



Kentucky Avenue – Tom Waits – Notes



- **Activity types:** Reading, Matching, Speaking, Vocabulary.
- **Level:** Intermediate / Upper-Intermediate
- **Time:** 1 hour.
- **Note:** Taken from Tom Waits' 1978 album Blue Valentine, this contains many autobiographical references, with real people from his childhood. The strongest influence was Waits' childhood friend, a boy named Kipper, who suffered from polio.

An online blog describes Waits singing:

"with such feeling and conviction, you can't help but wonder if he's singing about someone in his own youth. There is a deep pain seeping up from underneath his reflections of childhood, and an abrasive honesty to every word he sings. He purposely leads us to believe that the song is just a flashback of youth gone wild. Then, with a sudden impact, the lyrics reveal the true story...

This isn't just some song about two punks; this is a song about two friends, or perhaps siblings, one of whom is disabled. The other is doing everything within his power to make his companion feel 'normal', as if there were such a thing."

(<http://popdose.com/basement-songs-kentucky-avenue-tom-waits/>)

- This worksheet was prepared for the Disabled Access Friendly Campaign, supported by Luke Prodromou.



- 1) Tell students they are going to listen to a song by Tom Waits, about his childhood memories. Elicit their memories. Ask:

What games did you play as a child?

Were there any children that had difficulty playing these games?

- 2) Play the first two verses of the song. Ask students to note some memories from Waits' childhood. Feedback.
- 3) Play the final verse. What do we find out about his friend? What does Waits want to do for him?
- 4) Give each student a copy of the first page of the worksheet. Ask them to read the lyrics and complete the vocabulary exercise.

Key:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| a) church key | g) hacksaw |
| b) hobo jungle | h) lawn |
| c) trowel | i) four bullet holes |
| d) hunchback | j) spokes |
| e) gooseneck risers | k) flip him the bird |
| f) switchblade | |

- 5) Give each student a copy of the second page of worksheet. They match Tom Waits' comments on the song with the correct verse (or title). Feedback.

Key:

- A. Verse 2
- B. Verse 1
- C. General
- D. Title
- E. Verse 1
- F. Verse 3
- G. Verse 2
- H. Verse 3

Words:

- B. Mrs. Storm
- D. Kentucky Avenue
- G. Joey Navinski, Dicky Faulkner, Hilda
- H. freight train

- 6) Discuss the contents of the song.
- 7) Play the song. Students follow the lyrics.
- 8) Follow up: Homework Activity. Write a short newspaper article (at least 100 words) based on your or Tom Waits' childhood.



Kentucky Avenue – Tom Waits



Well, Eddie Grace's Buick got four bullet holes in the side
And Charlie DeLisle is sittin' at the top of an avocado tree
Mrs. Storm will stab you with a steak knife if you step on her lawn
I got a half a pack of Lucky Strikes, man, so come along with me
And let's fill our pockets with macadamia nuts
And go over to Bobby Goodmanson's and jump off the roof

Well, Hilda plays strip poker when her mama's cross the street
Joey Navinski says she put her tongue in his mouth
And Dicky Faulkner's got a switchblade and some gooseneck risers
That eucalyptus is a hunchback, there's a wind down from the south
So let me tie you up with kite string and I'll show you the scabs on my knee
Watch out for the broken glass, put your shoes and socks on
And come along with me
Let's follow that fire truck, I think your house is burnin' down
And go down to the hobo jungle and kill some rattlesnakes with a trowel
And we'll break all the windows in the old Anderson place
And we'll steal a bunch of boysenberries and I'll smear 'em on your face
I'll get a dollar from my mama's purse and buy that skull and crossbones ring
And you can wear it 'round your neck on an old piece of string

Then we'll spit on Ronnie Arnold and flip him the bird
And slash the tires on the school bus, now don't say a word
I'll take a rusty nail and scratch your initials in my arm
And I'll show you how to sneak up on the roof of the drugstore
I'll take the spokes from your wheelchair and a magpie's wings
And I'll tie 'em to your shoulders and your feet
I'll steal a hacksaw from my dad and cut the braces off your legs
And we'll bury them tonight out in the cornfield
Just put a church key in your pocket, we'll hop that freight train in the hall
We'll slide all the way down the drain to New Orleans in the fall

Read the lyrics and match the underlined words to the explanations below.

- a) a bottle or can opener, esp. as used to open a container of beer, named for its form.
- b) a gathering place for the unemployed of a city, often near the dumping ground and usually equipped with homemade shacks or huts for those with no other place to live.
- c) a hand-tool used for gardening.
- d) a person with a back deformation.
- e) a piece of plumbing (possibly used in this case as a toy or a weapon).
- f) a pocket knife with a spring opening.
- g) a tool for cutting metal.
- h) a well-kept stretch of open, grass-covered land in front of a house or in a park.
- i) the Roadmaster model of this car featured trademark portholes, known as Ventiports.
- j) the metal rods between the hub and the rim of a wheel.
- k) to gesture (to someone) by raising a clenched fist with the second finger extended; to give the finger to.

Sources: a), b) Dictionary Of American Slang, Wentworth/Flexner; k) American-Australian slang dictionary, O'Shea.



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Read the following extracts from comments Tom Waits has made about this song. One is a general comment on the theme of the song, one refers to the title and there are two for each verse.

Beside each extract write **General**, **Title**, **Verse 1** (there are two), **Verse 2** (two) or **Verse 3** (two), and fill in the missing words.

A. *"And I finally got me (myself) a paper route. I used to get up at 1 o' clock in the morning so I could deliver my papers and still have time to break the law..."*
(Note: refer to the first breaking of the law)

B. *"And there was a woman called _____ . She lived with her sister. She used to sit in her kitchen with her window open and a twelve-gauge shotgun [sticking] out of it ... so we took the long way around."* (Note: in the song she has a different weapon)

C. *"Childhood is very important to me as a writer, I think the things that happen then, the way you perceive them and remember them in later life, have a very big effect on what you do later on."*
"It's what you don't know that's usually more interesting. Things you wonder about, things you have yet to make up your mind about. There's more to deal with than just your fundamental street wisdom. Dreams. Nightmares."

D. *"I grew up on a street called _____ in Whittier, California."*

E. *"I had my first cigarette when I was about seven years old. It was such a thrill. I used to pick 'em up right out of the gutter after it was raining. My dad smoked Kents. Now, I never liked Kents - I tried to get him to change brands."*

F. *"My best friend, when I was a kid, had polio. I didn't understand what polio was. I just knew it took him longer to get to the bus stop than me."*

G. *"There was a guy called _____ who played the trombone, and a guy called _____ whose nose was always running."*
(Note: the names here appear in the same order as the song, after a reference to _____ being naughty when she is alone at home.)

H. *"When I was a kid there used to be a train in the hall. Every night a train went through the hall. To get into the bathroom I used to have to wait into my doorway. The _____ used to run right through the center of the house."*

Sources:

A: introducing the song at BBC's "Tonight In Person" TV show. July 26, 1979 – video on Teacher's Area of www.tuneintoenglish.com

B, D, E, G: Waits introducing the song at the Apollo Theatre, London, UK. March 23, 1976

C (1): "Hard Rain" New Musical Express (UK) (Gavin Martin). Date: New York. October 19, 1985

C (2), F: "Tom Waits: Waits And Double Measures" Smash Hits magazine (Johnny Black). March 18, 1981

H. "MTV's The Cutting Edge 'Limo Interview'", 1987

<http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics/bluevalentine/kentuckyavenue.html>