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## A Mad Magical Poet: Essays on the Life and Art of Warren Zevon

Zachary E. Tenney  
*Grand Valley State University*

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# A Mad Magical Poet

*Essays on the Life and Art of Warren Zevon*

by Zachary E. Tenney

Submitted for Completion of the Senior Project

to the Frederik Meijer Honors College

Grand Valley State University

April 25th, 2020

*Dedicated warmly to my high school buddy,  
Kyle Hodgson, whose simple “You should listen to this guy”  
sent me on the most meaningful music journey of my life.*

*And, for giving Warren Zevon a career:  
Thanks always to Jackson!*

## Author's Note and Acknowledgements

The following text consists of an introduction detailing my personal relationship with Warren Zevon's music, followed by three essays of a critical/analytical nature on different aspects of Zevon's career: 1) a general overview of Zevon's appeal as a literary and philosophical figure, 2) an exploration of his environmental crisis song, "Run Straight Down," and 3) a commentary on the role of violence in Zevon's songs. In each of these, I make reference to several other songs in connection with the primary themes of the essay, but there are, of course, some that are not mentioned. These are worth consideration too, for both casual listeners and those interested, as I am, in thinking about Zevon on a deeper level. I selected topics and themes that were most interesting to me; others may find cause for similar analysis of entirely different Zevon-related subjects. I fully support that, and I hope other writers find a way to explore those one day.

In addition, all commentary contained here is the opinion of the author, or of the authors quoted in the essays. There is no one "right" way to hear or think about a song, so consider these essays just one exploration by one passionate fan, and feel free to agree or disagree.

The essays are also composed to function as standalone pieces, so occasionally a bit of information may appear twice.

Finally: all lyrics quoted in these essays are the property of their authors and their estates; I use them here under the convention of fair use, for an educational purpose. I am not profiting from their usage.

I also wish to express my gratitude to several individuals, without whom this project would not have been what it now is. First, thanks to Professor David Vessey, of the Philosophy Department here at Grand Valley, for acting as my faculty advisor for this project. His insights, feedback, and encouragement were essential to this experience. Second, much thanks to authors James Campion and Professor George Plasketes, each of whom has written a book of their own on Warren Zevon. I was fortunate to have conversations with them regarding my essays, and they were very generous and enthusiastic in sharing some of their time with me. I spoke with Connor Reid, as well, a filmmaker from New York busy at work on a Zevon documentary. Thanks to him for his time and for working on such a cool project himself. I am also grateful to Carl Hiaasen, who was unable to contribute directly to this project on account of other obligations, but who contributed in spirit by answering my letter with words of encouragement.

Thanks also to Director Roger Gilles and everyone at GVSU's Frederik Meijer Honors College for organizing such an effective and independent system for the completion of these Senior Projects that allows students to pursue essentially whatever sort of subject and project format they desire. And, special gratitude to all those involved in selecting my project for the 2020 Outstanding Senior Thesis award. I have worked very hard at getting others to appreciate Warren Zevon; it would seem that some found my work moving enough to award me recognition. Thank you again.

Finally, I thank my parents, who encourage me and support me in many ways, not the least of which is helping fund the education that allowed me to pursue this project in the first place. In a way, too, I owe my dad for my love of Warren Zevon. It may have been my friend Kyle who pointed me directly to him, but my taste in that era and style of music comes in the first place from my dad. It is the greatest gift one could ask for. Thank you.

## Searching for a Heart

“Blue feeling to the maximum,” Warren croons on “The Heartache,” a beautiful ballad painfully worthy of its title from 1987’s *Sentimental Hygiene*.<sup>1</sup> Though I never met the man, I feel comfortable referring to him as Warren. His songs are more like friends to me than a lot of people ever have been.

*Blue feeling to the maximum.* No matter how shitty I feel, that line always makes me smile. When I hear it, I think, *Yeah. Damn right, Warren. At least you get it.*

Songwriter and Zevon contemporary Bonnie Raitt once said, “We had to be truly twisted to be able to get Warren--and I mean that in a good way.”<sup>2</sup> I do not know how true that is of others, but I believe it applies to me, by a number of metrics. Zevon aside (though surely included), the kind of art and literature I’m drawn to and enjoy are often the kind of things that make others a little nervous, if not outright uncomfortable: the unfiltered violence and nihilism of Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*, the scandalous perversion of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*, the thematic obscurity and arguably excessive (though I do not necessarily endorse that critique) brutality of Lars von Trier’s film *Antichrist*. My sense of humor skews toward the irreverent (think Lenny Bruce), the darkly vulgar (think Quentin Tarantino or *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*), and the absurd, quirky, and ironic (think the filmography of the Coen brothers). My taste in music is, perhaps obviously, a generation or two behind that of most of my peers, and for the most part I consider this a point of pride, though I am not as dead-set against contemporary music as was when I was younger (read: less mature). While everyone else was listening to--well, I honestly couldn’t even tell you what--I was listening to Pink Floyd’s *The Wall* every night before bed, relating to it as only a teenager can, letting the angst and anger of Roger Waters pass through me in a ritual of Aristotelian catharsis, or else trying to find myself in the nasal sneers and opaque poems of Bob Dylan, the defiant narratives of Tom Petty, and the operatic epics of Pete Townshend.

Make what you will of all that. Maybe it explains why I am so interested in Warren Zevon, maybe it doesn’t. Whatever the answer, it remains true that both myself and Warren are different, and so my relationship with his music is different. The way I relate to his music is not the same as the way I relate to those others I mentioned, though I love them dearly. Dylan and Townshend made it big because they wrote things that had common appeal across a culture (“talkin’ about my generation...”<sup>3</sup>), Petty and Waters because they wrote so clearly and beautifully about aspects of the human condition *everybody* can relate to.

Warren Zevon pretty much never made it big, except for a short span of time on the strength of one now-notorious werewolf boogie. But, that’s just it. Nobody would ever write a phrase like “werewolf boogie” unless they were writing about Warren Zevon. He is unique, a true one-of-a-kind, a rarity that not everyone can, or even should, relate to.

But I, along with a relatively small number of others, do relate to him, and that makes the connection a special one. It was almost instantaneous, too. One day, a friend, to whom I have dedicated this collection of essays, casually suggested I check Warren out. I shelved the recommendation for a rainy day. But then, a few days later, I heard “Werewolves of London” in an

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Zevon, “The Heartache,” recorded 1987, Track 9 on *Sentimental Hygiene*, Virgin.

<sup>2</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 117.

<sup>3</sup> Pete Townshend, “My Generation,” recorded October 1965, Brunswick (UK), Decca (US).

episode of the television program *Supernatural*<sup>4</sup> (I still can't help but wonder whether something "supernatural" was at play).

*Hey, I know that one*, I thought. *Isn't that by that Zevon guy?* I dug it enough to make my friend's recommendation a priority. Shortly thereafter, I listened to the entirety of *Excitable Boy*, and was sold from the first note. Here was a songwriter whose innate sense of rhythm and melody was so instantly clear and intoxicating that I couldn't help but latch on immediately. In a matter of weeks, I'd listened to several other albums and ordered a biography of the man, the reading of which quickly fueled further listening. It was, and is, in a word, an obsession, one which continues to deepen as my life goes on.

My life. I suppose I should say a little about that, if I am to really explain my relationship with the life and music of Warren Zevon.

The long and short of it is that I spent the first eighteen years of my existence as an anxious, slightly confused young fellow. I did not fit in at school, which I both resented and relished. I hated it because, of course, the world I was born into had given me the idea that fitting in was what one was supposed to do. I loved it because fitting in seemed boring, inauthentic, fake.

Still, it made for a lonely existence. I didn't date in high school (I was too busy listening to *The Wall*--yikes. Talk about "trouble waiting to happen."<sup>5</sup>), and the one time I tried I got rejected somewhat embarrassingly. I did have a small circle of friends, but even there I did not feel the proverbial sense of belonging. At times it seemed my role was little more than to be the butt of various jokes. The nascent Zevonite in me was alright with that--better to be laughed at than to not be a source of laughter at all, somebody had to be the worst so somebody else could be the best...right? These were the jokes I told myself, but my own laughter was sour.

My acceptance of these circumstances was a result of necessity rather than choice. I didn't really *like* the way things were, but what was I to do? Nobody gives you any rights until you're eighteen, and they barely give you any money before that either (or after, I've found), so I was stuck. It didn't stop me from yearning for more, for all the things teenagers yearn for--sex, parties, real friends who understood me, and the alcohol and drugs that seemed important to all those things, at least in every rock 'n' roll biography I'd ever read.

And of course there was one place, eternally mythologized by naively optimistic parents and state-sponsored high school counselors, not to mention an infinity of films of all kinds, whereat I was given to understand all these things and more awaited: college. (Go ahead, you can laugh.)

So that's how I thought of things. Whatever problems I had in high school, they were the fault of parents who wanted to know where I was going, who with, what for, and for how long.<sup>6</sup> Or perhaps moralistic teachers were to blame. Maybe it was the culture of my town (I'm not really sure it has one, which is probably the problem). Whatever it was, my view was that all I had to do to escape it was hang on until graduation, then get the hell out of dodge and move into a dorm, where everything would be different (you may laugh again here). I'd be independent, likely have access to alcohol, and in a place where everybody else would be excited about independence and alcohol. What could go wrong? If I could just get there...

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<sup>4</sup> *Supernatural*, Season 10, Episode 4, "Paper Moon," directed by Jeannot Szwarc, written by Adam Glass, featuring Jensen Ackles and Jared Padalecki, aired October 28, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Warren Zevon, "Trouble Waiting to Happen," recorded 1987, Track 4 on *Sentimental Hygiene*, Virgin.

<sup>6</sup> My parents are going to read this, so I feel obligated to say that all is forgiven: it's a teenager's job to resent you, but it's your job to care, and regardless of anything implied in what I said above, you did it well. Love, Z.

Then I did. After four years of high school misery, a year and a half of which was insult-to-injured by a horrific fastfood job, I was free, out of my hometown and, so I thought, ready for anything.

The college experience did not turn out to be a glamorous escapade in which lifelong friendships were formed and a plethora of parties were attended. This, I am sure, was the experience for those without social inhibitions, who made friends easily, who I heard laughing and screaming outside my dorm room window at ungodly hours while I sat and listened, wondering why I wasn't with them.

Later I learned that the term for my condition was *social anxiety*, and that it had a side of something called *depression* (or maybe vice versa--hell, sometimes they both feel like main courses). I would eventually see a counselor about it. I still do.

But before I came around to the fact that I needed some kind of help, I found comfort in lots of music, but mostly in the strange, twisted (there's that word again) world of Warren Zevon. I discovered his music only a month or two into my freshman year of college, and it has been a mainstay in my listening ever since.

Why?

Well, for one thing, he was just a *different* sort of songwriter. In his music, one does not hear the honey-glossed pop romance one might in his friend Bruce Springsteen's, nor the idyllic coastal waves in his other friend, Jackson Browne's. Gone, too, are the chimeric, ever-evolving poetics of Bob Dylan, the wiry melancholy of Neil Young, and the heartland passion of Tom Petty...all things for which I had a serious passion, but perhaps also a limited tolerance. When I discovered Warren Zevon, it was possible I'd overdosed on romance, and so was susceptible to his darkness, his honesty, his jaded vision. Whether it was the gloomily festive, appropriately collegiate mantra of "I'll sleep when I'm dead!"<sup>7</sup> or the brutal admission, "My shit's fucked up,"<sup>8</sup> I heard clear, concise truths in Warren's words, and was drawn to them.

Truth. Now *there's* an idea. For as much as I loved and still love the cutesy two-minute stories of the early Beatles records and the like, I found more meaning in songs that confronted how things actually are. "She loves you, *yeah, yeah, yeah...*"<sup>9</sup> What kind of world is that? To me it was a fantasy. There was no she, and if there was, she definitely didn't want anything to do with me.

Warren didn't sing about that shit. He wrote about real life, in all its ugliness. Sure, there was an absurd fiction or two regarding werewolves and gorillas that made its way into the mix, but ultimately Warren was in the business of looking existence dead in the eye and singing about what he saw. He recognized love as conflict, life as violence, living as pain--and best of all, he could laugh about all of it. For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like I was being bullshitted. Here was a guy writing about the 1914 United States occupation of Veracruz *from the perspective* of the people actually *in* Veracruz. My high school history classes didn't so much as mention that event, and would never dare tell us that version of the story.

Here was a guy who was unafraid to acknowledge the darker side of the rock 'n' roll lifestyle, even as he lived it and was still over a decade from sobering up, and the difficulty of dealing with his own sense of unbelonging:

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<sup>7</sup> Warren Zevon, "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead," recorded 1976, Track 8 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>8</sup> Warren Zevon, "My Shit's Fucked Up," recorded 1999, Track 9 on *Life'll Kill Ya*, Artemis.

<sup>9</sup> John Lennon and Paul McCartney, "She Loves You," recorded July 1963, Parlophone (UK), Swan (US).

*Still wakin' up in the mornin' with shakin' hands  
 And I'm tryin' to find a girl who understands me  
 But except in dreams you're never really free  
 Don't the sun look angry at me?*<sup>10</sup>

I don't claim to relate to exactly whatever was going through Warren's mind when he wrote those lines, but the sentiment is something I can grasp. Regret, confusion, loneliness. A preference for dreams over reality. The fact is, I see a lot of myself in Warren Zevon: I see the fucked up, emotionally conflicted soul of a man who, like myself and many others, possessed strong feelings but often lacked a healthy outlet for them. I see the literature-obsessed polyglot: part of the way I dealt with the chronic loneliness of my college years was spending entire weekends in Barnes & Noble stores, buying everything from books by Kierkegaard to Thomas Hardy novels to books on the history of the dinosaurs and plenty more. I'll be the first to admit that my bibliophilia is a subconscious, or perhaps just conscious, imitation of Zevon's own notorious reading habit. Warren was the first person I met who read as much as I did.

That dedication to reading--and other facts about his lifestyle--suggest that he was a seeker. Seeking after what? Well, that isn't totally clear. Jackson Browne said, after Zevon's death, that Zevon "fully volunteered to undergo whatever trial by fire was necessary to get at the truth."<sup>11</sup> It is not wholly clear just what truth Warren might have been seeking, but he searched for something else, too, something perhaps easier for the average person to comprehend: a heart. And I don't mean that in the Dick Cheney sense.

