You'll be washed of all your sins and all of your crimes
If you're down there by the train
Tom Waits and the Beat Generation

While many would suggest other musicians to describe the Beat Generation through music: Woody Guthrie, Ramblin’ Jack Elliott and Bob Dylan spontaneously come to mind, I would suggest an alternative. Tom Waits is never the obvious choice but he has a deep adoration for traveling and road literature typified through multiple interviews. He also references the album *Kerouac-Allen* on Hanover Records as his favorite recording; and states that one of his favorite authors was Jack Kerouac. This recording was one of the many examples of Kerouac reciting his prose with a musical accompaniment, provided in this instance by Steve Allen; but it wasn’t the only example. Another collection known as *Jack Kerouac Reads on the Road* also features a song by Tom Waits, being the first and most obvious example of Waits’ love for Kerouac and the road being displayed through song:

“I left New York in 1949 / To go across the country without a bad blame dime / Montana in the cold, cold fall / Found my father in the gambling hall.” So begins the third track, “On the Road,” from the CD *Jack Kerouac Reads on the Road*; a collection containing many of Kerouac’s works, read by him. However, the track “On the Road” should not be confused with the novel he wrote bearing the same name. Though the CD is a collection of many spoken pieces, this track is actually a song, with him singing.
While Kerouac speaks in a low, musky voice at the beginning and it is hard to distinguish the exact lyrics, he later presents an introduction to his own personal song. “Can you hear me now?” “But anyway, tonight also I wrote a song called On the Road. I just remember being on the road all night…there are better things coming than what I wrote all night, coming straight from the mind to the voice” (Kerouac, Reads on the Road). This introduction almost feels to the listener as an apology, as though he feels that his venture into lyrical composition is worth apologizing for. However, Kerouac is being honest in this introduction, even if he is possibly apologizing for the material. By saying “coming straight from the mind to the voice,” he leads the listener to believe that he has not edited nor changed the lyrics to appeal to a massive audience - that the lyrics are the way he intended for them to be. This may or may not be the case, but from the explanation he gives, it certainly seems the most likely possibility. The song is Kerouac being brutally honest and providing a true look into his world views.

While the bulk of the album is dedicated to Kerouac’s own readings, the final track on the compilation is a reprise of the song “On the Road”. However, it is a cover version of the song, done by Tom Waits and Primus. The same cover song was eventually released as part of Tom Waits’ 2006 album *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers & Bastards*. The track is a drastically different song when compared to the original source material. While Kerouac’s original recording of the song is sung with a simple string accompaniment behind it, Waits and Primus abandon the melodic background song, instead bringing harmonicas and a drum set to the forefront, as well as some form of a string accompaniment (probably a guitar), and Waits sings the lyrics in his stereotypical, guttural voice. It is an experimental track that takes the heart and soul of Kerouac, but
crafts it into a new interpretation. It becomes less of a ballad; the way Kerouac had sung it, and more of an aggressive folk song.

However, Waits is such a fan of Kerouac that he cannot leave the song alone. Though he had collaborated with Primus on the piece, he also released another cover version of the same song on the *Orphans* album. This version is known as “Home I’ll Never Be,” referencing the final lyrics of the song. It is only after listening to both tracks that it becomes apparent that Waits is singing identical lyrics, for there are no other comparisons. “Home I’ll Never Be,” is Waits performing Kerouac’s “On the Road” in a much closer rendition to the original. Unlike Waits’s version of “On the Road” with Primus, “Home I’ll Never Be,” returns to the ballad structure. In fact, other than the change from a string accompaniment to a piano accompaniment, the song sounds nearly identical to Jack Kerouac’s original recording. It illustrates how Tom Waits has such adoration for Jack Kerouac’s work that he can either perform it in the original intent or expand upon it to make his own interpretation. This could be stated as ‘the way Kerouac is meant to be read’, that everyone should enjoy a Kerouac novel in its original form, but then are free to make their own interpretations upon the meanings he was trying to convey.

Tom Waits has stated many times that he was heavily influenced by the writings of the Beat generation, consistently citing Kerouac as one of his favorite authors. In an article written by Todd Everett, from 1975 when the world was first being introduced to the strange man known as Tom Waits, Everett made the claim “Tom Waits is a poet.” While this is certainly a matter of opinion, it is hard to dispute, because many of his lyrics are very reminiscent of poetry. However, in the article, Everett has several quotes from
Waits himself, which pertain to poetry and the concept of the Beat generation. Even though many other interviews brought forth his opinions on Kerouac, in the Everett quotes, Waits says, “I guess everybody [reads Kerouac at some point in their] life. Even though I was growing up in Southern California, he made a tremendous impression on me. It was 1968” (Waits, Innocent When You Dream, 44). Waits later continues by stating that he was a little late in discovering Kerouac; his first introduction to coming after the author’s death in 1969. When asked about his favorite authors in various interviews, he does mention other authors; retaining Jack Kerouac as a major influence. In an earlier interview, he mentions that he had read Nelson Algren, and in a later interview, Cormac McCarthy. Tom Waits and the persona he gives off is a musician obsessed with the road and the beat generation.

