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John Waters's Love Songs, Suitably Bizarre

By GEOFFREY HIMES FEB. 11, 2007

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JOHN WATERS still has the first record he ever stole.

It was “Tonight You Belong to Me,” a 1956 hit sung by two chirpy girls named Patience and Prudence, and the 9-year-old Mr. Waters loved it. He had never stolen anything before, but this future filmmaker was visiting a Read’s drugstore in suburban Baltimore with his parents when he looked at the seven-inch 45 and realized it would fit snugly in his coat pocket. And now, just in time for Valentine’s Day, the song is the opening track on the new album “A Date With John Waters.”

That purloined disc, with Liberty Records’ distinctive statue-with-a-torch logo, now sits with hundreds of other scratched and worn 45s from the ’50s and ’60s in a bureau drawer in Mr. Waters’s living room, on a quiet, wooded side street near Johns Hopkins University. Sporting a blue velvet jacket with tan lapels, a blue turtleneck with thin red stripes and his signature pencil-thin mustache, he sprawled on the couch last month and eagerly relived his early record-collecting days, however unorthodox they may have been.

“My first obsession was rock ’n’ roll, even before the movies,” Mr. Waters, 60, said. “The movies that would change my life I couldn’t see when I was that young. They wouldn’t show movies condemned by the Catholic Church at the Towson Theater, but records I could get my hands on.”

Those records first shaped the taste for the bizarre, outlandish and sleazy that was later expressed in films like “Pink Flamingos,” “Polyester” and “Pecker.” Mr. Waters personally picks all the songs for his pictures, and the resulting soundtrack albums are delightful collections of songs you had never heard of and then can’t forget, no matter how you might wish to.

Given that, it’s not surprising that two of his films have been turned into Broadway musicals. “Hairspray” dominated the 2003 Tony Awards, and “Cry Baby” is scheduled to open early next year. Music was so central to the storytelling in those two pictures that they were natural candidates for adaptation. (A film version of the Broadway version of “Hairspray,” to be directed by Adam Shankman, will open this

summer.)

“When I turn in a script,” Mr. Waters said, “I almost always turn in a complete soundtrack with it. The studio executives are always surprised when that happens, but the music is another character in the movies. I use the songs like a punch line or a costume.”

“One of my biggest influences when I was 10 years old was the record ‘The Flying Saucer, Parts 1 and 2,’ by Buchanan and Goodman,” he recalled. “It was one of the first records to sample other records, and it used them to tell a ridiculous story. That’s my whole career: using music to tell ridiculous stories.”

“A Date With John Waters” (New Line Records), his second nonsoundtrack album, is a collection of his favorite twisted love songs. “Tonight You Belong to Me” is followed by Elton Motello’s “Jet Boy Jet Girl,” a late-’70s new wave song with explicit lyrics about gay sex. Other key tracks include Mildred Bailey’s “I’d Love to Take Orders From You” and Josie Cotton’s “Johnny, Are You Queer?” as well as songs from two of Mr. Waters’s regular actresses: Mink Stole’s “Sometimes I Wish I Had a Gun” and Edith Massey’s “Big Girls Don’t Cry.”

The 14 songs are arranged to tell the story of an imaginary date that progresses from getting comfortable to getting hot to basking in the afterglow, all narrated by Mr. Waters’s witty liner notes. “Think I invited you over here to discuss the future of independent film?” he writes. “Hell no, I’m lookin’ for a little action and ‘In Spite of Ourselves’ by John Prine and Iris DeMent ought to do the trick. ‘Convict movies make her horny’ goes the lyrics. Me too! Put on a video.”

The album peaks with Ike and Tina Turner’s “All I Can Do Is Cry.” Over Ike’s wavering blues guitar riff, Tina delivers a long, agitated recitation about sitting in the back of a church and watching her ex-lover marry another woman. When she reaches the point where the rice is falling on the head of “my man,” her voice erupts into an unearthly, screeching wail. It’s a song that Mr. Waters listened to over and over again with his teenage best friend, Glenn Milstead, now better known to the world as Divine, the exaggerated drag queen Mr. Waters made a star. (He died in 1988.)

“Ike and Tina were our role models,” Mr. Waters said. “When we saw them at a Dundalk union hall, Ike stood in the back like a Svengali in a shiny suit. He was scary in a pimpish way. And Tina was a ghetto vision, Jayne Mansfield gone to the street corner. And she could howl. If you look at them on their ‘Dynamite’ album, Tina’s wearing Springolators, those backless high heels that went flap, flap, flap, and that was a key part of Divine’s look.”

In the ’60s Mr. Waters shifted his focus from music to movies. He blames the Beatles. “Parents liked the Beatles,” he said. “When you’re young, you should never like music your parents like. Some of my friends who are liberals are appalled when their kids like rap. Of course that’s why their kids like rap. I basically hated all music

from the Beatles to punk. Punk put the danger back in music.”

Mr. Waters broke out of the cinema underground with “Pink Flamingos,” his 1972 picture about “the filthiest people alive.” He went on to direct mainstream stars like Johnny Depp, Kathleen Turner and Melanie Griffith. An occasional actor himself, Mr. Waters will play the Groom Reaper, the Alfred Hitchcock-like host of Court TV’s first scripted series, “’Til Death Do Us Part,” beginning March 19.

But he has never forgotten the crucial role music played in shaping his aesthetic. He assembled his favorite holiday songs for the 2004 album “A John Waters Christmas,” and he hopes to follow up “A Date With John Waters” with a series of theme albums. He said he feels little guilt for his youthful larceny, which progressed from impulse to premeditation. Now he has to pay \$25,000 apiece to use the same songs in his movies that he once stole to avoid paying 89 cents. “They got their money back,” he said of the record labels. Nonetheless he talked wistfully of those days when “a stolen record always sounded better than one I paid for.”

Kids today, he said, will never know the same thrill. “Downloading is stealing, but it’s not the same,” he said. “You don’t need a special coat to download a song. You needed a special coat to steal records.” He chortled. “Especially albums.”

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