*Darkness in the morning  
 Shadows on the land  
 Certain individuals  
 Aren't sticking to the plan*<sup>12</sup>

So begins "Searching for a Heart," the 1991 track from the aptly titled *Mr. Bad Example* (though by that time Zevon was five years sober, a *good* example of breaking free of addiction), one of Zevon's frankest tracks. Ever the ironic humorist, that "certain individuals" bit is almost certainly a reference to himself: his "thousand casuals and one-night stands," marriage and divorce, and several meaningful by fraught relationships thereafter more than reflect someone who isn't "sticking to the plan," as the second verse affirms:

*Leavin' in the evening  
 Traveling at night  
 Staying inconspicuous  
 I'm staying out of sight*

Not exactly the behavior of one who's "searching for a heart," eh? But that is just what the narrator of the song claims to be doing:

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<sup>10</sup> Warren Zevon, "Desperados Under the Eaves," recorded 1976, Track 11 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>11</sup> David Fricke, "Warren Zevon: A Tribute," *Rolling Stone*, October 2003.

<sup>12</sup> Warren Zevon, "Searching for a Heart," recorded 1991, Track 10 on *Mr. Bad Example*, Giant.

*And I'm searching for a heart  
 Searching every one  
 They say love conquers all  
 You can't start it like a car  
 You can't stop it with a gun*

The “they” is likely the overly romantic optimists (or overly optimistic romantics) represented by the previously quoted Beatles track. The narrator here is not quite convinced, though Zevon’s tender vocalizing is so touching that it’s likely he believes their message, just a little, just enough to go on searching. For indeed, the narrator here *is* open to love; he just knows how hard it is to find. It’s not as easy as most three-minute pop songs make it sound. And it never is in Warren’s love songs; if we went “searching every one,” we would always find some sort of conflict. Even the more positive ones, such as 1987’s “Reconsider Me,” are rooted in a checkered past: the song is a plea to his ex-wife to take him back now that he has finally overcome his alcoholism.

But that is just what appealed to me. Warren wasn’t afraid to bring those elements into his love stories, such as they were, and that, to me, is part of what made him special. He felt no need to craft morally pure narratives for a world that is not morally pure. He always preferred the truth.

I imagine, though, that this was also due to his own moral impurities, which are imperative to address for anyone writing about Zevon, especially politically and socially progressive writers like myself. The story of Warren Zevon is, inevitably, one of addiction and abuse. Such behavior defined the first half of his life, and it wasn’t just a series of close calls or minor slip-ups. The man was horrifically, dangerously erratic and abusive during the heights of his addiction: a drunken Warren would fire guns in the middle of the night, and on a few occasions physically abuse his wife. The various biographies written on him detail these stories more fully; none of them are pleasant, and none of them are excusable.

However, it is true that the abuse and the addiction were intimately tied together. “There’s no excuse,” fellow Zevonite James Campion told me in conversation, “but there is a reason.”<sup>13</sup> Warren did awful things when he drank, took pills, or whatever else (and there was a *lot* of “whatever else”), but that is not fundamentally who he was. “Clearly,” says Campion, “when Warren was not half out of his mind on drugs or booze, he was not a misogynist. There are some people who are violent, toward women or children or in general, but Warren was not like that. He was a perfectly erudite, intelligent, sensitive guy who became a monster when he drank.”<sup>14</sup>

And this is evident in his story and his songs. Following his final, permanent commitment to sobriety in 1986, Warren did change monumentally as a person. He rebuilt fractured relationships with his former wife, Crystal, and with his children Jordan and Ariel. Various literary figures, such as the bestselling writers Stephen King and Mitch Albom, got to know him during his sober years, and have many wonderful things to say about him. He had several warm, loving relationships with women that never turned abusive, even if they didn’t ultimately last. Warren, in a very real way, redeemed himself. Campion echoes this: “He’s the most redemptive character.”<sup>15</sup>

That too makes Warren unique, as well as important, to me. I haven’t been to Zevonian extremes, but I’ve certainly fucked up a few times over the years, and because of them I missed out on a lot (though not all) of the friendships, relationships, and memories I came to college to build.

<sup>13</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>15</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

In the end, I did not get the fresh start I dreamed about, and four years later I'm looking to try again in graduate school, in another new place. There is a lesson to be learned there, one I'll give some thought to when I'm not so busy writing about Warren Zevon. That aside, the point I wish to convey is that it means everything to me that there is a songwriter who went through the same troubled journey (if infinitely worse in degree and extent) and lived long enough to write about it.

And, indeed, to find that heart he was searching for. It's hinted at in the final verse of the song:

*Searching high and low for you  
Tryin' to track you down  
Certain individuals  
Have finally come around*<sup>16</sup>

But if this is not convincing, surely the final song of the final album of his long career must be. "Keep Me In Your Heart" remains a quintessential farewell song, a masterpiece of ultimate self-awareness, that is, awareness of one's own imminent death (the song was written in the final year of Zevon's life, following his terminal cancer diagnosis in 2002) and the need to say a proper goodbye to those who, ultimately, were friends and loved ones, despite the rough patches along the way:

*Shadows are fallin'  
And I'm runnin' out of breath  
Keep me in your heart for a while  
If I leave you it doesn't mean  
I love you any less  
Keep me in your heart for a while*<sup>17</sup>

Words like those are really who Warren Zevon was. Beneath all the complexity, the addiction, the mental illness (he struggled quite seriously with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), the persistent wry humor, was an utterly sensitive human being, perhaps the sort of person we all strive to be (even if it took him years to get there--but isn't that kind of the point?). How many of us have the courage (never mind the talent) to write something like "Keep Me In Your Heart," let alone sing it as a we're dying of terminal cancer, knowing it's the final message we will ever send to the people who meant something to us, and whom we meant something to?

Warren Zevon spent his life searching for a heart. I think he found it in the end, and I know he's helped me on my own continuing search. The following series of essays is my humble way of thanking him. In the course of this project, I reached out to one of Zevon's closest friends, Carl Hiaasen, who wrote me back saying Warren would be "so flattered you are writing about him."<sup>18</sup> Hiaasen himself was too busy with his writing and travel schedule to contribute more than that to this project, but I remain very grateful for his handwritten reply, and am very happy to think that Warren might enjoy my commentaries on his work, were he still around to read them. I hope that

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<sup>16</sup> Warren Zevon, "Searching for a Heart," recorded 1991, Track 10 on *Mr. Bad Example*, Giant.

<sup>17</sup> Warren Zevon, "Keep Me In Your Heart," recorded 2003, Track 11 on *The Wind*, Artemis.

<sup>18</sup> Carl Hiaasen, letter to the author, February 2020.

whoever does read these writings will enjoy them as well. This was a labor of love, a love that can't be started like a car, nor stopped with a gun.

# Words, Wisdom, and Warren Zevon

*The Literary and Philosophical Value of Rock 'n' Roll's Unsung Desperado*

## Warren's World

"This is Zevonian dialect here," laughs Bruce Springsteen during a session for 2003's *The Wind*, Warren Zevon's final album and exhaustive swansong.<sup>19</sup> The Boss's comment is in reference to a lyric about an ashamed Lhasa Apso, but it could well apply to any number of phrases from across Zevon's catalogue. From quips like "I'll sleep when I'm dead!"<sup>20</sup> and "life'll kill ya"<sup>21</sup> to invented hyphenates like "say-one-thing-mean-another-ville"<sup>22</sup> and "Little Miss Gun-to-a-Knife-Fight,"<sup>23</sup> the lyrics of Warren Zevon's songs are chock-full of playful tricks of language.

But "dialect" does not do it justice. Zevon's art forms an entire *oeuvre*, a world all its own. A world full of werewolves, headless mercenaries, outlaws, junk bond kings, a poisonous lookalike and a highly protective rottweiler, a gorilla guilty of grand theft auto, boxers and baseballers mired in controversies, Woodrow Wilson's guns, and whatever the hell a French inhaler is. This list hardly scrapes the surface; one sentence is simply not enough. I have left the mystic waves of Mohammed's radio unmentioned, omitted the clown mobile and the porcelain monkey, and skipped the legend of the lecherous, murderous, bathes-himself-in-pot-roast Excitable Boy. Lost also in this manic ramble are the literary namedrops and intertextual dialogues which populate the songs, from a nod to Norman Mailer to a scene where Shelley, Keats, Lord Byron, and John Milton gather for a gunfight in between cameos from Jesus Christ, John Wayne, and Charlton Heston. Historical events as diverse as the 1914 United States occupation of Veracruz, a medieval pilgrimage, and the lives of Frank and Jesse James also hold hallowed places in the Zevon songbook. All these and more appear across continents--"in Ireland, in Lebanon, in Palestine and Berkeley,"<sup>24</sup> not to mention the Congo, Vladivostok, Los Angeles, Collier County Florida, Ovamboland, Sri Lanka, and one postmortem trip to Denver, as well as settings from Zevon's imagination: Detox Mansion and the surrounding Last Breath Farm, Transverse City, and the All-Time Losers Hall of Fame. Trips to more mundane locales such as golf courses and shopping malls are offered as well, for the bewildered traveler in need of a rest stop on their journey through the Zevonosphere.

So, dialect? Ha. Perhaps the dialect could fill a humble glossary, but the objects and characters and stories require an encyclopedia, not to mention a thorough atlas. And a thick sheaf of sheet music, for all of what was just described forms the icing on a classically composed cake. Beneath all the chaos and comedy of his lyrics, Warren Zevon is still the man who, at the age of thirteen, stood in the home of Igor Stravinsky, drinking scotch with the great composer while discussing musical scores.<sup>25</sup> The high art of formal composition was burned into his blood as a youth, and would never leave: he composed charts for all of the instruments in his songs himself, and spent his life laboring intermittently on a symphony, which was never finished.

<sup>19</sup> VH1 *(Inside) Out: Warren Zevon: Keep Me In Your Heart*. (2003), DVD.

<sup>20</sup> Warren Zevon, "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead," recorded 1976, Track 8 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>21</sup> Warren Zevon, "Life'll Kill Ya," recorded 1999, Track 2 on *Life'll Kill Ya*, Artemis.

<sup>22</sup> Warren Zevon, "Dirty Life and Times," recorded 2003, Track 1 on *The Wind*, Artemis.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Zevon, "Poisonous Lookalike," recorded 1995, Track 6 on *Mutineer*, Giant.

<sup>24</sup> Warren Zevon, "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner," recorded 1978, Track 2 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

<sup>25</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 13.

Glossary, encyclopedia, atlas, music catalogue--all these guiding documents may be necessary for mere mortals like us. But for Warren Zevon, the mind was enough. While a number of literary friends helped him along the way, with everything from songwriting to his own sobriety, the songs he left us are his and his alone; no other could have produced them. And with those songs, he made a world. A weird world. Warren's World.

If I haven't frightened you away, then welcome. Enjoy your stay--and every sandwich.

## **Goin' to a Party in the Center of the Earth**

Looking back on the lists in the last section, I could probably leave it at that when it comes to making the case for Warren Zevon's cultural and artistic value. The eccentricity and absurdity alone should be enough to convince any lover of music and literature to give Zevon a serious listen. But "Why stop now? Let's party for the rest of the night."<sup>26</sup> And let's go deeper, to the fiery center of Warren's World. The songs--and Zevon himself--deserve it. For within and between the bizarre images and nightmarish misadventures of Warren Zevon songs float perennial themes of human life, among them death, love, morality, conflict, and violence.

And beyond the music, there is the man himself, who, between historical documentaries and twisted tales of werewolves and gorillas, still found time to be an autobiographer. As his life progresses and he evolves--as a musician, writer, and human being--so do the songs. So much so, in fact, that even without the aid of biographical and journalistic sources, one could construct a coherent narrative of addiction, abuse, regret and redemption simply by following the arc of the albums. With Warren Zevon, art and artist are not separate. They are one and the same, and together they tell a story of self-inflicted pain and hard-earned joy. Whether as a cautionary tale for those still on the straight-and-narrow or a roadmap for those who've found themselves where angels fear to tread, Zevon's life and art is a story for all of us, one eminently worthy of our understanding, one perhaps capable of giving us a little sentimental hygiene, another piece of Zevonian dialect defined by the excitable boy himself as "feelings so clean you can eat off them."<sup>27</sup>

How can you not want to study *that*?

Thus far, I have only alluded to Warren Zevon's literary, philosophical, musical, and human value. But now it's time to dig into the life and music of Warren Zevon in all its dark, hilarious, elegant glory. If what I've said to this point has been unconvincing, it is my hope that a closer examination of Warren's songs as pieces of literature, experiments in language, philosophical reflections, and human testimonies will bring you around.

To get in the spirit, you may wish to pour yourself a scotch and listen to some Stravinsky (or Warren Zevon). By all means, go ahead.

This is a party, after all.

## **Song Noir and Gonzo Rock: Zevon as Inventor of Genres**

### *Drugs and Wine and Flattering Light: Song Noir*

Singer-songwriter Jackson Browne, a contemporary of Zevon to whom the present collection is partly dedicated in gratitude for kicking off his career by securing him a record deal in the 1970s,

<sup>26</sup> Warren Zevon, "The Rest of the Night," recorded 2003, Track 8 on *The Wind*, Artemis.

<sup>27</sup> George Plasketes, *Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 109.

labeled Warren “the king of song noir.”<sup>28</sup> Of another king, Elvis Presley, on 1999’s “Porcelain Monkey,” Zevon sings a pair of his finest lines:

*Hip-shakin’ shoutin’ in gold lamet  
That’s how he earned his regal sobriquet*<sup>29</sup>

How did Warren Zevon earn his?

The story begins, appropriately, with the first song on his first album. I do not refer here to 1976’s *Warren Zevon*, the Asylum Records debut secured (and produced by) Browne, although the leading track there, the outlaw biography “Frank and Jesse James,” may work just as well. I speak of the obscure *Wanted Dead or Alive*, a more or less failed effort released in 1969 to what its composer, ever without illusions, called “the sound of one hand clapping.”<sup>30</sup> The first track of that record is also its title track, and it is a fine introduction, even if the rest of the album is less than stellar. The lines of the second verse in particular yield insights about Zevon’s journey to relative royalty:

*I am wanted dead or alive  
Fifteen states, I’ve got to survive  
I am wanted dead or alive  
I’m a new kind of man,  
I’ve got to survive*<sup>31</sup>

It is a fitting, prophetic introduction, even if the fulfillment would be delayed some years. For Warren Zevon *was* a new kind of man, one who managed to be a voracious reader and student of art, a classical composer turned rockstar little known to popular audiences but positively revered by his many famous peers, an olympian alcoholic as well as drug and sex addict, a beloved rock ‘n’ roll performer, and fashion lover all at once. And in his long career, he would indeed cross states (and continents) in what may well be characterized as a fight for survival, both of addiction and the vagaries of the music industry, as well as his own self-sabotaging tendencies.

