



Rufus Wainwright.  
Courtesy Dreamworks  
Records.

## Wainwright, Rufus (b. 1973)

by Linda Rapp

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Singer and songwriter Rufus Wainwright has built a successful career with witty lyrics and rich melodies that have earned him comparisons to Cole Porter and George Gershwin. Wainwright cites Al Jolson, Edith Piaf, and Nina Simone as artists who were among his early inspirations.

Both music critics and Wainwright's loyal fans appreciate the structural complexity and lush orchestrations of his works. Described by *Advocate* reviewer Anderson Jones as "the thinking gay man's sex symbol," Wainwright composes and performs songs marked by intelligence, humor, and pathos. In his rendition, his songs are at once achingly plaintive and hip, their frank romanticism only barely mediated by a light dose of irony.

Wainwright comes from a distinctly musical family. His father is American folk-singer and humorist Loudon Wainwright III, and his mother is Canadian folk-singer and songwriter Kate McGarrigle. Born July 22, 1973 in Rhinebeck, New York, Rufus Wainwright grew up in Montreal, where his mother made her home after his parents separated when he was three and subsequently divorced.

Music has always been at the center of Wainwright's life. He began learning to play the piano at six and by his early teens was performing on tour with his mother, his aunt Anna McGarrigle, and his sister Martha Wainwright as the McGarrigle Sisters and Family.

Wainwright wrote his first song, "I'm A-Runnin'," for the children's film *Tommy Tricker and the Stamp Traveller* (1988, directed by Michael Rubbo), for which his mother and aunt had been engaged to provide the music. He was rewarded with nominations for a Juno Award (the Canadian equivalent of a Grammy) and for a Genie Award (the Canadian version of an Emmy) for his performance of the song in the television movie.

Wainwright spent his high school years at Millbrook, a boarding school in upstate New York. While in his early teens he discovered opera. This taste not only gave him his own musical niche in the family but also led him to incorporate classical elements in his songs, creating a texture and sophistication that sets them apart from ordinary pop fare.

At the age of fourteen Wainwright also discovered that he was gay and came out publicly. He has consistently been forthright about his sexual orientation.

After high school Wainwright briefly attended McGill University in Montreal, studying piano and composition, but left to write music and perform in clubs in Quebec.

He made a demo tape of his songs, which his father gave to producers at the fledgling Dreamworks Records company. Impressed, they quickly signed Wainwright to a contract.

Two years in the making, his self-titled first album came out in 1998 and was an immediate success. His

sophisticated tunes were compared to the work of Harry Nilsson and George Gershwin. *Rolling Stone* magazine named Wainwright the best new artist of the year.

As the album was set for release, some advisers at the record company suggested excising references to Wainwright's sexual orientation from the press kit, but Wainwright refused. His candor earned him a special place in the hearts of gay fans.

Wainwright's second album, *Poses* (2001), showed him maturing as a musician and was well received by both critics and his fans, among whom are many teen-age girls who enjoy his romantic love songs, as well as gay men, who are attracted to his boyish good looks and who flock to his concerts.

In the same year that *Poses* appeared, Wainwright contributed songs to the soundtracks of three films, Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Jessie Nelson's *I Am Sam*, and Andrew Adamson, Vicky Jensen, and Scott Marshall's *Shrek*.

While Wainwright's career was flourishing in the new millennium, his personal life was troubled. He became addicted to alcohol and drugs, including methamphetamines. In addition, he was depressed. Without a steady love in his life, he took to meeting men over the internet and engaging in loveless affairs.

To break this dangerous pattern Wainwright underwent a month of rehabilitation and therapy at the Hazelden Clinic in Minnesota. Upon completing the program he plunged back into his work, creating new material for the albums *Want One*, released in 2003, and *Want Two*, released in 2004.

Elizabeth Weinstein of the *Columbus Dispatch* called *Want One* "at once heartbreaking and heartening" with "lyrics [that] are emotionally charged and revealing."

