**WALT WAGNER**

*Reworks*

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Charles Darwin said it best: adapt or die. Okay, maybe that's not an exact quote, but the great English scientist was definitely on to something. Organisms that respond over time to the ever-changing environment are more likely to survive and thrive.

While you may not find this crazy idea in Junior's textbooks these days, it's audible in every facet of Walt Wagner's *Reworks*. With its distinctive renditions of songs popularized by DJ Shadow, My Bloody Valentine, Fleet Foxes, and more, this live recording of the beloved pianist's farewell performance shows how three Seattle institutions – Wagner, Canlis restaurant, and Sub Pop Records – have evolved over the years.

When veteran pianist Wagner first landed at Canlis in 1996, the Emerald City's premiere destination for fine dining was in the midst of significant changes: a new chef, new uniforms, modifications to its iconic building overlooking Lake Union. That required a fresh approach to dinner music, too. "I knew what the status quo was, but the owners wanted new energy," recalls Wagner.

Although he started out with a set heavy on the Great American Songbook and the occasional pop tune, that gradually gave way to more adaptations of modern fare. "Increasingly I kept working in more new, edgier music. In the beginning my sets were 90 percent standards. In the last few years, I was mostly playing very contemporary music."

As young staff members recommended new artists and songs, Wagner's repertoire grew deeper and more varied – especially after the next generation of the Canlis family took over in 2003. Yet whether the source material was Pink Floyd, Prince, Metallica, or the Weeknd, the challenge remained the same: "To distill the vibe on a record, the very essence of a song, into solo piano playing." Performances as memorable yet tasteful as the cuisine, interiors, and views of Canlis.

One fateful night a couple years ago, Sub Pop CEO Megan Jasper and co-president Tony Kiewel were dining at the award-winning when they recognized melodies by Adele and Daft Punk wafting through the restaurant and decided to investigate. Canlis co-owner Mark Canlis offered the Sub Pop crew a full tour, and when he pulled out a vintage copy of the '60s LP *Live At Canlis*, an idea was born. With Wagner preparing to retire, the time was ripe for a live recording that captured his inimitable gifts in their natural surroundings.

In preparation for the big night, Wagner sat down with Jasper and Kiewel for more ideas. "I wanted them to feed me tunes that they loved and could imagine hearing me play." Sub Pop alumni Fleet Foxes and Band of Horses were already staples of Wagner's sets, but what magic could he work with DJ Shadow, Phoenix, or My Bloody Valentine? He had three months to find out.

The album's opening selection, "Building Steam with a Grain of Salt," provides a glimpse into Wagner's modus operandi. "The first time I listened to it, I said 'well what can I do with that?'" he recalls. "But the more I listened, the more I noticed these signature moments in the song, and through messing around with those and improvisation, I ended up with my version."

Recorded before a packed house on October 9, 2016, *Reworks* is more than just a souvenir of a very special evening; it captures decades of musicianship that forged Wagner's distinctive style. At the age of six, he couldn't keep his mitts off of the family piano – even though it was stored under a moving blanket in the basement. He studied classical piano throughout his youth, yet kept his playing secret until he'd reached his teens, when he began playing in rock bands.

While learning to improvise and play more rhythmically made him a hit with his peers, his classical instruction made his band the Exotics especially popular with local bookers. "We were one of the only bands that could read music, so we accompanied different stars of the time: Dick and Dee Dee, Johnny Crawford, all these '50s and early '60s artists that came to town." The Exotics even cut a single, a Wagner original entitled "Oasis," that made it to #3 on local radio station KJR in the summer of 1961.

In the years that followed, Wagner played at downtown Seattle watering holes and eateries including the Dublin House and Plaza Five, and refined his jazz chops. In the '70s he began working on cruise ships and supporting entertainers like Bob Hope and George Burns. Two decades at Canlis taught him to interact with listeners in a whole new way. And now, flush with excitement over *Reworks*, Wagner may not stay retired for long.

"This record is totally out of the box for me," he concludes. "It's a totally new adventure, and I don't know what kind of life it's going to have. If it catches on, I could see myself making a lot more music in this style."