If Jackson Browne is to be believed, Zevon was also a new kind of songwriter, one who ruled, if not invented, an entire subgenre of song. With “Wanted Dead or Alive,” Zevon certainly inaugurates himself with an element of the classic *noir* aesthetic, to wit, criminal activity. And, as mentioned, he embraces it again on the first song from his proper debut record. That album is also where he elevates his talent, delivers some of his most celebrated works, and proves his mastery of *noir* that drew such praise from Browne. Warren would traffick in song noir throughout much of his career, but nowhere else is it more prevalent and more beautifully realized than on *Warren Zevon*, and it is there he earns his royal nickname.

Like any good king, he knew his subject well. An avid consumer of crime fiction, Zevon was no stranger to the gloomy atmosphere and moral ambiguity of noir, a style and tone primarily found in American crime and detective films of the mid-20th century. That he spent his formative years

<sup>28</sup> Norman Snider, “A Talented, Tormented Excitable Boy.” *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, CA), June 9, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Warren Zevon, “Porcelain Monkey,” recorded 1999, Track 3 on *Life’ll Kill Ya*, Artemis.

<sup>30</sup> George Plasketes, *Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 10.

<sup>31</sup> Warren Zevon, “Wanted Dead or Alive,” recorded 1969, Track 1 on *Wanted Dead or Alive*, Liberty.

and early days of his career in the drug- and sex-fueled chaos of 1960s and 70s Los Angeles surely helped push Zevon's imagination in that general direction as well.

Indeed, the bleak, seedy mood so famously established in film noir permeates the eponymous Asylum debut, most humorously in "Poor Poor Pitiful Me," a musical and lyrical romp through L.A. featuring amusing encounters with Zevonian iterations of a common noir trope, the *femme fatale*:

*I met a girl in West Hollywood  
I ain't namin' names  
She really worked me over good  
She was just like Jesse James<sup>32</sup>*

Note the outlaw comparison and callback to "Frank and Jesse James." Poor, poor, pitiful he survives this event, though perhaps not without a few scars:

*She really worked me over good  
She was a credit to her gender  
She put me through some changes, Lord  
Sorta like a Waring blender*

"Gender" and "blender" is one of Zevon's finest and funniest rhymes, but there's a lethality to the imagery as well: the narrator isn't simply dumbfounded by the talents of this woman; whatever he goes through is comparable to being put through a blender. *Femme fatale*, indeed. As is the next woman he meets, who, given the narrator's reticence, is perhaps even more dangerous:

*I met a girl at the Rainbow Bar  
She asked me if I'd beat her  
She took me back to the Hyatt House  
I don't wanna talk about it*

It is worth pausing here to reflect on the comedy of all this. Noir is known for its darkness; Zevon, however, steps into these shadows with his mouth twisted in a wolfish grin and a knowing glimmer in his eyes. Bestselling writer Mitch Albom, who would come to know and collaborate with Zevon decades after "Poor Poor Pitiful Me" was released, may say it best: "He was always one joke away--always looking for an opening to get in a little wit, or a little slice of this, or a little sardonic this, or ironic that."<sup>33</sup>

But Warren could keep things dark, too. Think of "Poor Poor Pitiful Me" as a comical flirtation with noir, meant to get listeners' feet wet before submerging us fully in the unsavory gloom of Los Angeles. It begins directly after "Poor Poor Pitiful Me," with the stunning, deceptively frigid farewell of "The French Inhaler."

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<sup>32</sup> Warren Zevon, "Poor Poor Pitiful Me," recorded 1976, Track 5 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>33</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 370.

*How you gonna make your way in the world, woman,  
when you weren't cut out for workin'?  
When your fingers are slender and frail?  
How you gonna get around  
in this sleazy bedroom town  
if you don't put yourself up for sale?*<sup>34</sup>

Written, in the words of Warren's son Jordan, as a "fuck you"<sup>35</sup> to Marilyn "Tule"<sup>36</sup> Livingston, Jordan's mother and Zevon's first love, "The French Inhaler" stands firmly as one of the most evocative lyrics and compositions in the Zevon catalogue. A gorgeous piano ballad that bursts wide open with an orchestral flourish halfway through, the stunning melody and structure of the song belies its bitterness. But the language is as fine, and as sharp, as the composition, and the story it tells is one of darkness and desperation for two lovers in Los Angeles whose relationship fails along with their dreams. Warren, of course, had spent the early seventies chasing a songwriting career without much luck outside of a few notable anecdotes, and Livingston was an aspiring actress, which a jaded Zevon points out cruelly, though not without admitting his own faults, right as the strings begin to hum:

*You said you were an actress  
Yes, I believe you are  
I thought you'd be a star  
So I drank up all the money,  
Yes, I drank up all the money,  
With these phonies in this Hollywood bar,  
These friends of mine in this Hollywood bar*

There is a lovely descent in the melody here, a fading as the dream fails and all that's left is a melancholy scene in a Hollywood bar where phonies are the singer's only friends. The tragedy has played out; the proverbial best laid schemes have gone awry. But Zevon is not finished yet: he delivers a further stroke of lyrical brilliance and takes his listeners even lower, both melodically and narratively, cementing the song in the fatalistic aesthetic of the noir once and for all:

*Loneliness and frustration  
We both came down with an acute case  
When the lights came up at two  
I caught a glimpse of you  
And your face looked like  
Something Death brought with him in his suitcase*

Whatever chance the song had at being a lament for lost love is erased in this verse, where we are treated to the Zevonian equivalent of telling someone they look like hell.

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<sup>34</sup> Warren Zevon, "The French Inhaler," recorded 1976, Track 6 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>35</sup> Ken Shane, "Listening Booth: *Warren Zevon (Collector's Edition)*," *Popdose*, November 12, 2008.

<sup>36</sup> Pronounced like "Julie"

“The French Inhaler” is as noir as it gets, a far cry from the comic noir tone of “Poor Poor Pitiful Me.” While we could laugh out loud (or at least smile nervously) at the sex-crazed dominatrix *femme fatale* from the Rainbow Bar, here we are given the tragic image of a femme who merely *looks* fatal, and we can only despair. Or have another drink with our friends the phonies, if we still have the cash, and hope the remainder of the album has more to offer in the way of hope.

But of course, in true noir fashion, it does not. The most we get comes in the rocker “Join Me in L.A.,” the album’s penultimate track, but even here the day is “dark and sultry”<sup>37</sup> and the chords are ominous and ghostly. Warren calls us to join him, but we cannot be blamed if we don’t want to, especially given what precedes and, most of all, what follows.

“Join Me in L.A.” is sandwiched between the mellow, almost-saccharine “Carmelita” and the epic, symphonic “Desperados Under the Eaves,” indisputably his greatest song. Each is the story of a down-and-out addict, at least one of whom (the narrator of the latter track) is Warren Zevon himself. But more on that in a moment.

Famed film critic Roger Ebert’s 1995 “Guide to Film Noir Genre” includes, as one of the style’s characteristics, “knowing a lot of people whose descriptions end in “ies,” such as bookies, newsies, junkies, alkys...”<sup>38</sup> It is the latter two on which “Carmelita” and “Desperados” focus, each taking on one of the noir archetypes.

*Well, I'm sittin' here playin' solitaire  
With my pearl-handled deck  
The county won't give me no more methadone  
And they cut off your welfare check*

*Carmelita, hold me tighter  
I think I'm sinkin' down  
And I'm all strung out on heroin  
On the outskirts of town*<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps now it is clear why I called the song *almost*-saccharine. The melody is sweet and lovely, as is the Spanish-inflected guitar holding the song down. But once again, Zevon has brought us into a sordid and pitiful situation, continuing a by-now well-established pattern of eschewing the pop romance so common to the popular songs of his day, from the early Beatles records to 1967 Turtles megahit “Happy Together,” the B-side of which was penned by Zevon.<sup>40</sup> Instead, he opts to defy conventions and redefine the possibilities of rock and roll songs by combining darkly comic elements with the aesthetics of film noir. It bears repeating that while the clearest examples of this innovation come from 1976’s eponymous record, Zevon would dabble in this realm for decades thereafter, from the haunting chords and violent themes of “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner” and “Boom Boom Mancini” to the international intrigue of “The Envoy” to the Floridian comedy capers “Seminole Bingo” and “Rottweiler Blues,” cowritten with celebrated mystery author Carl Hiaasen.

<sup>37</sup> Warren Zevon, “Join Me in L.A.,” recorded 1976, Track 10 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>38</sup> Ebert, Roger. “A Guide to Film Noir Genre,” *Roger Ebert*, January 30, 1995.

<sup>39</sup> Warren Zevon, “Carmelita” recorded 1976, Track 9 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>40</sup> See: Warren Zevon, “Like the Seasons,” recorded by The Turtles, 1967, White Whale.

But when it comes to being the king of the genre, it all comes back to *Warren Zevon* and its final, sublime song, “Desperados Under the Eaves.” Warren had a penchant for autobiography in his songs, but none is perhaps more personal and more heartrending than this, an epic written about a weeks-long bender at the end of which Zevon ended up at the Hollywood Hawaiian Hotel. It begins with a lovely orchestral reprise of the piano melody which introduced “Frank and Jesse James” at the album’s start, followed by a silk-smooth guitar lick that leads into the opening lyric:

*I was sitting in the Hollywood Hawaiian Hotel  
I was staring in my empty coffee cup<sup>41</sup>*

At first glance, this may seem innocent enough, but...ah, come on. We’re dealing with Warren Zevon, and this song has a whole record’s worth of crime, debauchery, and bitter romance trailing behind it. The coffee cup is a metaphor for a deeper, existential emptiness. It is the abyss Nietzsche warned us against. Zevon dares to gaze into it, and it gazes back, resulting in a self-confrontation of apocalyptic proportions, as Zevon reveals in some of the best lines he--or anybody else--ever wrote:

*And if California slides into the ocean  
Like the mystics and statistics say it will  
I predict this motel will be standing  
Until I pay my bill*

It doesn’t matter what happens; the whole state could wash away, and still Warren Zevon would remain, with his coffee and his sins.

But this couplet, which arrives to us over an instrumental swell, is only a preparation for what is to come. Another burst and crescendo leads us into the next verse, into the words that make “Desperados Under the Eaves” the greatest hangover song ever composed:

*Don’t the sun look angry through the trees?  
Don’t the trees look like crucified thieves?  
Don’t ya feel like desperados under the eaves?  
Heaven help the one who leaves*

*Still wakin’ up in the morning with shakin’ hands  
And I’m tryin’ to find a girl who understands me  
But except in dreams you’re never really free  
Don’t the sun look angry at me?*

This is quintessential song noir. The “lovely place, lovely face”<sup>42</sup> celebrated by Zevon’s friend Don Henley on “Hotel California” (released on the same label in the same year as “Desperados Under the Eaves” and alongside which the “Heaven help” line pairs well) is nowhere to be found here. The hot Los Angeles sun is a watchful judge bearing down on the derelict Zevon as he stumbles out of an alcoholic haze and into the bright California morning, the walking embodiment of the rundown noir protagonist.

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<sup>41</sup> Warren Zevon, “Desperados Under the Eaves,” recorded 1976, Track 11 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>42</sup> Don Felder, Don Henley, and Glenn Frey, “Hotel California,” recorded 1976, Asylum.

No other song captures the less glamorous side of the rock ‘n’ roll lifestyle or what fellow Zevonite and author James Campion, paraphrasing friend Adam Duritz of Counting Crows (also a Zevon fan), described to me as the “beautiful exhaustion”<sup>43</sup> of Los Angeles. And it is a pure distillation, void of the comedy of “Poor Poor Pitiful Me” and the relationship baggage of “The French Inhaler.”

If Warren Zevon is the king of song noir, “Desperados Under the Eaves” is his coronation.

*Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead: Gonzo Rock*

The concept of “Gonzo” journalism originated in and is now practically synonymous with the work of legendary *Rolling Stone* writer Hunter S. Thompson, whom Warren Zevon befriended and even wrote a song with. The term refers, generally, to journalistic writing that eschews detached, purely factual objectivity in favor of a first-person narrative style that includes not just the facts of an event, but the author’s personal experiences and emotions, as well as, potentially, elements of satire.

Here, I shall argue that, in addition to noir, Zevon also brought the Gonzo aesthetic to life in his songs, primarily by either adopting a first-person perspective in several of his narrative songs or inserting himself or people from his life into the songs in a way which blends biography and story, distorting objective reality as journalists like Thompson so often did.

The most amusing place to begin is with the title track of *Excitable Boy*, the popular follow-up to *Warren Zevon* and the album that contained Zevon’s biggest hit, “Werewolves of London” (itself a story song told in first person).

*Well he went down to dinner in his Sunday best  
Excitable Boy they all said  
And he rubbed the pot roast all over his chest  
Excitable Boy they all said*<sup>44</sup>

In a 1980 interview, renowned television host and soon-to-be lifelong friend David Letterman asked Zevon if “Excitable Boy” is autobiographical. With characteristic gravelly wit, Zevon answered, “The culinary part of the song is.”<sup>45</sup> And indeed, the song has its origin in just such an incident. Much like many of his songs, Warren’s love for pot roast was, evidently, larger than life.

Fortunately, the autobiography stops there, as “Excitable Boy” goes on to describe its titular character committing rape, then murder, then building a cage with the bones of his victim. Still, the insertion of an autobiographical event into the fictional narrative puts a Gonzo twist on the story. A similar effect occurs later on *Excitable Boy*, on the somber “Veracruz,” where Warren sings in the first person about the United States’s siege of that location in 1914:

*I heard Woodrow Wilson’s guns  
I heard Maria cryin’  
Late last night I heard the news  
That Veracruz was dyin’*<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Warren Zevon, “Excitable Boy,” recorded 1978, Track 3 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

<sup>45</sup> WarrenZevonAddict, “Warren Zevon - His First David Letterman Show.”