In *Rolling Stone*, Barry Walters described *Want Two* as the least commercial of Wainwright's ventures, observing that with its "operatic vocals, symphonic arrangements, iconoclastic religiosity and Latin," the album "is unlikely to steal away any Jessica Simpson fans." But its adventuresomeness and musical and lyrical challenges helped solidify Wainwright's reputation for seriousness, and also for political engagement, as in "Gay Messiah," which responds to fundamentalist homophobia by imagining a counter-culture savior.

Wainwright also appears on the big screen, playing a nightclub singer in Martin Scorsese's *The Aviator* (2004). He also has a speaking role in an Merchant-Ivory film *Heights* (2004, directed by Chris Terrio). In addition, he contributed to the soundtrack of Ang Lee's phenomenal hit, *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

The singer maintains a busy concert schedule, appearing frequently in Canadian, English, and American cities. In a concert in Los Angeles, Wainwright was joined on-stage by Elton John, with whom he sang a duet of "Greek Song."

In 2006, in an extraordinary tribute to Judy Garland, Wainwright recreated the singer's legendary 1961 concert at Carnegie Hall in the same venue. Critic Stephen Holden described the concert as "a tour de force of politically empowering performance art in which a proudly gay male performer paid homage to the original and longest-running gay icon in the crowded pantheon of pop divas."

Wainwright has expressed an interest in doing more acting work while pursuing his career in singing and songwriting.

Wainwright has participated in benefits for AIDS charities in both the United States and Canada. As he has matured he has become more politically aware and has stated that he feels that "it's almost irresponsible of artists not to be socially conscious these days." He has, for instance, appeared at rallies protesting the war in Iraq. Although his songs are not generally political, he hopes to be able to reach out to his fan base, particularly glbtq people and youth, to encourage them to stand up for individual rights.

Wainwright was the producer as well as the composer and singer on his 2007 album *Release the Stars*. While working on it, he was living in Berlin to be with his life partner, theater producer Jörn Weisbrodt, who was the inspiration for the love song, "Slideshow."

Reviewer T'cha Dunlevy noted that while "all the familiar elements [of Wainwright's music] are there--the intricate songwriting, elaborate orchestration, wit, and raw emotion," *Release the Stars* shows a new "vulnerability, a patience, and a presence in his delivery."

Although the majority of the songs on the album deal with personal life and love--or the lack of it--the album's first single release, "Going to a Town," takes a step into the political arena, expressing Wainwright's dissatisfaction with the social and political direction of his adopted country, the United States.

Wainwright's opera, *Prima Donna*, about a former diva dreaming of a comeback, was first performed in Manchester, England in 2009. It was also presented in London, Melbourne, and Toronto before its American premiere during the 2012 season of the New York City Opera.

Reviewer Zachary Woolfe of the *New York Times* described *Prima Donna* as "an attempt to make the sweeping lyricism of Gounod and Puccini sing to us in a fresh way" but complained that it "is so busy being an homage that it has forgotten to be an opera," and he found the plot wanting.

In 2012 Wainwright released the album *Out of the Game*, which is more in the pop vein than his previous works but which, while it does not reflect all of the diverse styles that have informed his music, is nevertheless intensely personal, addressing three milestone events in his life.

The final song, "Candles," lays bare his grief over the loss of his mother, who died in 2010.

"Montauk," on the other hand, celebrates the arrival of his daughter, Viva Katherine Wainwright Cohen, born in February 2011 to Lorca Cohen, the daughter of Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen. Wainwright and Cohen have joint custody of the child, but in "Montauk" Wainwright sang to her about "your dad . . . and your other dad."

The "other dad" in the parenting partnership was Weisbrodt, now the artistic director of the Luminato Festival. Two of the tracks on the album--"Respectable Dive" and "Song of You"--address the couple's relationship.

Wainwright and Weisbrodt became engaged in 2010 and were married on August 23, 2012 in Montauk, Long Island, where the couple live. Wainwright's sister, Martha Wainwright, was among the musicians performing at the ceremony.

Other family members were also present for the joyous occasion, as were friends including Alan Cumming, Yoko Ono, Sean Lennon, Antony Hegarty (of Antony and the Johnsons), and Carrie Fisher.

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