

# *Vibrate*: How good is the best of singer-songwriter Rufus Wainwright?

By Hiram Lee  
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*Vibrate: The Best of Rufus Wainwright* collects singles released throughout the career of acclaimed singer-songwriter and pianist Rufus Wainwright. It provides listeners with an opportunity to assess the work of this interesting if uneven performer.

Born in Rhinebeck, New York 1973, Wainwright grew up in Canada in a well-known musical family. His father is singer-songwriter Loudon Wainwright III, his mother the late folksinger Kate McGarrigle (1946-2010). A sister, Martha Wainwright, has also had a successful career as a singer. His aunts and various cousins are also musically inclined.

While he performed concerts with his family when he was still very young, Wainwright's own career really began with his debut album *Rufus Wainwright* in 1998. Numerous other albums would follow, including *Poses* (2001), *Want One* (2003), *Want Two* (2004), *Release the Stars* (2007) and *Out of the Game* (2012).

Wainwright remained for the most part one of those figures who achieves a certain degree of critical recognition but only relatively minor popular success. His career has been interesting and unusual. In addition to his work in pop music, Wainwright has composed operas and performed and recorded the music of Judy Garland.

In returning to the songs collected on *Vibrate*, one is struck first and foremost by Wainwright's voice. Often described as "operatic," it is at times a bit mannered or stiff. There are moments however, and more than a few of them, in which Wainwright's rich tenor is simply stunning. Working as he did in the years in which melismatic overkill was pervasive in popular music, it is also a special treat to hear a singer who has always known the value of a good, solid whole note.

As a songwriter, Wainwright has grown considerably over the years. Early songs like "Poses," "Foolish

Love," or "Grey Gardens," all from his 1998 debut and included on the new compilation, showed promise then, but do not hold up quite as well as more recent recordings included here. The verses on "Poses" get to be a bit much ("The green autumnal parks conducting and the city streets a wondrous chorus. . ."), though the chorus itself is quite lovely.

The early songs tend to be overly verbose, so full of words that no room is left for a melody to emerge. They are overburdened, trying very hard to paint a picture of the world, but unable to do so convincingly.

By the time he arrives at the non-conformist "Out of the Game" in 2012 or "Going to a Town" in 2007, however, Wainwright has developed into a very strong composer of pop songs. Melody and lyrics complement one another. The songs feel more natural, even effortless. There is space, time to think, to listen. There are also more danceable songs, more songs that speak to the feet as well as the head.

"Going to a Town," in particular, is a beautiful song. Something of the disgust and disappointment felt by millions toward official life in the US comes through. He sings as the song begins:

I'm going to a town that has already been burned down

I'm going to a place that has already been disgraced  
I'm going to see some folks who have already been let down

I'm so tired of America

The controversial refrain about America expresses not a hostility toward "America" or "Americans," in general, but toward the government and toward all the attacks on democratic rights. As Wainwright told one interviewer, the song is about the US, which "dominates the planet but is in peril of losing democracy."

The song refers to ruined towns and people, as well as anti-democratic opposition to gay marriage. “I got a life to lead!” sings Wainwright, who is gay.

While one admires the best in Rufus Wainwright’s work, one also encounters real difficulties and limitations. They do not belong to Wainwright alone. They are not personal failings, but are instead problems bound up with the difficulties of the times in which he developed as an artist.

Rufus Wainwright’s career matured at a time when identity politics had already come to dominate considerable sections of the middle class, including substantial portions of the entertainment industry. In such circles, sexual orientation and personal identity are treated as almost everything, but they are *not*, in fact, everything.

It is difficult to find an interview conducted with Wainwright in which sexuality does not come up. In the end, he may be considered a “gay icon” by many critics, but the fact that Wainwright is gay may be far from the most interesting thing about him!

One thing he and others must begin to address: Gay or straight, unless one is very rich it is hard to make a life for oneself and it is getting harder still.

There is perhaps too much self-involvement, self-reflection, self-everything in this music, ultimately, and too little of the world. The one new song included on the album is “Me and Liza,” about a feud between Wainwright and singer Liza Minnelli following the former’s Judy Garland project.

Wainwright is a talented artist and a beautiful singer. And on the very good “Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk,” he has shown himself to have a capacity for self-criticism. There is something to him. But as it stands, what he is able to see and say about real life is still too narrow.

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