<sup>46</sup> Warren Zevon, “Veracruz,” recorded 1978, Track 7 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

While the “I” here could well be the literary speaker as opposed to the author himself, the effect still roots the story in a personal perspective, rather like a Hunter S. Thompson piece. Though the song is a historical narrative, it is not merely a list of facts delivered objectively; instead, it is a mournful vision experienced in the deeply personal first person, and is more poignant as a result.

These two examples each come from the same record, but others featuring similar Gonzo elements may be found throughout the Zevon catalogue, from “Mohammed’s Radio” on *Warren Zevon* (a song inspired by a man Zevon saw in Los Angeles who was dressed in Arab garb and holding a radio to his ear) to the deliciously funny tunes “Gorilla, You’re A Desperado” (*Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School*, 1980) and “Mr. Bad Example” (from the record of the same name, 1991). Also on *Mr. Bad Example* is “Things to do in Denver when You’re Dead,” a ghostly adventure in the titular city, where Zevon channels friend Hunter Thompson from the very first verse:

*I called up my friend LeRoy on the phone  
I said, “Buddy, I’m afraid to be alone  
‘Cause I got some weird ideas in my head  
About things to do in Denver when you’re dead.”<sup>47</sup>*

The reference is to “Things to Do” and “Werewolves of London” co-writer LeRoy P. Marinell, who often went by Roy. Anyone who’s perused the pages of Thompson’s *Hell’s Angels* or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* will feel the parallels: “weird ideas” is practically a two-word summary of Thompson’s bibliography. A later verse in the song namechecks Waddy Wachtel, a longtime friend of Warren and key contributor to his early records. It is an especially Gonzo track, especially given that its setting is Colorado, where Hunter Thompson once ran for sheriff of Aspen County on a “freak power” campaign.<sup>48</sup>

But the ultimate Gonzo rock song must be 1987’s “Boom Boom Mancini,” Zevon’s blunt, hard-rocking telling of the rise, fall, and rise of boxer Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini. On a lazy afternoon, you may feel like hosting a *Rocky* marathon. But on a busy day where there’s no time for movies, this brutal five-minute boxing epic will more than satisfy. On more than one level, Zevon narrates the story like a journalist, beginning with a sort of extra-extra-read-all-about-it introduction:

*Hurry home early  
Hurry on home  
Boom Boom Mancini’s  
fighting Bobby Chacon<sup>49</sup>*

And soon he moves into the sort of biographical exposition one might expect in a New York Times profile (or *Rolling Stone*, for that matter):

*From Youngstown, Ohio  
Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini  
A lightweight contender  
Like father like son*

<sup>47</sup> Warren Zevon, “Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead,” recorded 1991, Track 9 on *Mr. Bad Example*, Giant.

<sup>48</sup> Sophie Gilbert, “When Hunter S. Thompson Ran for Sheriff of Aspen,” *The Atlantic* (Boston, MA), June 26, 2014.

<sup>49</sup> Warren Zevon, “Boom Boom Mancini,” recorded 1987, Track 2 on *Sentimental Hygiene*, Virgin.

*He fought for the title  
With Frias in Vegas  
And he put him away  
In round number one*

Where things turn Gonzo is in the lines where Zevon, this time *without* shifting into first-person, does away with objectivity and offers a pair of insights on the nature of boxing:

*Some have the speed  
and the right combinations  
If you can't take the punches  
It don't mean a thing*

And, following the bridge, which describes Mancini's infamous fight with Kim Duk-koo, who died of severe brain injuries following the fight:

*They made hypocrite judgments  
After the fact  
But the name of the game  
Is be hit and hit back*

No other song in the Zevon canon better captures the Gonzo aesthetic. It elevates the reported events to a level of drama akin to the Mancini-Chacon fight he teases in every chorus, and joins it with his own, darkly realist ruminations on the story. It reminds one of passages out of *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* or others of Thompson's works, and cements Warren Zevon as a full-fledged member of the Gonzo tribe, the patron saint of Gonzo rock.

## **A Model Global Citizen**

*Ha'ina 'ia mai ana ka puana: Warren Zevon's Languages*

Warren Zevon was a globetrotter. He was born in Chicago, raised in California, lived for a while in Philadelphia and made several trips to Florida to hang with friend and author Carl Hiaasen. And of course, he visited city after city while on tour.

He got around outside of the United States, too; prior to recording *Warren Zevon*, he lived in Spain with his wife Crystal, and throughout his career he toured in Europe, inevitably visiting Norway, the "land of the midnight sun" he immortalized, in his own inimitable way, in "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner."

As I noted in the introduction to this essay, his songs traverse even wider territory, from Latin America to Africa to Russia. But what is even more notable than Zevon's extensive traveling is his commitment to a sort of worldliness. Throughout his entire career, it is possible to find songs that contain verses written in the language of the land and people he sings about. He even sings one song entirely in French (a cover of Serge Gainsbourg's "Laissez-Moi Tranquille"). The lament "Veracruz" contains a Spanish verse, "Turbulence" a passage in Russian, "The Hula-Hula Boys" a

Hawaiian chorus. There's even a bit of Swahili in the obscure, funky, overproduced "Leave My Monkey Alone," Zevon's 1987 tale of the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya: "Mzungu arudi Ulaya Mwafrika apate uhuru,"<sup>50</sup> the Mau Mau call which may be translated as "Whites go back to Europe; Freedom for Africa."<sup>51</sup>

I find this aspect of Zevon's catalogue sorely underlooked. The deliberate inclusion of other languages in his lyrics, specifically ones relevant to the subjects of the songs, is revealing of who Zevon was as a person and artist--namely, a writer who loved *language*, period, be it his own or another--and also a stylistic choice that alters the character of the songs. The narratives become more immersive; the language itself, not just the music and melody and story told in the English lyrics, draws us deeper into the worlds of the people and places Zevon chose as his subjects. For the English listener, it adds an exoticism not often found in pop music; for those who speak the additional languages, it is a sign of respect as well as something recognizable, even empowering in the songs.

An anecdote located between songs on 1993's acoustic solo live album *Learning to Flinch* further proves Warren's regard for other languages: before launching into "Mr. Bad Example" in Berlin, Germany, he speaks some words in German to the crowd. I am no master translator, but judging from the cheers with which the crowd responds, I imagine the words were kind.

Between the wide range of subjects Zevon chose to write about and his inclusion of the relevant languages, it is clear that he deserves some credit for being a true "global citizen," a person who regularly thought about the world beyond his own location, and brought that world into his art with admirable linguistic precision.

### *So long, Norman: Warren Zevon and Literature*

More than anything else, Warren Zevon loved to read. He read constantly and widely, from the crime fiction which often inspired his musical and lyrical aesthetic to heady philosophy like Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and everything in between. This love of literature is reflected in his songs. Some examples: "You're a Whole Different Person When You're Scared" from 2002's *My Ride's Here* was cowritten with Hunter S. Thompson and includes a lyrical reference to a "kingdom of fear," the title of Thompson's 2003 book. 1989's *Transverse City* is an entire album largely inspired by William Gibson's science fiction classic *Neuromancer*. He wrote "Basket Case," also from *My Ride's Here*, with Carl Hiaasen, for Hiaasen's book of the same name, and penned two other tracks with Hiaasen for 1995's *Mutineer*. Zevon also befriended and performed with the Rock Bottom Remainders, a casual band of authors including Stephen King, Mitch Albom, and many others. With Albom, Zevon wrote "Hit Somebody! (The Hockey Song)," a delightful novelty which, again, appears on *My Ride's Here*. That record also features a pair of collaborative efforts with Pulitzer-winning Irish poet Paul Muldoon, the Ireland-set "MacGillycuddy's Reeks" and quintessential Zevon song "My Ride's Here," the most literary of the bunch.

*I was stayin' at the Marriott  
With Jesus and John Wayne  
I was waitin' for a chariot  
They were waiting for a train*

<sup>50</sup> Warren Zevon, "Leave My Monkey Alone," recorded 1987, Track 10 on *Sentimental Hygiene*, Virgin.

<sup>51</sup> John Harrington Ndeti, "50 Years of Independence Later, Africa Still Helpless," *Standard Media*, May 27, 2013.

*The sky was full of carrion  
 'T'll take the mazuma,"  
 Said Jesus to Marion,  
 "That's the 3:10 to Yuma,  
 My ride's here."<sup>52</sup>*

References to Jesus Christ and John Wayne paired with the biblical image of a chariot (from the book of Ezekiel) may seem literary enough, but there's quite a lot more going on in this verse--and it's only the first one of the song. Firstly, John Wayne's real name is Marion Morrison--a fact I did not know myself until I began reading about this song for this essay. There is a brilliant cleverness in working that little detail in, especially as a rhyme for "carrion." But beyond this, the bit of dialogue between John Wayne and Jesus contains its own reference to "Three-Ten to Yuma," a short story by beloved storyteller Elmore Leonard in which an outlaw offers money to an officer of the law in exchange for his freedom; in the story, the deputy refuses, but here, it seems that Jesus Christ, of all people, will "take the mazuma," *mazuma* being a Hebrew word for money.

Through one verse, the song has already engaged in a substantial dialogue with another text; the second verse contains something similar, but this time it's a reference to Zevon's own work:

*The Houston sky was changeless  
 We galloped through bluebonnets  
 I was wrestlin' with an angel  
 You were workin' on a sonnet*

*You said, "I believe the seraphim  
 Will gather up my pinto  
 And carry me away, Jim,  
 across the San Jacinto  
 My ride's here."*

One is compelled to take note of the language here. "Changeless, bluebonnets, angel, sonnet." Where does something like *that* come from? Somehow, the second verse outdoes the first verse, where the rhymes were "Marriott, chariot, carrion, and Marion." There's a poeticism to the lyrics of this song that afford it a literary quality before one even delves into the content; it is the beautiful peak of Zevon's love for rhyme and language.

In between another lovely rhyme, "pinto" and "San Jacinto," someone named Jim appears out of nowhere. Or so it would seem. Those more familiar with Zevon's catalogue will recall Jim's appearance in 1995's "Piano Fighter," and even those less familiar may recognize the name from "Werewolves of London." The callback to earlier Zevon songs makes the insertion here more than just a convenient rhyme for "seraphim,"; it's a piece of intertextual wit that links "My Ride's Here" with other pieces, binding it up with a wider body of work. One might read it as self-parody: the original use of "Jim" in "Werewolves" likely arose during the vodka-fueled banter session in which the lyrics were written: "You better stay away from him, he'll rip your lungs out, Jim!"<sup>53</sup> It's pretty

<sup>52</sup> Warren Zevon, "My Ride's Here," recorded 2002, Track 10 on *My Ride's Here*, Artemis.

<sup>53</sup> Warren Zevon, "Werewolves of London," recorded 1978, Track 4 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

much just a rhyme device there, too, but there's humor in it: an ordinary name like "Jim" conjures the image of a plain, unwitting fellow crossing paths with the titular berserk werewolf.

The trick works to lesser effect in "Piano Fighter," where Zevon sings of the piano, "I practiced hard, it was more than a whim / I played with grim determination, Jim."<sup>54</sup> Outside of being a reference to "Werewolves" once again, and a third rhyme to complete what was started with "whim" and "grim," it's hard to see what deeper role the name might play. I think of it as a comic device, a self-deprecating pronouncement: "Look at me, here I am, years later, using the same rhyme."

In the context of "My Ride's Here," there's fantastic irony to this: it's the song where Zevon, alongside Muldoon, is at his most experimental and clever with rhyme. This comical, ironic touch is a part of what makes the song so uniquely *Warren*. Even at his cleverest and most literary, there's still his sense of humor, operating within and beside all the highbrow stuff.

We have now examined two verses of "My Ride's Here," and still we have not yet gotten to its most literary moment, which comes at the bridge:

*Shelley and Keats are out in the streets  
And even Lord Byron is leavin' for Greece  
While back at the Hilton, last but not least,  
Milton is holding his sides*

*Saying, "You bravos had better be ready to fight  
Or we'll never get out of East Texas tonight  
The trail is long, and the river is wide,  
And my ride's here."*

In addition to further fun with rhyme, the song now introduces, in rapid succession, several of the most famous names in Western literature. The biblical references continue with John Milton, renowned writer of *Paradise Lost*, while the Western theme that began with John Wayne's appearance in the first verse is brought to life more fully, as there is a fight to win before anyone can escape East Texas. In just a few lines, Zevon has delivered the climax of a wild west epic, and produced a passage ripe for intertextual analysis. While it was a collaborative effort, it could never have existed without Zevon's love and appreciation for literature, which fueled his bizarre imagination throughout his whole career as well as motivated him to work with writers (and writers to work with him).

"My Ride's Here," the ultimate display of Zevon's literary intellect, comes full circle, as many great stories do. The final verse remains rooted in biblical themes, but returns us to the format of the first verse, right down to the cameo from another famed 20th century actor:

*I was staying at the Westin  
I was playin' to a draw  
When I walked Charlton Heston  
With the tablets of the law*

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<sup>54</sup> Warren Zevon, "Piano Fighter," recorded 1995, Track 7 on *Mutineer*, Giant.

*He said, "It's still the Greatest Story,"  
I said, "Man, I'd like to stay,  
But I'm bound for glory,  
I'm on my way,  
My ride's here."*

Once more, we have a verse chock-full of allusions: Heston is known for his roles as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* and John the Baptist in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, both of which get nods here; meanwhile, near the end of the verse, the phrase "bound for glory" appears. This is possibly a reference to another legend of American culture, Woody Guthrie, who titled his memoir *Bound for Glory*. Additionally, the hotel motif repeats again, acting as an anchor for this sprawling narrative and a further symbol of the traveling suggested by the song's title phrase.

From beginning to end, "My Ride's Here" is a masterpiece, one that shows Zevon's reverence for literature as well as his own ability to craft it. The greatest testament to this lies in that I have rambled about this song for several pages and still not even discussed its relationship to the theme of death, which preoccupied Zevon throughout his final three albums. The cover of *My Ride's Here* is a photo of Zevon in a hearse, which creates a dark subtext for the song that in and of itself is worthy of reflection. Such is the richness of Warren Zevon's art: so much is packed into each composition that any attempt at analysis is like entering a rabbithole. Or perhaps the more appropriate metaphor is a funnel cloud, a veritable vortex of themes, characters, poetics, and musical elegance.