It is an accurate statement to say that Tom Waits is obsessed with the “road”; after all he was born in the back of a taxi cab in Pomona, California. Though he has never actually stated this; his obsession with On the Road and Kerouac’s Beat Generation might come from a sense of kindred spirit with Dean Moriarty. Moriarty also breathing his first breath in the back of a car as well. They share that same introduction to the world and from interviews Tom Waits has given, his personality does seem similar to that of the fictional Moriarty. In his own personal statement Waits said, “I really started to shine after school” (Waits, Innocent When You Dream, 26) and the statement feels as if it could come from the mouth of Dean himself.

In an article by Mark Rowland, from 1987, he declares Tom Waits as a songwriter who has followed in the footsteps of Bob Dylan. It is an interesting notion to consider as Bob Dylan, like Tom Waits, was just as obsessed with the beat movement and Jack
Kerouac. Dylan was the kind of man who attempted to make friends with his idols, such as Woody Guthrie and Allen Ginsberg. Dylan even wrote a song in honor of Woody Guthrie on his debut self titled album, known as “Song to Woody.” Like Dylan, Waits also wrote songs in honor his idols Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady befriending them in the process. William S. Burroughs being another example.

That song was “Medley: Jack & Neal/ California, Here I Come” and appeared on Tom Waits’ fifth studio album, *Foreign Affairs*. “Jack was sittin poker faced with bullets backed with bitches / Neal hunched at the wheel puttin everyone in stiches / Braggin bout this nurse he screwed while drivin through Nebraska” are the opening lyrics to the song, which is almost an ode to both Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady. While the song (probably) does not tell true events, it captures the essence of Jack and Neal. While Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty are the fictional counterparts of Jack and Neal, the adventures he writes for the songs protanginists feel like adventures the two would have had together in unwritten segments of *On the Road*. Even the music that accompanies the song feels like music Jack and Neal would have listened to. It is a cool Jazz sound, with a saxophone playing throughout the entire song, while Tom scats the out lyrics. It is an extremely unique sound, even for Waits, but it feels like the kind of music you’d hear in a club that the two would have gravitated to and had adventures in. The song may or may not be based from real events, more then likely not, but it is able to capture their essence with ease and feels like a lyrical accompaniment to *On the Road*.

Of course, as stated before, Tom Waits wasn’t influenced solely by Jack Kerouac; William S. Burroughs was even able to collaborate with him for a project known as *The Black Rider*. *The Black Rider* was a musical put together by Robert Wilson, Tom Waits
and William S. Burroughs. Burroughs was responsible for the book of the musical while Tom Waits wrote both music and lyrics. This collaboration was probably as close to Jack Kerouac as Tom Waits will ever be able to achieve, since Kerouac had passed away before Tom Waits would have had any chance to meet him. William S. Burroughs was a friend of Jack Kerouac’s as well as a collaborator. The two crafted the novel “And the Hippos were Boiled in their Tanks” together, though it was only recently published this year.

Aside from writing songs that were immersed in the beat generation and the concept of traveling on the road, Tom Waits also wrote several songs that pertained to the concept of traveling by train. Songs about trains and train hoppin’ often evoke a feel of Jack London and his tails of hitchhiking prior to the age of cars. The best example of this ‘ridin’ the rails’ genre song is probably his “Down There by the Train,” which was also featured on his 2006 album Orphans. Though there are no overt references on “Down There by the Train” to Jack London or his novel The Road, it does certainly evoke the feeling of the novel, whether this is intentional or not. “You can hear the whistle, you can hear the bell / From the halls of heaven to the gates of hell / And there's room for the forsaken if you're there on time / You'll be washed of all your sins and all of your crimes / If you're down there by the train,” is a lyric featured in the middle of the song. When compared with The Road, it certainly seems reminiscent to the moment when all of the hobos are waiting for the train to come so that they can hop on, it almost conjures the image of witnessing the fight to get onto the train. The line “And there's room for the forsaken if you're there on time” specifically is reminiscent of the novel, because it sums up the lives of the hobos. If you can keep up with the life and are able to make it their on
time to board the train, it doesn’t matter if you are forsaken or not, because there is 
always room for one more. Of course…that is as long as you are not caught by the 
security on the train, but that is another story entirely.

Though there are many other examples of Tom Waits’ songs that have been 
influenced by the Beat Generation, these were some of the best choices. His covers “On 
the Road” and “Home I’ll Never Be” highlight his devotion to Kerouac, as he is able to 
interpret the original song in a new and interesting way and also able to release it the way 
it was intended to be interpreted. “Jack and Neal” was an ode to Jack Kerouac and Neal 
Cassady, as well as the novel On the Road, having the essence of the two writers and 
their fictional counterparts put to lyrics. “Down There by the Train” was able to evoke 
the mood and sense of the hobo traveler, just as Woody Guthrie did in his own lyrics and 
Jack London did in his hitchhiking novels. While Tom Waits certainly is not the most 
obvious choice for as a representative singer for the Beat Generation, he is a fine choice 
as demonstrated by his love and adoration for the road and its comparative literature.
Works Cited


