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Travels with the pirate master

By [Mark McDermott](#) | December 15th, 2010 | Filed under [Music](#) | [No Comments](#)

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Wandering the world with Waits



Omar Torrez playing guitar behind Tom Waits on the Glitter and Doom tour.

Omar Torrez has always been a pirate, albeit a pirate of great refinement.

Think more Captain Jack Sparrow and less Captain Hook. He's light on his feet and inclined towards sly exuberance and an appreciation for the finer things in life. He wears scarves and eats well. He'll steal your women, alright, but he's going to be very particular about which vintage of wine is also included in the loot, and there is likely to be some parting complaint about the meager quality of your tequila. And that sound you hear as he traipses away will be his guitar, played deliriously, gorgeously and with celebratory gusto.

But Torrez, who was famously dubbed the "Latin Hendrix" as a 20-year-old in Seattle, has of late learned the lesson of less refinement. His encounter with of the great musical pirates of our times has left him a little roughed up, and that has been a very good thing. The heretofore sweet-voiced Torrez went travelling around the world with Tom Waits and has returned home bellowing at the moon.

“You get a little dirty, and you realize you like it,” said Torrez, who performs at a songwriter’s round at Saint Rocke on Sunday night.

Torrez’s adventures in Glitter and Doom – Waits’ 2008 world tour – began two years ago when he was sitting in a café and his phone rang. The voice on the other end was unmistakable.

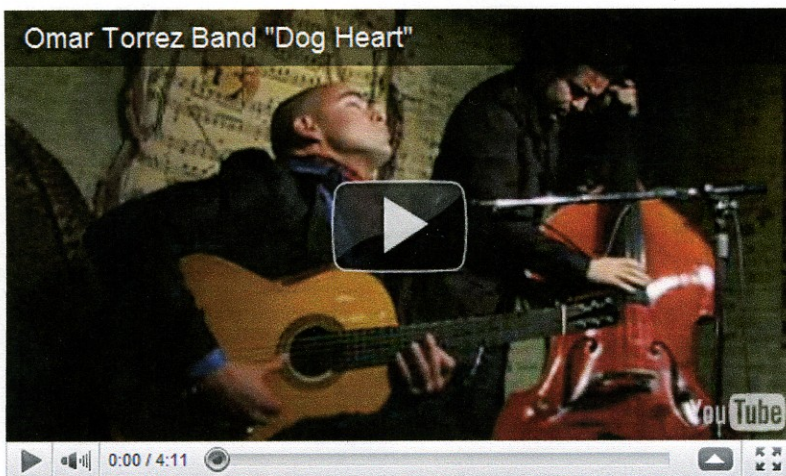
“Hello, Omar?” the gravelly voice asked.

“I’m like, ‘Ha ha ha, that sounds like Tom Waits,’” Torrez recalled. “That’s pretty funny.”

Waits had been wandering around the internet and ran across Torrez’s music. Something about the guitar lines apparently struck him. His longtime guitarist, Marc Ribot, wasn’t able to tour. So he wanted Torrez to come and hang out and play some music and see where it went. He quickly flew Torrez up to Sevastopol and they played and talked guitars.

Torrez was hired. Next thing he knew, he was rehearsing with Tom Waits and his band, and it was immediately unlike any musical experience he had ever had. Torrez had already travelled a broad musical road. While studying classical guitar and English literature at Western Washington University at the age of 20, he played an incendiary electric set at the famed Bumbershoot festival that led one Seattle newspaper critic to compare him to Hendrix and declare him poised to “reach out and kiss the sky.”

Torrez and his band ruled Seattle for three years. But he didn’t take the obvious path to rock stardom. Instead, he took a sabbatical from rock and instead travelled to Cuba and Spain and studied under rumba guitar masters Andulusian gypsies. He eventually returned to the States and began fusing all he had learned. The sound he came up with has aptly described as “Jimi Hendrix, Carlos Santana and James Brown drinking tequila in a bar in Russia, playing all night until they fade into the oblivion of the early morning.”



His music didn’t draw as much attention in the United States but it did internationally. In Russia, in particular, and influential critic named Artemy Troitsky lauded the arrival of a significant new artist.

“Omar Torrez is crossing many borders and establishing many unlikely links — between classical and pop, virtuoso and hot swinging, Latin and blues, European and American, sexy and pure... and doing all this with style,” Troitsky wrote.

But there was an ingredient missing. He made beautiful, even stunning music. But like so many virtuosos, because he could do almost anything, he had trouble clearly defining himself.