And don't just take my word for it: in conversation with Auburn professor and Zevon biographer George Plasketes, he reported a word count of roughly 100,000 for his book *Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles*. The publisher had suggested 65,000. "Warren has a way with words, his and anyone else writing about him," he wrote to me by email.<sup>55</sup>

But how many words have been written about Milton or Keats? I say we can spare a few for Warren Zevon. And, as I hope I've begun to show, we should.

## **The Vast Indifference of Heaven**

In *Keep Me in Your Heart*, VH1's 2003 commemorative documentary on Warren Zevon, the songwriter wistfully paraphrases German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, saying, "We buy books because we believe we're buying the time to read them."<sup>56</sup>

Warren Zevon bought a lot of books, but unlike many bibliophiles he actually did find the time to read most of them. Hardly anyone was more well-read. I alluded above to Warren's all-encompassing love of books and his interest in philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. For friend and collaborator Carl Hiaasen, "the most intimidating thing about him was the breadth of his intellect. A prodigious reader, he could talk knowledgeably about Marcel Proust, Thomas Mann, or Mickey Spillane, all in the same conversation."<sup>57</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that in addition to dazzling literary epics and pristine musical compositions, the songs of Warren Zevon are also philosophical curiosities. While the humor of his

<sup>55</sup> George Plasketes, email message to the author, January 2020.

<sup>56</sup> VH1 *(Inside) Out: Warren Zevon: Keep Me In Your Heart*. (2003), DVD.

<sup>57</sup> Carl Hiaasen, Foreword to *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* by Crystal Zevon (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), xiv.

songs may belie it, as might the many sordid and horrific tales of his time as an alcoholic and drug addict, Zevon was, at his core, a very thoughtful, honest, meditative songwriter. His lived experiences and the songs they ultimately led him to write are full of reflections on existence and many of its most universal--and most challenging--themes, among them love, conflict, morality, and death.

Perhaps the most salient of these is the latter. Early in his career, Warren Zevon loudly, perhaps even proudly declared, "I'll sleep when I'm dead!" Decades later, it became prophecy fulfilled: he passed away in his sleep after a lengthy battle with inoperable lung cancer.

But, unlike most of us, he had a year's warning. Well, it wasn't a year at the time: the prognosis was only a few months. Left with this news, Warren had a decision to make, namely, what to do with the time he had left? In true Heideggerian fashion, he looked death in the eye, nodded in acceptance of the inevitable, and got to work on a new record. It would, of course, be his last, but also one of his best, at least in part because it was, more than anything else in his dark catalogue, defined by the inevitability of death. Needing to say goodbye and to leave one final gift to those he loved most, Warren put all of himself into the making of *The Wind*. So much of himself, in fact, that he was able to outlive his prognosis by several months, see the album through to its beautiful finish, and witness the birth of his twin grandsons--an especially rewarding moment, given the years of effort Warren, after finally getting sober, had put into reforging a relationship with his daughter, the twins' mother, Ariel.

The heroic story of how Warren Zevon handled the news of his impending death is ripe for philosophical exploration, particularly in connection with Heidegger's ontology and view of death, especially since there are reasons to believe Heidegger was quite a favorite of Zevon's: he gifted a copy of *Being and Time* to friend and fellow songwriter J.D. Souther,<sup>58</sup> and when his daughter graduated from Marlboro College in 1997, he wrote in his journal that "judging by Senior profiles, Marlboro produces enough Heidegger scholars to belie my cracks about "folk dancing school.""<sup>59</sup>

Zevon's interests in existentialism were not limited to Heidegger, however. Per Crystal Zevon's description of a book on Kierkegaard she recently sold on eBay (as part of a charity project funded by the sale of Warren's vast library), he "read many philosophers, but had more books on Kierkegaard than any other." And another of his journal entries quotes Schopenhauer again, calling him, affectionately, "uncanny as a motherfucker."<sup>60</sup>

These interests peek through in several of Warren's songs. Like the existentialists, he is occupied with topics such as love and the meaning of life. Jean-Paul Sartre's view of love as conflict is reflected perfectly in Zevon's many heartbreaking ballads, from "Accidentally Like a Martyr" and "Hasten Down the Wind" to "Searching for a Heart" and "El Amor de mi Vida" and almost everything in between. Even the brightest of his love songs, 1982's "Let Nothing Come Between You," contains the lines:

*There are frustrated people in town  
Who might envy us and wanna bring us down*

And also, somewhat hilariously:

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<sup>58</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 322.

<sup>59</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 322.

<sup>60</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 364.

*Got the license, got the ring  
Got the blood test and everything*<sup>61</sup>

Prudent as the blood test might be, it certainly isn't something one finds in the typical love song. Even the most successful romance in Zevon's songbook is set against the backdrop of potential venereal disease. The point is clear: nowhere in the Zevon catalogue is love totally free from conflict.

As for the meaning of life, Zevon channels pure existentialism in "The Indifference of Heaven" and "Fistful of Rain." James Campion aptly described the former to me, saying, "Later on, he said it was about the L.A. riots [of 1992], but it's also a song about memory, and loss, and the silence of God."<sup>62</sup> Indeed:

*The past seems realer than the present to me now  
I've got memories to last me  
When the sky is gray  
The way it is today  
I remember the times when I was happy*<sup>63</sup>

The importance of these memories becomes even clearer in the chorus, where the sky Zevon mentions proves to have little to offer:

*Gentle rain  
Falls on me  
All life folds back  
Into the sea  
We contemplate eternity  
Beneath the vast indifference of heaven*

That "vast indifference" is the preoccupation of such writers as the philosopher Albert Camus and Japanese novelist Shusaku Endo, author of *Silence*, which was adapted into a film in 2016 by friend and favorite filmmaker of Zevon, Martin Scorsese. If Zevon could have lived to see that, there is little doubt in my mind that he'd have loved it, for its theme of God's silence clearly interested him as it has theologians and philosophers for centuries.

Zevon engages further with existence's potential lack of meaning in 1999's "Fistful of Rain," where he, I would venture, distills the nature of philosophy as a discipline into three lines:

*You've heard all the answers  
But the questions remain  
Grab ahold of that fistful of rain*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Warren Zevon, "Let Nothing Come Between You," recorded 1982, Track 5 on *The Envoy*, Asylum.

<sup>62</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Warren Zevon, "The Indifference of Heaven," recorded 1995, Track 4 on *Mutineer*, Giant.

<sup>64</sup> Warren Zevon, "Fistful of Rain," recorded 1999, Track 10 on *Life'll Kill Ya*, Artemis.

My (half) joke about philosophy aside, these lines also resonate with anyone attempting to navigate human existence. We all have questions about ourselves, about the decisions we have to make and live with. But no matter how much deciding we do, certainty about what was really right is hard to come by. The cliché “hindsight vision is 20/20” reflects the universality of this dilemma.

But, as Zevon points out, even if the answer you want is as slippery as rain, the value is more often in the inquiry itself. Or the grabbing ahold, one might say:

*When there's nothing to lose  
And nothing to gain  
Grab ahold of that fistful of rain*

Related to existentialism is the subject of spirituality. Zevon, ever a polymath, had interests here as well, and expresses them in songs like “Bad Karma” and—a title that should make philosophers salivate--“Ourselves to Know.” The songs also contain enough violence and comedy (often both at once) for aestheticians interested in such themes to have a field day.

There is one other, essential aspect of Warren Zevon’s career that should draw the attention of philosophers: the tension between, and intersection of, art and life. Zevon is an artist who left nothing unexposed; his request at the end of his life was for his ex-wife and friend, Crystal, to write a true warts-and-all biography, which she did. The good, the bad, and the ugly are on full display there, and of course the songs are informed by his journey through addiction to sobriety. That story is, at times, very disturbing and unpleasant, but what emerges at the end is a man who, ultimately, overcame his demons and, on his own terms, rebuilt what he had lost.

And that, to me, is where the true greatness and value of Warren Zevon lies.

## **Reconsider Me**

I asked James Campion, who wrote his own book on Warren, how to write about him. Without hesitation, he said, “Very carefully.” He added, “Warren is not your quintessential likable male character, and he doesn’t care, which makes him harder to come to. It’s very interesting to write about someone who does not ever blink.”<sup>65</sup>

Indeed, when one comes to Warren, one must have a certain sensitivity to issues of misogyny and addiction. With Warren, the two are bound up. His substance abuse made him into a beast, someone capable of dangerous and cruel behavior, both physical and verbal. Now, that he was drunk or high is not an excuse for such actions. “There’s no excuse,” Campion says. “But there is a reason. Clearly, though, when Warren was not half out of his mind on drugs or booze, he was not a misogynist. There are some people who are violent, toward women or children or in general, but Warren wasn’t like that. He was a perfectly erudite, intelligent, sensitive guy who became a monster when he drank.”<sup>66</sup>

And this is true. One can see it reflected in the ways Warren changed after getting sober in the 80s. Even before that, the sensitive and caring side of him comes through, on songs like “Hasten Down the Wind” or the stunning “Never Too Late for Love.” But where it really begins is on 1987’s “Reconsider Me,” a song written in the wake of his sobriety and meant as a sort of “take me back” song to Crystal. However, in what might be viewed as a poignant lesson about redemption, when

<sup>65</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>66</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

Warren went to play it for her, he made the mistake of flat-out ignoring his own young daughter, who was so excited to see him. In his mission to show Crystal his new song, he really showed how far he still had to go. “That song is beautiful,” she writes in the book. “It tormented me for months. I still loved Warren, and he loved me. That never changed. But, Ariel was crushed, and Warren was totally oblivious. That overshadowed what used to allow me to forgive him anything.”<sup>67</sup>

Redemption is a long road. “The trail is long, and the river is wide...”<sup>68</sup>

But, in time, Warren Zevon would walk that trail. He and Crystal would form a friendship that lasted until his death, and he would rebuild his relationship not just with Ariel, but also with his son, Jordan, along with the many, many musicians he knew. In the end, when he was dying and desperately trying to finish *The Wind*, there would be no shortage of musical friends and admirers who would contribute to the songs. In footage of the sessions from the VH1 documentary, Warren can be seen laughing and smiling with them all. “He’s the most redemptive character,” says Campion. “And the ultimate Shakespearean tragedy, the fact that makes it so painfully beautiful, is that he gets this disease that has nothing to do with him or how he abused his body, and he wrote this beautiful record at the end that speaks to the sins in his life and the people he hurt.”<sup>69</sup>

In conquering his addictions, Warren Zevon set out to be reconsidered. And, eventually, he was, by all the people who mattered to him--and who he mattered to--most. He would, tragically, die too soon to enjoy the full fruits of it (he got to hold his grandsons, yes, but not to know them), but in the time he did have here on Earth he managed to compose and deliver a catalogue of songs in which a beautiful, evocative, painful narrative of darkness and redemption plays out. From “Desperados Under the Eaves” to the final tearjerker “Keep Me in Your Heart,” Warren Zevon lived his art.

*When you get up in the morning  
And you see that crazy sun  
Keep me in your heart for a while*<sup>70</sup>

For Warren, finally, that crazy sun, rising through the trees, did not look angry. The path to that point was long. Or, as longtime songwriting partner Jorge Calderon put it, “Warren Zevon traveled down his own road, and it was unpaved.”<sup>71</sup>

I like to think he paved it as he went, and left it behind for us, as students and lovers of art and as human beings just trying to get along in this world. And yet, despite its crossing of continents and its population of bizarre scenes, incredible compositions, poetic brilliance, and existential insights, only a few have bothered to explore this road. So few that the name Warren Zevon, for many, does not even ring a bell, and for others reminds only of “Werewolves of London.” But he is so much more than that, and there is, as this lengthy manuscript suggests, so much more to say.

On that note, then, I hope you’ve been convinced to reconsider him.

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<sup>67</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 193-194.

<sup>68</sup> Warren Zevon, “My Ride’s Here,” recorded 2002, Track 10 on *My Ride’s Here*, Artemis.

<sup>69</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>70</sup> Warren Zevon, “Keep Me In Your Heart,” recorded 2003, Track 11 on *The Wind*, Artemis.

<sup>71</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 431.

# Run Straight Down

*Zevon on the Climate Crisis*

The year is 1989. Exactly a decade has passed since the grandeur of the concept album peaked in the form of Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, a masterwork of art rock made possible primarily by the pain-twisted vision of lyricist Roger Waters and the sublime guitar work of David Gilmour, the duo at the heart of 1970's Floyd.

Following a bitter split with Waters, Gilmour would lead a reformed Floyd into a new and still largely successful era, releasing studio albums in 1987 and 1994 and live albums from the respective tours for each.

And, in 1989, Gilmour would once again lend his inimitable hand to yet another concept album: a rehabilitated (sober as of March 19, 1986<sup>72</sup>) Warren Zevon's cyberpunk, neo-noir, William Gibson-inspired *Transverse City*. The Pink Floyd axeman contributes lead guitar to the album's second track, the subject of this essay, the environmental nightmare "Run Straight Down," lending it auditory doom-and-gloom to match the darkness its title suggests and its lyrical content describes. We will come to the song more directly in due time, but to prepare, some reflection on the rest of the album is worthwhile.

Much like Tom Petty's *Southern Accents* or David Bowie's *Diamond Dogs*, the success of *Transverse City* as a concept album is dubious. The first three tracks are strung directly together much like those from 70's Pink Floyd albums, but even here it is difficult to parse a single coherent narrative apart from the future dystopia depicted, in turn, in the nihilistic decadence of the title track, the postapocalypse of "Run Straight Down" and the severe authoritarianism of "The Long Arm of the Law," which clues us roughly into the time period, namely, our own century: "After the war in Paraguay, back in 1999..."<sup>73</sup>

But this drama breaks off here. The next track is "Turbulence," a lament from the perspective of a Cold War era Soviet soldier. We've left the fiction behind and entered contemporary reality. "They Moved the Moon" rejects both in favor of a surrealistic middle ground:

*They moved the moon  
While I looked down  
While I looked away  
They changed the stars around*<sup>74</sup>

The "they" is never identified; nor is the "you" whom the narrator also addresses as an apparent love interest. Given the context of the opening songs, one could construe this track as dystopian, perhaps in an Orwellian sense—it reminds one of 1984's Oceania, where love is explicitly forbidden and changes to fundamental societal narratives are so radical and so frequent as to be comparable to moving the moon and stars around. But it's equally plausible to view this as a simple, albeit weird (in typical Zevonian fashion) song of heartache and loss.

