

music
review

Third time charmed

Want One, the third release from Rufus Wainwright, confirms the gay troubadour's spot in the musical pantheon
By Michael Giltz

Want One ■ Rufus Wainwright
 ■ DreamWorks Records

Now it's time to get *really* excited about Rufus Wainwright. A distinctive debut bristling with promise is always nice. A solid follow-up is better. But now the son of acclaimed musicians Loudon Wainwright III and Kate McGarrigle has bettered himself. With *Want One* (the first of two releases; *Want Two* is due out early next year), Wainwright has delivered a third album that fulfills the mighty expectations he's raised.

Can we talk about a song being "Rufusian" yet? Certainly the lead track, "Oh What a World," qualifies. It

begins with Gregorian chant-like background vocals; adds an ominous, vaguely classical, chugging brass melody; slips in a playful string arpeggio; delivers deadpan lyrics like "Why am I always on a plane or a fast train / Oh what a world my parents gave me"; and then—amid a quote from Ravel's *Bolero*—climaxes with the newfound optimism coursing through the album by saying, "Wouldn't it be a lovely headline?! 'Life is beautiful.'"

That brash opener is just the beginning for a collection of 14 terrific songs that never flags for a moment. Typical, dull pop songs simply return again and again to the chorus until it's ingrained in your head. The songs on *Want One*

surge forward at a gallop, swerving this way and that but always building to glorious climaxes; in one tune he urges, "Stop me making movies of myself." But these certainly aren't home movies he's talking about. They're Technicolor musicals delivered with panache.

"Go or Go Ahead" is an epic with an anthemic, cast-of-thousands chorus complete with an ecstatic guitar solo that would make Freddie Mercury proud. "14th Street" (which ends with a banjo fade-out courtesy of his mom) and the thumping "Beautiful Child" aren't far behind. (Other guests include guitarist Charlie Sexton, Rufus's talented sister Martha, and pal Teddy Thompson.)

What's different? Well, it's no coincidence his second album was called *Poses*. Wainwright seemed desperate to be world-weary, and half the fun of his first two records was seeing his pleasure at wallowing in misery. Now, while his music is no less grand, Wainwright is no longer onstage all the time, as he lets us behind the curtain instead. Whether it's the lovely "Natasha," the vulnerable "Vibrate" ("My phone's on vibrate for you"), or the wrenching closer, "Dinner at Eight" (about his anger toward his father), it's more convincingly personal and sincere than ever.

The Wainwright of a few years ago (before recently fessing up to problems with crystal meth and sex) would have known what to make of a song called "Want." But what does he sing here—and sing so sweetly it breaks your heart? "I just wanna be my dad / With a slight sprinkling of my mother / And work at the family store."

Will this album break him into the big time? It's the wrong question. No one sits around wondering when Randy Newman or Joni Mitchell or Scott Walker or Leonard Cohen is going to get another hit single. They're all uniquely talented artists who exist proudly outside the Top 40 universe yet pervasively influence it. And with *Want One*, Wainwright proves he belongs right beside them. Wainwright has always had the confidence; now he has the goods. ■

Based in New York, Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post.