshly rehabbed from a meth addiction, Rufus Wainwright peers 500 years into the future

BY JIM RADOSTA

Mariah Carey, eat your heart out. Two days after the notoriously sketchy songbird flutters into the Schnitz bragging about how she made it "Through the Rain" following her infamous meltdown on live television, another gay icon will take to the stage across the river. And his skin is just a little bit thicker.

Rufus Wainwright's daringly baroque latest album, *Want—à la Quentin Tarantino's Kill Bill*—is being released in two editions, with a more "lavish and obtuse" follow-up slated for next spring. In a telephone interview with *Just Out*, he sings the praises of Portland, assesses his toxic past and gazes far into the future.

Jim Radosta: You make a reference to Portland in the song "11:11." Was that inspired by any particular experience?

Rufus Wainwright: Portland is one of my favorite cities on the West Coast because, at least at the time of when I wrote that song, it seemed to be one of the least sort of gentrified places left—at least [compared with] Seattle and San Francisco. Yeah, I've certainly had a couple of crazy nights in that town with all of your wacky inhabitants. It was a lot of fun.

JR: When I saw you in concert a few years back, you mentioned a critic who complained that you were "too gay." Have things changed since then, or do you still encounter this kind of ignorant homophobia?

RW: It doesn't really register on my radar. I haven't really dealt with it all that much. It does happen occasionally, but I just sort of dismiss it.

JR: Now that you've put out three well-received albums in a row, do you see a time coming when you'll just stop paying attention to critics?

RW: I'm trying to get there. I'm trying not to read my criticism at all, only because you can read 10 great critiques and you'll read one bad one, and it's like you've been condemned to a life sentence.... But every once in a while I peek—kind of like peeking at a horror movie.

JR: You remade "The Origin of Love" for the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* tribute album *Wig in a Box*, which was produced by a Portlander. How did you get involved in that project?

RW: I know [*Hedwig* writer/director/star] John Cameron Mitchell, and he asked me to do it, and it's also for a really good cause. And I also don't get the chance often to really, like, rock out too much....so I liked to do that as well.

JR: In light of the state of the world today, do you find yourself increasingly drawn to causes that will make the world a better place?



Rufus Wainwright plays the Aladdin in Portland on Dec. 11 and The Shedd in Eugene on Dec. 12

RW: Definitely, in terms of saving the world or whatever, now is the time to do it. I think we've sort of lost the sense of bliss, or ignorance, or blissful ignorance I'd say, especially after 9/11. All those predictions I had growing up about, you know, by the year 2000 this and this and this will happen—well, it's 2003, and I think it's probably more time to act now.

JR: In interviews you've been candid about your past use of crystal meth. I'm curious what convinced you to go into rehab—was it strictly the physical effects, or did it also have something to do with turning 30 or world events like 9/11 and the war?

RW: I just couldn't take it emotionally, and certainly the drug itself is—in my opinion, anyway—above and beyond most other experiences I've had with narcotics.... So that was the main reason. But...I felt like in terms of arguing about what was going on in the world, I really had to get my own house in order, in order to really be effective.

JR: This might be a rather naive question, but what exactly made somebody as beautiful and talented as you feel like you needed a drug to make yourself feel sexy and secure?

RW: I don't know. I think a lot of it has to do with the nature of the attention that I get, which is on one hand very compassionate and honest and real but also from 20 feet away. It was that classic Janis Joplin line, "For 40 minutes you've got all the love in the world and everybody's around you, and then for the rest of the time you're completely alone." There was a backlash to that kind of attention.... And also it was that I have been so dedicated to my music, my art, that sometimes I forget that I'm actually a human being.

JR: I love the tracks you recorded for the soundtracks to *Moulin Rouge* and *Big Daddy*. Are there any other projects or collaborations you're dying to work on—a James Bond theme, a duet with Liza?

RW: I do want to write an opera at some point. And I'm just saying that a lot because it'll force me to do it. [*Laughs*] I'd love to write a really crazy opera that is performed for another 500 years.

JR: Both of your shows in Oregon are going to be all-ages, and you've got a really strong connection with your young fans. Do you think they're drawn to you because you've been out since you were a teen-ager?

RW: That may be an element. I think the main thing is that there has to be a fallout from the present music era. There's not a lot of alternatives out there for kids, and so I'm sort of banking on the fact that there are ones out there that are interested in depth. [*Laughs*] And I'm not saying that I'm the only [deep] musician at all, but there's not a lot that are given the amount of attention that I'm given.

JR: What other "deep" musicians are on your radar right now?

RW: I'm thinking a lot about, of course, Elliott Smith, because he died. I like Beth Orton as a songwriter, and I'm one of those Radioheads as well. 

RUFUS WAINWRIGHT plays Portland's *Aladdin* Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave., at 8 p.m. Dec. 11 and Eugene's *The Shedd*, 285 E. Broadway, at 7:30 p.m. Dec. 12. Tickets are \$25 from Ticketmaster (Portland) and \$22.50-\$32.50 from 541-687-6526 (Eugene).

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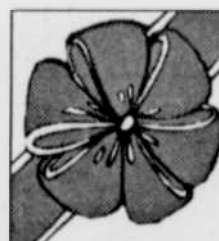
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