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<sup>72</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 209.

<sup>73</sup> Warren Zevon, "The Long Arm of the Law," recorded 1989, Track 3 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>74</sup> Warren Zevon, "They Moved the Moon," recorded 1989, Track 5 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

The sixth track is one of the finest in the Zevon catalogue, but it marks something of a tonal shift from the somewhat overproduced 80's sound that dominates the early songs. "Splendid Isolation" returns to the basics of rock and folk, opening with a mournful harmonica melody played over a catchy chord progression and rhythm held down by drums, bass and guitar. Lyrically, the song is quite straightforwardly about its titular theme of isolation and solitude. Of course with Zevon, ever the ironist, we cannot be sure just how splendid the isolation is or will be, particularly given its ominous final verse (to which we will return later in the proper discussion of "Run Straight Down").

The album's closing four tracks do return us to a sort of conceptual unity, though not to the settings of the Cold War or the post-Paraguayan conflict dystopia we saw earlier. Instead, each engages with essential themes of modern life. The first, seventh on the overall tracklist and entitled "Networking," is perhaps the most fascinating. I admit I am surprised to find myself saying this, because to my young ears it was catchy, but just a little corny. And can you blame me? Here are the chorus lines:

*Networking, I'm user friendly  
Networking, I install with ease  
Data processed, truly Basic  
I will upload you, you can download me*<sup>75</sup>

I have my elder and fellow Zevonite James Campion, author of *Accidentally Like a Martyr: The Tortured Art of Warren Zevon*, to thank for my revised perspective. In conversation, Campion says, "I came to technology kicking and screaming. I didn't know shit about networking or downloading, and didn't get on email until years after Warren was writing about downloading shit. I think "Networking" is miraculous, given all that."<sup>76</sup> Before that conversation, the chorus of "Networking" struck me as a half-cute, half-cheesy, eminently nerdy sexual innuendo, and while I still sort of feel that way, I have a newfound appreciation for the song and for Warren Zevon's eccentricity and wisdom: the man was singing about some truly cutting edge concepts, things his contemporaries certainly weren't engaging with, at least not broadly.<sup>77</sup> "Warren was just tapped in," says Campion. "He was an intellectual, and intellectuals see things sooner than other people."<sup>78</sup>

Next up, the hard-rocking "Gridlock" transitions from computers to the perhaps more relatable (at least in 1989) subject of traffic jams, particularly the hell of commuting in a large urban environment, something lifelong Angeleno Warren Zevon would have known a bit about. This is followed by "Down in the Mall" a wry examination of the culture of consumerism. The former contains bits of Zevon's characteristic dark humor: "The paramedics and the C.H.P. / wait impatiently for catastrophes" to occur on the road, while in the unmoving cars "the radio's tuned to the traffic news / and everybody's chokin' on monoxide fumes."<sup>79</sup> In the latter, Zevon humorously

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<sup>75</sup> Warren Zevon, "Networking," recorded 1989, Track 7 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>76</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>77</sup> Neil Young, who contributed some guitar and backing vocals to *Transverse City* approaches the subject on his 1982 album *Trans*, notably in the track "Computer Age."

<sup>78</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Warren Zevon, "Gridlock," recorded 1989, Track 8 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

and self-consciously justifies a shopping spree by saying “we’ll put it on a charge account we’re never gonna pay” but then jabs that “you buy everything you want and then you want more.”<sup>80</sup>

Between the hokey techno-romance/digital age foreshadowing of “Networking” and the caustic musings on modern excess in “Gridlock” and “Down in the Mall,” Zevon has taken us from the dystopia of the album’s opening trilogy to an examination of pre-dystopic modernity in this late-album trio. He follows it up with one final reflection on life in an overly commercialized world, the somber “Nobody’s in Love This Year.” While not an overt commentary on the ways in which the alienating aspects of neoliberalism—from increased emphasis on developing one’s “brand” and pursuing one’s career to the ever increasing hardship imposed on the middle class by austerity politics that favor the ultra-wealthy, certainly a relevant theme in the Reagan-Bush era (and our own)--the finance-based vocabulary of this song establishes the connection. From the first verse:

*The rate of attrition for lovers like us  
Is steadily on the rise  
Nobody’s in love this year  
Not even you and I*<sup>81</sup>

And the second:

*You sit back and wait for your love to accrue  
You’ll be waiting a long, long time  
Nobody’s in love this year  
Not even you and I*

And, finally, from the third:

*We keep walking away for no reason at all  
For the sake of being free  
No one’s invested enough of themselves  
To yield to maturity*

I have always found this song especially touching, as one who has long struggled to form meaningful friendships and relationships, due in part, admittedly, to my own socially anxious taste for “splendid isolation,” but also to the wide range of other priorities and pressures myself and my peers are burdened with by a society in which the economy is an arena where Goliaths run the game at the expense of millions of Davids. It is also a fine example of Zevon’s ability to shift from the dark, serious tone of the album’s early songs and the still-dark, but more humorous tone of the tunes leading up to this one and deliver something much more tender and sentimental. In his art there is a remarkable capacity for taking on a range of subjects and giving them totally different, yet always sophisticated treatments. The lovely conclusion of *Transverse City* is no exception.

Still, as fascinating as these songs are, to call the record a “concept album” is perhaps a bit mistaken. Like the Petty and Bowie records alluded to earlier, the initial themes fade as the album progresses. We might instead label *Transverse City* an album-of-concepts, concepts which interrelate

<sup>80</sup> Warren Zevon, “Down in the Mall,” recorded 1989, Track 9 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>81</sup> Warren Zevon, “Nobody’s in Love This Year,” recorded 1989, Track 10 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

and which ultimately circle around what I am prepared to argue is the album's centerpiece and one of the great works of Warren Zevon's career, the (rightly) paranoid epic "Run Straight Down."

In the 1960s, Warren Zevon was friends with one Bones Howe, a record producer in Los Angeles. Howe shares an anecdote from his time with Warren in Crystal Zevon's oral biography of her late ex-husband, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon*. He describes Zevon as a "very prophetic guy" and tells of how the first time he heard the term *ecology* was from Warren's mouth. He'd said it would be the "next big thing," and, Howe says, "he was absolutely right."<sup>82</sup>

For as interested as he apparently was in the subject, Warren would not bring ecology into a song until "Run Straight Down," over two decades after that conversation with Bones Howe. But once he finally came to it, he wrote about the subject with his signature dark flare, and just a hint of prophecy. Concern for the environment was certainly not a new issue in 1989; it was well-after the establishment of the EPA under President Nixon and the passing of what today are still landmark pieces of environmental legislation. Still, in '89 the country was coming off eight years of more or less anti-environmental politics steered by Ronald Reagan, and little has changed since that time. When Warren Zevon died in 2003, we were well into the era of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, dubious victors over committed climate activist Al Gore and certainly not environmental advocates themselves. The reigns of renowned moderates Bill Clinton and Barack Obama may have brought some measures of progress, but conservative opposition and court litigation rendered it less than meaningful, and the reckless abandon of our environment by the Trump administration has made it meaningless.

I belabor these points of political past and present for a purpose, namely, to remind us of just how much--and I'll use the technical term here--*bullshit* we've spent the last forty years engaged in. For as the political games played out and the environment was continually sacrificed in favor of industry, the average temperature of the planet we call home continued to increase. Species after species diminished to the point of endangerment (if not outright extinction). Plastic piled up in our oceans. Ice in the arctic regions melted, raising global sea levels and threatening coastal communities with severe flooding. Hurricanes grew in size, strength, and frequency. Global warming became climate change became climate *crisis*, and the people in power were too busy taking money from fossil fuel lobbyists and lying about the problem to ever come close to seriously addressing it.

Why do I speak in past tense? These things are all happening now.

Precisely. They are threats of the present, and of the future. And of the past. They were happening in 1989, too, and will continue to happen for decades to come. Partly because the people in power do not care. Partly because taking meaningful action is almost incomprehensibly difficult, given the myriad complexities posed by environmental problems. Partly because it's simply too late to undo much of what has been done. And, unfortunately, partly because the prevailing ecological philosophy across much of the world is that nature is either an obstacle to be crushed or a resource to be exploited.

In "Run Straight Down," Warren Zevon saw it all coming.

And yet, there *is* now far greater concern about these issues than there ever has been before, even if not among those actually in power. We have reached, then, a most dangerous impasse: that of awareness-without-action. Fear without defense. Concern without acceptance. We watched sometimes nervously, sometimes skeptically, in the past; we do the same in the present as we race

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<sup>82</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 22.

toward a grim, uncertain future. It is a strange, dissonant middle-ground, and one significant enough that the term *climate anxiety* has entered into the cultural lexicon.

It is just this predicament that Warren Zevon brilliantly depicts in “Run Straight Down” and distills in its titular phrase. “Run straight down: you’re speeding toward the bottom, you’re speeding toward your own demise,” says James Campion. “It’s not just that you’re rotting; it’s about implosion. I have seen the enemy, and it is I. It’s the end of the Roman Empire. It’s the hubris of humanity.”<sup>83</sup> Indeed, there is a certain grimness in the language itself: it’s the antithesis of the hopeful, ecstatic, dreambound running of Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*. It evokes the term *rundown*. It isn’t running *toward* or running *for* or running *with*. It’s running *down*. Straight down—it’s inevitable, it terrifies. It is the concept at the center of *Transverse City*. Whether the indulgent titular metropolis where “life is cheap and death is free”<sup>84</sup>, the dark world where “only the dead get off scot free”<sup>85</sup>, the all-consuming menace of urban sprawl that we, in our human smallness, experience as the drudgery of 5 P.M. traffic, or the lovelessness of a world where financial investments trump emotional ones, the primary revelation of the album is about the overwhelming nature of the behemoth we’ve created. “Run Straight Down” confirms this directly and ultimately in its lament for the death of the very world we depend on, but do not care for enough to preserve.

The song begins with a jolt: the sci-fi version of the noir celebration that began in 1976’s “Join Me in L.A.” is cut short as “Transverse City” leaks into the hypnotic, synth-heavy introduction of the album’s second track. The song’s core chords churn in a foreboding drone, beginning with G-minor, then slipping smoothly to E-flat, to C-minor, and back to G-minor (alternatively played on the guitar as E-minor, C, A-minor, and E-minor, with a capo on the third fret, likely the case for the guitar in the recording), a strange case of what, in music, would be called an i-VI-iv-i, or one-six-four-one chord progression. The result is a gloomy cycle that never quite resolves in a comfortable way. Over this, a monotone Zevon lists off the names of various chemical substances:

*4-Aminobiphenyl, hexachlorobenzene*  
*Dimethyl sulfate, chloromethyl methylether*  
*2, 3, 7, 8-Tetrachlorodibenzo-*  
*para-dioxin, carbon disulfide*

*Dibromochlorophane, chlorinated benzenes*  
*2-Nitropropane, pentachlorophenol*  
*Benzotrithloride, strontium chromate*  
*1, 2-Dibromo-3-chloropropane*<sup>86</sup>

Well, first things first. David Letterman once called Warren Zevon “the only man in the history of human communication to use the word *brucellosis* in a song.”<sup>87</sup> I say we pencil him in for all of the above, too.

In the interest of comprehensive analysis, I have gone to the trouble of Googling each of the above chemicals; for brevity’s sake, I’ll not define them all, but here is a sampling: 4-Aminobiphenyl

<sup>83</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Warren Zevon, “Transverse City,” recorded 1989, Track 1 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>85</sup> Warren Zevon, “The Long Arm of the Law,” recorded 1989, Track 3 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>86</sup> Warren Zevon, “Run Straight Down,” recorded 1989, Track 2 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>87</sup> C.M. Kushins, *Nothing’s Bad Luck: The Lives of Warren Zevon* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2019), 135.

was used for the production of chemical dyes and was confirmed as a cause of bladder cancer in both humans and dogs; chlorinated benzenes are common ingredients in herbicides and pesticides, which for all their usefulness are also known as dangerous pollutants; and strontium chromate is a highly toxic compound used as a colorant in things like polyvinyl chloride (a substance another Zevon character manufactures for a living in 1987's "The Factory"), as well as a corrosion inhibitor and metal conditioner. The theme here, it seems, is obvious.

From out of this haze of pollutants, the narrator emerges with something heavy on his mind:

*I went walking through the wasted city  
Started thinkin' about entropy  
Smelled the wind from the ruined river  
Went home to watch T.V.*

*Entropy*. In the science of thermodynamics, a quantity standing for the lack of availability of thermal energy for conversion into mechanical energy. More colloquially, the tendency of all things to decline into states of increasing disorder (in physics, too, thermodynamic entropy is often understood as the degree of disorder in an energy system). This concept is central to the song, for at no point are we given an explicit answer to the question of just what we are "running straight down" to. But the reference to entropy tells us what we need to know, even if we may not want to know it. We are running down to nothing, or at least nothing coherent. Life as we know it is disappearing into chaos.

But it is not gone yet; though wasted and ruined, a city and a river are still recognizable, and the narrator is at least able to move through this filthy world. Curiously, he goes from the intimidating contemplation of entropy to watching television at home, another important move for the song's narrative. For television, one of the classic inventions of modernity, is the ultimate distractor. All one has to do is sit and stare, letting light and color pass through the eyes. There is no real need for serious cognitive engagement--it's no wonder that spending hours binge-watching various programs on services like Netflix has become the preferred pastime of the new generation. Climate change? Yikes, scary. Watching the ninth episode of the fourth season of *The Office* for the fifth time? Easy, soothing, simple, fun. Indeed, as Zevon sings next:

*And it's worse when I try to remember  
When I think about then and now  
I'd rather see it on the news at eleven  
Sit back, and watch it run straight down*

We should give our narrator some credit: he is at least watching the news, and not just the gazillionth re-run of some fictional program. But, as is clear, he is not *really* watching. He is not gathering information to help him take action; he is not looking for hope. He's simply letting pass over him, watching it *run straight down*. Because this is preferable to considering the horrific, irrefutable truth: that once it was not like this, but now it is, and it's our fault. While we were busy partying "up above in Transverse City," where "every weekend lasts for months,"<sup>88</sup> those chlorobenzenes and other poisons of our own making were depleting our soils and leaking into our

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<sup>88</sup> Warren Zevon, "Transverse City," recorded 1989, Track 1 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

waters. It never mattered enough to us to change our ways, and so now our cities are wasted, our rivers ruined. To confront and accept this, however, is too great a strain; better to leave it to the news reports, which we can witness but, all too easily, choose to ignore.