That is where Tom Waits came in. Waits, who could call upon almost any guitarist in the world, heard something simpatico in Torrez’s sound: here was another pirate, but perhaps one who didn’t know exactly who he was quite yet.

Torrez remembers having his mind “blown apart” on the second day of rehearsals. Waits asked him to “play outside” – out of tune – throughout an entire song.

“I was looking at him like, ‘Is this okay?’” Torrez said. “He seemed to be cool with it. He could tell I was having emotional difficulties playing out of tune for so long.”

Afterwards, they talked. In jazz, players often play outside for five or 10 seconds. Waits recalled the jazz saying that there are no wrong notes, just notes that need to be resolved. Usually that happens later in the song. But Waits had another idea. "Sometimes," he said, "it can be resolved in the next song."

"I'm like, 'Ho ho ho, that's heavy,'" Torrez said. "It's like adding another dimension – the time dimension... Then the next song is totally tonal and it resolves. It's revolutionary. And that was the second day. I sat awake that night in the hotel just contemplating that. It's beautiful."

The lessons had just begun. Out on tour, Torrez watched, listened, and learned. Waits did not sing songs; he inhabited them. Every song was like a movie. Every tiny element of the atmospherics had to be right.

"It was Jedi training. Genius school," Torrez said. "Yeah, it was amazing – the attention put into the vibe, every sound having to conform to the vibe. 'You've got too much treble in that guitar... or maybe one night, take a big giant rattle and beat it on the snare to get the right vibe. It's all in the details. That is a cliché, but it's so true.'"

Waits is not a fan of pretty. He likes his blues old and guttural, for example, not new and sleek – Blind Willie Johnson and Howlin' Wolf, not B.B. King or Stevie Ray Vaughn. One night in Paris, Torrez played in a way that veered towards pretty. Waits ambled back to him on the stage and let out a low growl. "Who are you, fucking Eric Clapton?" he snarled.

Towards the end of the tour, in Spain, Waits and Torrez had a conversation that is etched deep in the guitarist's mind. Waits was talking about Torrez's ability to play in so many styles.

"The way he phrased it was pretty interesting," Torrez said. "He was talking about how I have this ability to play all kinds of different styles pretty convincingly, and he said, 'That must be difficult for you.' But he didn't say you could play anything – he said, 'You could be anybody.'"

In Dublin, at the very end of the tour, Waits put it another way. "That gypsy thing you do, and that other thing, that pop thing, it's like you are two people that haven't been sewn together yet," he told Torrez.

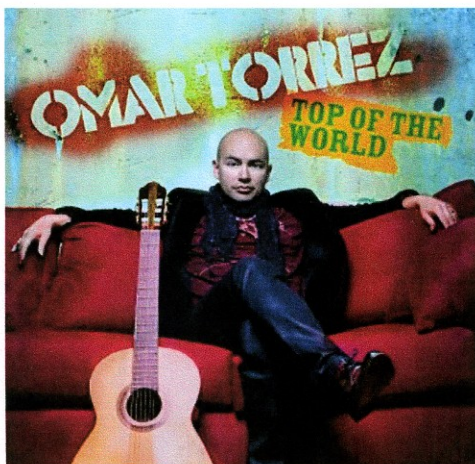
He was talking about forging his musical identity. Torrez understood. He had to become himself.

"You think about the kinds of music Tom makes, he borrows all kinds of influences from all over the place," Torrez said. "Tango, rumba, or blues, it all sounds completely like Tom Waits. That is something I really paid attention to."

And so Torrez came home and sewed himself together.

"He was sent to show me what I should be doing about myself," Torrez said.

The results can be partly heard on his new EP, "Top of the World." The very first song, "Marina" (co-written by the South Bay's Paul Duncan) is an announcement: the pirate has arrived, full throttled. He's not playing nice any more:



Omar Torrez's new EP, Top of the World.

"If your heart's not moved by the song I sing/Just think of all the gifts I'll bring/From Havana to Vera Cruz, San Juan offers the silken shoes/I never make an offer twice/so please accept me while I'm asking nice/Hey Marina, I drink too much and I laugh too loud... 'cause every girl, needs a pirate around the house..."

At the bottom end of the phrases, a startling boom of a voice erupts. Torrez didn't just learn from Waits. He took some loot from the master of the gutbucket growl, and he used it to fashion something that is very much his own.

"The trick is to simply soak it in tequila for a while," Torrez said. "Sometimes something rough is really more beautiful....The thing that might be ugly is more beautiful than the beautiful thing."

For more information, see www.omartorrez.com or www.saintrocke.com for tickets. ER

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