



Hard Ground

By Tom Waits

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Hard Ground By Tom Waits

Michael O'Brien got out of his car one day in 1975 and sought the acquaintance of a man named John Madden who lived under an overpass. Their initial contact grew into a friendship that O'Brien chronicled for the *Miami News*, where he began his career as a staff photographer. O'Brien's photo essays conveyed empathy for the homeless and the disenfranchised and won two Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Awards. In 2006, O'Brien reconnected with the issue of homelessness and learned the problem has grown exponentially since the 1970s, with as many as 3.5 million adults and children in America experiencing homelessness at some point in any given year.

In *Hard Ground*, O'Brien joins with renowned singer-songwriter Tom Waits, described by the *New York Times* as "the poet of outcasts," to create a portrait of homelessness that impels us to look into the eyes of people who live "on the hard ground" and recognize our common humanity. For Waits, who has spent decades writing about outsiders, this subject is familiar territory. Combining their formidable talents in photography and poetry, O'Brien and Waits have crafted a work in the spirit of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in which James Agee's text and Walker Evans's photographs were "coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative" elements. Letting words and images communicate on their own terms, rather than merely illustrate each other, *Hard Ground* transcends documentary and presents independent, yet powerfully complementary views of the trials of homelessness and the resilience of people who survive on the streets.

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Hard Ground By Tom Waits Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Review

"Other collections of lost souls (Richard Avedon's *In the American West* comes to mind) are different. . . . We meet O'Brien's people one on one. Their 'otherness' is removed. The photographs engender compassion and empathy. If that sounds simple, it is because it is simple. And, as you know, being simple is very, very difficult. *Hard Ground* is a rare and powerful book." (John Loengard, *Life* magazine photographer and picture editor, and one of *American Photo* magazine's "100 most influential people in photography")

"If I can think of a book to relate to this one, it would be James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. That book was photographed in 1936—during the Great Depression—and published in 1941. It had an enormous influence—and still does—on the way photography and writing can work together as a catalyst for social change. . . . I think *Hard Ground* has this potential." (Mary Ellen Mark, internationally renowned photographer and author of sixteen books, including *Seen Behind the Scene*, *Exposure*, and *Twins*)

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About the Author

For more than thirty years, MICHAEL O'BRIEN has worked as a freelance photographer for national publications, including *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Esquire*, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *ESPN Magazine*, and *Texas Monthly*. He has also published the book *The Face of Texas*, and his work is housed in the permanent collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the International Center for Photography in New York.

TOM WAITS is critically recognized as one of America's most influential and significant songwriters. In a career that has spanned four decades, he has delved into the worlds of recording, literature, and live performance, as well as theater and film as both actor and composer. His songs chronicle the lives of both the misbegotten and the entitled while wrestling with life's big themes: love, loss, war, grace, madness, God, corruption and beauty. Waits has won two Grammy Awards and an Oscar nomination.

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