And yet, we cannot escape it: it is happening, we all know it, and for some of us--such as our narrator--it is haunting:

*Run straight down*  
*Run straight down*  
*I can see it with my eyes closed*  
*Run straight down*<sup>89</sup>

*I can see it with my eyes closed.* Even as he tries to just sit back and watch it run straight down, he cannot, because it is too terrible and too great to look away from.

Perhaps we should reflect a moment on what precisely *it* is. Very broadly, it is clear that Zevon's focus in this song is on environmental ruin, but what does that mean? The clearest answer comes from what may well be the "Run Straight Down" of books: David Wallace-Wells's 2019 survey of the climate crisis, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming*. There, Wallace-Wells examines the many facets of the climate crisis, going beyond the common worries about sea-level rise to look at a broad body of data that indicates how the impending ecological collapse could exacerbate violent conflict around the world, cause severe food shortages, and bring about economic chaos--all of this, even in the absolute best case scenario (in which humanity scales back its greenhouse gas emissions enough to limit global warming to between 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius).

To delve fully into a book-length text would distract from our analysis of Zevon's song, to keep it brief and still make my point, I will simply list the titles of the chapters in Section II of Wallace-Wells's book. The section is titled *Elements of Chaos*, and these are its chapters: *Heat Death, Hunger, Drowning, Wildfire, Disasters No Longer Natural, Freshwater Drain, Dying Oceans, Unbreathable Air, Plagues of Warming, Economic Collapse, and Climate Conflict*.<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps some of these things sound familiar. Certainly wildfires have been in the news lately, as we've seen more and more of them in locations ranging from the Amazon to Australia to, yes, even the Arctic. "Disasters no longer natural" surely evokes the climate-change-driven increase in the size and frequency of hurricanes in recent years, while "unbreathable air" reminds of the statistical data that shows air pollution deaths in the millions, annually. And perhaps "plagues of warming" conjures alarm regarding the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, even if there is as yet no confirmed connection between it and climate change. Other than, perhaps, the common feature of humanity's difficulty in coping with it (though the resultant quarantine has also created a decrease in air pollution around the globe).

This--all of this--is what the narrator of "Run Straight Down" is facing down. It is not presented as forcefully as it is in *The Uninhabitable Earth*, but Wallace-Wells has the advantages of a much longer medium and thirty years of additional research and developments around the issues. To Zevon's credit, he condenses the anxiety a book like Wallace-Wells's inevitably provokes down into a three-minute rock song, and does so decades ahead of his time.

He also proves prescient about the widespread indifference to these matters in the song's next verse:

<sup>89</sup> Warren Zevon, "Run Straight Down," recorded 1989, Track 2 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>90</sup> David Wallace-Wells, *The Uninhabitable Earth* (Tim Duggan Books, 2019).

*We've been living in the shadows all our lives  
Where it's stand in line and don't look back and don't look left and don't look right  
So we hide our eyes and wonder who'll survive  
Waiting for the night...*

*Don't look left. Don't look right.* Left. Right. Anytime the pair appears in such a context, it is impossible not to think of them less as physical directions and more as political directions. Especially since the political standard for the Western world (the portion of the world most directly responsible for our ecological predicament) since the time of “Run Straight Down” has indeed been moderate neoliberalism (though today the specter of fascism is, in some places, far too near for comfort). For the wealthy upper class and the more privileged members of the middle class, this has not necessarily been terrible; there has been enough prosperity for them to afford to “live in the shadows,” which I view as the territory of political indifference, where things are good enough to justify a lack of reflection as well as a lack of commitment to left or right, where when push finally comes to shove, all we do is hide our eyes.

But as recent trends in international politics continue to reveal, the paradigm is failing. The increasing economic and ecological pressures of a globalized world have energized movements on both the left and right, from the resurgence of white supremacy in the form of the alt-right to the radical youth climate strike. The latter is perhaps a positive sign: at least a few of us are no longer hiding our eyes. But seeing that just as many are willing to stoop so low as to mock climate strike figurehead Greta Thunberg, a teenager on the autism spectrum, and that even those who do not mock have not embraced her cause with the urgency it so requires, it seems that Zevon was and remains on the mark: there is anxiety, there is uncertainty, but thus far we have proven incapable doing anything more than wondering who'll survive, as we wait for the “night” that is the disturbing darkness of our future to arrive.

This bleak but prophetic verse elevates “Run Straight Down” to the level of high poetry. Perhaps Zevon's blunt, direct style lacks the linguistic flare of other poets, but its grim tone is appropriate to its theme, and its prescience in foreseeing the current age of climate anxiety is impressive. And, really, “Don't look left, and don't look right” in this context is a reiteration of another famous line of poetry, from W.B. Yeats (whom Warren read): “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.”<sup>91</sup> Yeats wrote these words in his famed “The Second Coming,” itself a prophetic piece of which a dialogue with “Run Straight Down” could be its very own essay. Zevon's “run straight down” is Yeats's “Turning and turning in the widening gyre.” Zevon's “Sit back and watch it run straight down” is Yeat's “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.” The works differ in diction, but their general concepts of existential collapse and fear bring them together.

Zevon's prophecy is not over yet. In the third verse of “Run Straight Down,” the limits of climate knowledge in 1989 are revealed, but Zevon's grasp on the issue is nonetheless made clear:

*Fluorocarbons in the ozone layer  
First the water and the wildlife go*

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<sup>91</sup> W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming,” *Collected Poems* (Macmillan Collector's Library, London, 2010), 260.

*Pretty soon there's not a creature stirring  
'Cept the robots at the dynamo*

It is likely the first line would not be written today, for the issue of ozone depletion is one environmental issue which humankind has managed relatively well by banning the fluorocarbon and chlorofluorocarbon chemicals that were harming the ozone layer. But at the time, it was still a major issue, particularly in Zevon's hometown of Los Angeles--might the "ruined river" be the L.A. River? The presence of these words in the song suggests that Zevon was paying attention to his subject matter and attempting to give a timely, accurate depiction.

The second line, however, has only grown more insightful over time. Human-caused environmental change has indeed been most impactful on water and wildlife, rather than on ourselves (so far). From acid rain to plastic pollution to increasing ocean acidification, not to mention the massive number of unclean waterways, plus aquifer depletion and even the physical absence of water in increasingly dry and hot regions of the world, water problems are among the earliest environmental issues humanity has faced and will continue to face as the planet warms.

Wildlife, too, has suffered far more from humanity's reckless treatment of the natural world than humanity itself has. Endangered species are increasingly, well, endangered; some have gone extinct already. Recent reports suggest human activity is destroying biodiversity and has potentially endangered up a *million* species, and all of this is to say nothing of the wildlife we have displaced through the massive deforestation required for our various urban, industrial, and agricultural developments.

"Pretty soon there's not a creature stirring" may be slightly dramatic, at least for the time being, but as the final line of the verse reminds us, "Run Straight Down," for all its contemporary relevance, is set in the gloomy future of Zevon's imagination. But even that still feels eerily relevant. There were surely some wild ideas about robots in 1989, whether in the science fiction novels Zevon loved to read or in the culture at large, but today machines are increasingly powerful and genuine artificial intelligence has already arrived, with more progress being sought all time in spite of the warnings of skeptics. Is a future where they outlive us really so outlandish?

Zevon chooses not to contemplate this, and returns to the television. The song fades out after one final chorus:

*And it's worse when I try to remember  
When I think about then and now  
I'd rather see it on the news at eleven  
Sit back, and watch it run straight down*

*Run straight down  
Run straight down  
I can see it with my eyes closed  
Run straight down*

Though it is second on the album tracklist, and follows none other than the album's title track, "Run Straight Down" is, in my view, the foundation of the album-of-concepts that is *Transverse City*. From

the “ravaged tenements”<sup>92</sup> of the title track to the “turmoil back in Moscow”<sup>93</sup> of “Turbulence” to the horrors of highway gridlock and the recklessness of commodity consumption, everything on the record speaks to the entropic nature of the modern world and the unfathomability of, to borrow a term from philosopher Timothy Morton (whom Warren Zevon almost certainly would have found fascinating), *hyper-objects*--things like, say, the Internet, or phenomena such as climate change, or the geologic time-scale.<sup>94</sup> All things we can entertain intellectually to some extent, but which we do not really grasp (an easy example is large numbers: millions, billions, trillions, etc.). Even “Splendid Isolation,” probably the most thematically isolated (pun perhaps intended) song on the album, cannot avoid some form of engagement with the anxiety of living in a world so full of these objects:

*I'm putting tin foil up on the windows  
Lying down in the dark to dream  
I don't wanna see their faces  
I don't wanna hear them scream*<sup>95</sup>

This seems to be the next logical step after watching the world run straight down on the news at eleven: retreating into the darkness of sleep and the fantasy of dreams.

It is a dark vision, though as we saw with Yeats, Zevon is not alone in offering it. Nor is he singular among his contemporaries: in the early 1960s, a young Bob Dylan wrote of a hard rain that's gonna fall, and though the final verse of that song is hopeful, it is not a negation of the horrors that come before it. Dylan would change the metaphor from hard rain to slow train in 1979's half-religious, half-political “Slow Train Coming,” and then come around again to the effects of all that hard rain, singing “high water everywhere”<sup>96</sup> in what, perhaps, could become an inadvertent climate change anthem, 2001's “High Water (for Charley Patton).” And, a few years after *Transverse City*, in 1992, Leonard Cohen would sing, “I've seen the future, brother, it is murder.”<sup>97</sup> And we must not forget Roger Waters and David Gilmour, who would together reflect on time, money, insanity, capitalism, and war on Pink Floyd's concept albums of the 1970s.

And of course, outside the world of songwriting and poetry, writer after writer has offered up their own cautionary tales about the future, from *Fahrenheit 451* to William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, the text which primarily inspired *Transverse City*. “Run Straight Down” is Warren Zevon's contribution to the literary and lyrical subgenre of apocalyptic prophecy, and I hope I have shown that it deserves a place beside the others as a frightening, eerily prescient reflection on existential entropy, the terror we can see even with our eyes closed.

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<sup>92</sup> Warren Zevon, “Transverse City,” recorded 1989, Track 1 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>93</sup> Warren Zevon, “Turbulence” recorded 1989, Track 4 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>94</sup> Timothy Morton, “Introducing the Idea of ‘Hyperobjects,’” *High Country News*, January 19, 2015.

<sup>95</sup> Warren Zevon, “Splendid Isolation,” recorded 1989, Track 6 on *Transverse City*, Virgin.

<sup>96</sup> Bob Dylan, “High Water (For Charley Patton),” recorded 2001, Track 7 on *Love and Theft*, Columbia.

<sup>97</sup> Leonard Cohen, “The Future,” recorded 1992, Track 1 on *The Future*, Columbia.

# Knee Deep in Gore

*Violence in the Art of Warren Zevon*

*I: A Knife on Christmas Morning*

*Gambler tried to be a family man,  
Though it didn't suit his style  
He thought he had him a winning combination  
So he took us where the stakes were high  
Her parents warned her  
Tried to reason with her  
Never kept their disappointed hid  
They all went to pieces when the bad luck hit  
Stuck in the middle, I was the kid*

- Warren Zevon, "Mama Couldn't Be Persuaded"<sup>98</sup>

Shortly before Christmas one year, a father won a gift for his son in a game of poker. He brought it home on Christmas morning, as excited to give his son the gift as the boy was to receive it. Not so enthusiastic was the child's mother, at that point still the father's wife. The ensuing argument escalated quickly. The father ran to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and sent it soaring toward his wife.

It missed her. Barely.

The father's name was William, though he was known as "Stumpy." By the time of the Christmas Morning Knife Affair he had moved his young family to California, but not before a stint in Chicago during which he became involved with the mafia, a career in which he made enough of a name for himself to later refer to Al Capone as "Uncle Al" and describe him as a "really nice guy."

The mother's name was Beverly, and she was Stumpy's polar opposite: a product of a disciplined Mormon upbringing who chose, as her act of youthful rebellion, to get involved with a rough, roving gambler who was twice her age.

Their son's name was Warren William Zevon. On the morning he saw his father hurl a blade at his mother, he was nine years old.

And the gift?

That was a Chickering piano.<sup>99</sup>

This episode is perhaps the most defining in Warren's strange, wild life. It is the moment he received his first musical instrument, the one he would go on to master, the one he would build a career with. And it is the moment of his first real exposure to a theme he would explore incessantly in his music: violence. It also marked a severe development in his parents' fraught relationship. Although Beverly

<sup>98</sup> Warren Zevon, "Mama Couldn't Be Persuaded," recorded 1976, Track 2 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

<sup>99</sup> C.M. Kushins, *Nothing's Bad Luck: The Lives of Warren Zevon* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2019), 10-12.

and William had already gone through several separations by the time of that fateful holiday morning (and were in the middle of one then), things came to a head after this. Warren would spend the rest of his youth mostly fatherless, apart from an unpleasant relationship with his mother's new boyfriend and a few visits to William, who expressed his affection by handing his son wads of cash and leaving him more or less to his own devices. That the fight over the piano--the motivation for which was primarily hesitation to allow Warren's father to influence him at all--was such a great contributor to all of this suggests, however subtly, a partial explanation of a songwriter who spent decades writing about violence.

While the true psychological impact of this event is something locked away in the deep recesses of Zevon's brain that we will never access, it remains as good a place as any to begin this exploration. And I do not say this as some idle claim, or an attempt to construct a narrative. For Warren very briefly, but very notably revisits it in one of his most retrospective songs, 1995's curiously titled "Piano Fighter."

*Mom and Papa bought a Chickering  
Every day I'd sit and play that thing<sup>100</sup>*

It did not occur to me until I began thinking about introductory angles for this essay that the opening line of this song is so intriguing. As I related above, "mom and papa" very much did *not* buy the Chickering for little Warren. Firstly, it was a prize his father won by gambling; secondly, his mother neither had nor wanted any part of it, and the resulting conflict was half an inch from fatal. That Zevon changes the story so fundamentally and so radically is stunning to those who know how that Christmas morning really went down.

