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## ARTS DEVO

by JASON CASSIDY • jasonc@newsreview.com



**“THERE’S A WORLD GOING ON UNDERGROUND”** That line from **Tom Waits’** song “Underground” is on my mind as the Labor Day weekend approaches and the buzz of preparations by the **Butcher Shop** hive intensifies in these last few days before the annual free outdoor theater festival goes off in a south Chico orchard. “Underground” is the opening track on Waits’ 1983 album, *Swordfishtrombones*, which kicked off a trilogy of gloriously weird and beautiful releases (followed by *Rain Dogs* and *Frank’s Wild Years*—**Arts DEVO’s** three faves from his oeuvre) that found the man fully embracing his persona as the carnival barker for all the freaks and barflies buzzing away down there, “awake while the rest of the world is asleep.”



Tom Waits and his underground friends.

Of course, within the friendly confines of Chico, the freaks and barflies aren’t relegated to the underground. We live in this naturally beautiful place where creative exploration and having a good time can become a way of life. The Butcher Shop, for me, is the ultimate celebration of that, where Chico’s extended tribe gathers by the thousands in one spot to drink beer and watch a bunch of weird original theater, music and art.

One of the most enduring—and foundational—traditions of the Butcher Shop was actually inspired by *Swordfishtrombones*. **Dave the Butcher**—the house band that’s been accompanying the theater productions, as well as rocking the proceedings on its own since the early formative years when the festival was a backyard happening at the home of the Latimers (the first family of the Butcher Shop, as well as the **Blue Room Theatre**)—is named after an off-kilter circus-music instrumental from the album.

“We were in love with Captain Beefheart and Waits when we started the Butcher Shop in ’89,” said **Denver Latimer**, when I asked him about the band’s origins. Latimer is the arts director for **Slow Theatre**—the theater company that’s produced the festival since it went big in the orchard in 2009—and he said that early incarnations of the group often covered Waits and Beefheart, which were perfect complements to the avant-garde proceedings.

While some of the core Butcher Shop performers—most notably Denver’s siblings, **Dylan** and **Elizabeth Latimer**—have made regular appearances as guest singers for the band since its beginnings, the makeup of **Dave the Butcher** is ever-changing. In the past three years, local keyboardist/singer/songwriter **Webster Moore** has taken on the role of musical director. Some of the players joining him this year are regulars—vocalists Elizabeth Latimer, **Adriane Westerdahl** and **Donald Beaman**, drummers **Cody Naab** and **Scott Lehman** (aka **Scotty Imp**)—as well as some newcomers, including violinist **Peter Washington**, bassist **Aron Linker** and trumpet/flute/synth/French horn player **Evan Goodson**.



Elizabeth Latimer with Dave the Butcher.  
PHOTO BY SHARON DEMEYER

Moore told me that there aren’t as many stand-alone musical numbers this season, with the bulk of the songs “pretty much directly related to the show.” Nearly all the music was composed specifically for this year’s program, titled *The Director’s Cut*, with Moore saying that sometimes the direction he received was as simple and wide open as composing something “dark and melancholy.”

“There’s a lot of freedom to try and experiment new ideas,” he added. “I see it as a palette to get weird.” Amen to that! As always, all this good, dirty fun is free to enjoy. As in, just ride your bike out by 6 p.m. on Saturday or Sunday, Aug. 31 or Sept. 1, and plop a blanket on the grass and let the weirdness wash over you. But it’s not free for the organizers to put it on. If you got it to give, help keep the tradition alive by visiting the Butcher Shop’s fundraising campaign at [gofundme.com](http://gofundme.com) (search “Butcher Shop 2019”) and depositing some digital coin in the keep-Chico-fun bank.