Now, it might be argued that I am simply reading too much into this, that Warren just needed a short, concise line to fit the melody of his song. While it is indeed true that a proper lyrical narration of such a dramatic, even traumatic childhood event would probably require a song all its own, I do not believe we should give Zevon such little credit for his own writing. He was very intentional about how and what he wrote, a fact testified to by close friend and collaborator Carl Hiaasen: "Warren was meticulous. Even when he was young and high as a kite, he agonized over his lyrics."

If, on these grounds, we accept Zevon's transformation of the story as deliberate, we are left with quite an interesting quandary indeed. For the rest of the song is a largely a reflection on the kind of life Zevon's unstable childhood allowed him, or perhaps led him, to lead:

*I worked in sessions and I played in bands  
A thousand casuals and one night stands  
Here on Thursday, gone on Friday  
Headed down the Dixie Highway*

And, in a later verse:

*We cut a single and it made the chart  
I took the money and I played my part*

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<sup>100</sup> Warren Zevon, "Piano Fighter," recorded 1995, Track 7 on *Mutineer*, Giant.

*Got in trouble down in New Orleans  
I must admit that I was strung out and painted in the corner of a limousine*

These are combined with the choruses, which announce the titular *fighter*, a violent moniker (and possibly a reference to his father, who had a background in boxing), and suggest his inner turmoil:

*Someone called Piano Fighter  
I'm a holy roller, I'm a real low-rider  
Hold me tight, honey, hold me tighter  
Then let me go, Piano Fighter*

And, one of my personal favorite passages from the Book of Zevon, both because of my own freelance aspirations and my love of the phrase and image embedded in the term *thin-ice walker*:

*Someone called Piano Fighter  
I'm a thin-ice walker, I'm a freelance writer  
Hold me tight, honey, hold me tighter  
Then let me go, Piano Fighter*

We see now that the song's beginning is the benevolent mother and father jointly purchasing the piano that started it all, but its real narrative is the rough and risky life of its writer, a life he may well not have had if his parents had been as united as the opening line suggests.

But is that perhaps the point? That no matter how the piano came to him, Warren would always spend his life in a fight of some kind, be it against addiction or for his own career? This possibility is not out of the question, and we may turn to another childhood anecdote for proof: Warren's namesake was his mother's older brother, Warren Cope Simmons. In November of 1943, he was killed in the Second World War, while on tour in Italy. A painting of him hung in the home of Zevon's maternal grandparents, and for him it was a rather disturbing thing. He said of it:

"Uncle Warren was sort of the dead figurehead of the family, and I was brought up to follow in his footsteps. My ideal was supposed to be a dead man--with my name, looks, and career intentions. A dead warrior who'd been waylaid by his heroism. I guess that kind of background gave me the idea that destroying myself was the only way to live up to expectations."<sup>101</sup>

Suddenly, Piano Fighter seems a much more revealing title. Warren waged his fair share of battles throughout his life, but did it through his music rather than with a machine gun and a hard helmet. But that did not stop him from singing about such things, over chords he wrote and played on his trusty piano. Though he would later record a guitar-heavy album just to avoid playing keys, which to him had become like work, it would always be the first instrument he learned and the one at which he was most advanced. There is a reason the song is not called "Guitar Fighter."

And perhaps there are many reasons why the song is written the way it is. Like the best of Warren Zevon's songs, "Piano Fighter" is alive with mystery, and we may never solve it. But even

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<sup>101</sup> C.M. Kushins, *Nothing's Bad Luck: The Lives of Warren Zevon* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2019), 11.

so, it gives us a glimpse at the complex soul of a man who, unlike most songwriters of his day, used his art to tackle one of humanity's most complex and disturbing behaviors: violence.

## *II: Blood and Time*

One of the important ways Warren Zevon examines violence is through the lens of history. This is a particularly frequent theme in his early work, where he recounts the lives of the legendary outlaw James brothers ("Frank and Jesse James"), bases the beginning of a fictitious revenge epic in the 1966 and '67 mutinies that followed the Congo Crisis of 1960-1965 ("Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner"), and mourns the United States's 1914 occupation of Veracruz ("Veracruz"). He would continue this theme in later work as well, albeit with somewhat more contemporary content, making further reference to United States foreign policy blunders ("The Envoy"), documenting the boxing career of Ray Mancini ("Boom Boom Mancini"), delivering a funky account of the Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya ("Leave My Monkey Alone"), and subtly recalling the L.A. Riots of 1992 ("The Indifference of Heaven").

In each of these songs, though in quite different ways, Zevon confronts violence as an event in time, one of some historical or social significance. The first song named, "Frank and Jesse James," explores the life of those two notorious brothers that have come to hold high place in the cultural mythology of the Wild West. Curiously, Zevon embraces the more mythic element, which is that the two were not simply wanton criminals, but operated on a Robin Hood-like code of rebellion against power:

*They rode against the railroads  
And they rode against the banks  
And they rode against the governor  
Never did they ask for a word of thanks<sup>102</sup>*

In these lines, the outlaws are made noble fighters against wealthy, implicitly corrupt authority figures (why else would anyone give them words of thanks for such antics?). But there is no historical evidence to suggest that the fruits of the James' brothers exploits were ever distributed to the unfortunate, and this is something Zevon, ever studious, surely knew, and seems give an ironic nod to elsewhere in the song:

*No one knows just where they came to be misunderstood  
But the poor Missouri farmers knew  
Frank and Jesse do the best they could*

Frank and Jesse did indeed come to be misunderstood, but in precisely the way the song understands them. But the "poor Missouri farmers" and other common folk are the cultural demographic amongst whom such a misunderstanding was propagated by the authors of the dime novel Westerns in which Jesse James was often featured (and surely the genre was not unfamiliar to

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<sup>102</sup> Warren Zevon, "Frank and Jesse James," recorded 1976, Track 1 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

the ever-literate Zevon, who in addition to his constant reading also grew up in the era of popular Western films)<sup>103</sup>.

Historical accuracy aside, the song speaks to one intriguing perspective on violence and other illicit behavior: that is acceptable, and even praiseworthy, when done in the name of resisting some exploitative power and aiding those exploited by it. If there is a common thematic thread running through Zevon's early explorations of historical violence, this may be it. In "Veracruz" he, an American singer, tells a heart-wrenching tale from the point of view of the Mexican victims of an American occupation.

*I heard Woodrow Wilson's guns  
I heard Maria cryin'  
Late last night I heard the news  
That Veracruz was dyin'  
Veracruz was dyin'*<sup>104</sup>

Guns, death, and, in the middle, tears. These images come to us through Zevon's deep, but sensitive vocalizing. The guns belong to Woodrow Wilson, a foreign aggressor (from the song's perspective), while the death belongs to the entire community of Veracruz and the tears are those of one of its victims, the character Maria.

The placing of these three images in close succession beautifully establishes a tragic backdrop for the song; it is a lament for the victims of an overly aggressive American foreign policy decision. The occupation of Veracruz began after the Tampico Affair, when some unarmed American sailors were arrested by the Mexican government after entering off-limits waters near Tampico; they were released, but the U.S. desired an apology and a twenty-one gun salute; only the former was provided, and so President Wilson began to prepare an occupation. At around the same time, he learned of a weapons shipment headed for Veracruz on a German cargo ship--although the true source of the weapons was an American financier and a Russian arms dealer, not the German government. Still, news of the shipment escalated the conflict further, leading ultimately to the Battle of Veracruz and an occupation that would last seven long months.

Amid all this conflict and background, Warren Zevon's focus is on the people of Veracruz, and he adopts the first-person viewpoint of one who is likely a resident of the area during the battle. This is a powerful statement, given the cultural tendency in the United States to unquestioningly valorize the American military and rarely consider the fates of its victims. But this is precisely what Zevon does, zeroing in on the danger and trauma faced by those caught in the crossfires of this conflict.

*Someone called Maria's name  
I swear it was my father's voice  
Saying, "If you stay you'll all be slain  
You must leave now, you have no choice*

*Take the servants and ride west*

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<sup>103</sup> Zevon's prized first gold-certified record was for a version of his early song, "She Quit Me," which appeared in the acclaimed Western film *Midnight Cowboy*.

<sup>104</sup> Warren Zevon, "Veracruz," recorded 1978, Track 7 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

*Keep the child close to your chest  
When the American troops withdraw  
Let Zapata take the rest."*

In these succinct images of family intimacy, Zevon captures the tragic element of violence. The citizens of Veracruz are here faced with a heartbreaking dilemma: stay and die, or uproot your lives and go elsewhere. It is a plight all too common in the modern world, where tens of millions of people are displaced by warfare and threats of religious or racial persecution, which all amount to violence of some kind.

Perhaps this tragic component of violent events is the source of the noble element Zevon also depicts: be it bankers and governors or invading American troops, violence is made to appear acceptable when the dominant force in a power disparity is its target. This sentiment is beautifully crystallized in the Spanish verse of "Veracruz."

*Aquel día yo jure (That day I swore)  
Hacia el puerto volveré (Toward the port I will return)  
Aunque el destino cambió mi vida (Although destiny changed my life)  
En Veracruz moriré (In Veracruz I will die)  
Aquel día yo jure (That day I swore)*

The speaker in this verse is solemnly declaring his loyalty to his home and his willingness to fight for it. This proclamation of resistance, expressed in passionate Spanish (a further tribute to the local victims of the battle), is heroic in the context of the narrative: as the women, children, and servants flee, this speaker and surely others stay behind to fight and, if necessary, to die.

This is heavy stuff to find on a rock 'n' roll album, which speaks to Zevon's uniqueness as a writer: he was seeking to examine serious events and serious subject matter, and he did so diligently and honestly, choosing to write from the perspective of those most vulnerable to violence. So far, however, we have only seen Zevon hint at the notion of violence as an equalizing force, a justified reaction to oppression. To see this theme more fully realized in his work, we must turn to one of his greatest masterpieces, the lurid and haunting historical fiction epic "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner."

Cowritten with friend and former mercenary (a combination perhaps only possible for someone like Warren Zevon) David Lindell, "Roland" intrigues right from its title--need I explain why? It wastes no time in pulling us in further, with the first verse of the bloody ballad beginning after a short keyboard intro:

*Roland was a warrior  
From the Land of the Midnight Sun  
With a Thompson gun for hire  
Fightin' to be done*

*The deal was made in Denmark  
On a dark and stormy day  
So he set out for Biafra*

*To join the bloody fray<sup>105</sup>*

The titular gunner is a classic character, the intrepid warrior heading into battle without hesitation. But, curiously, he is also a mercenary: he is not fighting nobly on behalf of his own Scandinavian homeland (not Denmark, as it will turn out, but Norway), but rather fighting in Africa, in exchange for money. What are we to make of this? The next verse offers some clues:

*Through sixty-six and seven  
They fought the Congo War  
With their fingers on their triggers  
Knee-deep in gore*

*For days and nights they battled  
The Bantu to their knees  
They killed to earn their living  
And to help out the Congolese*

The first lines refer to real historical conflict, the Kisangani Mutinies of 1966 and 1967<sup>106</sup>, which occurred in the aftermath of the years-long Congo Crisis of 1960-1965. Once again, Zevon is using history as the grounds for his exploration of violent activity. This setting is further established by way of reference to the subsaharan African Bantu and Congolese peoples.

Such a conflict is quite remote, relative to Scandinavia and its politics. So what is Roland doing there? The final two lines reveal the answer, plain and simple. He is there to earn money and help out the Congolese in the process, in their uprising against the rule of undesired authority. At that time, the Congo area had recently come under the authoritarian rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, who had seized power in a coup following intragovernmental conflict after the March 1965 elections. The Kisangani Mutinies were indeed led by mercenaries, fighting alongside former soldiers of freshly ousted prime minister Moise Tshombe, who was rumored to be mounting a return.<sup>107</sup>

So, once again, Zevon is focusing on anti-authoritarian violence, this time more directly than in the other songs we have examined. Violence, in these songs, is not monolithically horrific or immoral, but rather a tool of resistance against the forces arrayed against freedom and prosperity for ordinary folks. It is also worth noting that the historical events referenced in “Roland” occurred during the Cold War, and that the dictator Mobutu had been supported by Western powers Belgium and the United States. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that in the next verse we find a reference to the United States’s meddling military ways.

*His comrades fought beside him  
Van Owen and the rest  
But of all the Thompson gunners  
Roland was the best*

*So the CIA decided*

<sup>105</sup> Warren Zevon, “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner,” recorded 1978, Track 2 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

<sup>106</sup> Also known as the Stanleyville Mutinies.

<sup>107</sup> “The Congo Crisis,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

*They wanted Roland dead  
That son of a bitch Van Owen  
Blew off Roland's head*

In this verse we find the song's most subversive moment, as well as a major narrative shift from historical fiction to supernatural horror (the arrival of the titular *headless* Thompson gunner) and from military to interpersonal conflict. First, we have the reference to the CIA, that shadowy American organization that has long operated behind the curtains of countless global conflicts, acting to protect the interest of the American empire, often at the expense of populations like the Congolese Roland is fighting to help out.

The CIA's various interventions and other activities are hardly something the average American is informed about, even now, so for Zevon to make such a reference in the mid seventies, when he and Lindell wrote this song, is a testament to his awareness of and attentiveness to the world around him, as well as further evidence of his interest in violence as resistance to manipulative forces. But all the same, Zevon does not spend much time on this, for now, in the narrative, the time of resistance has passed into the time of revenge. The second chorus kicks in and contains two vocal tracks, the second admittedly somewhat difficult to hear clearly in the recording. The full lyrics are as follows:

*Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner  
(Time, time, time for another peaceful war)  
Norway's bravest son  
(But time stands still for Roland 'til he evens up the score)  
They can still see his headless body  
Stalkin' through the night  
In the muzzle flash of Roland's Thompson gun*

In addition to being one of the sharpest images in any of Zevon's lyrics, that muzzle flash is a flash of transition, from headed to headless, from the fight against the Bantu to the betrayal of Roland by Van Owen and the subsequent journey of revenge to follow. Here, Zevon elevates his use of violence as a literary theme. The theme of violent revenge is perennial in human storytelling, and holds a place both in the resistance politics of anticolonialism and in conflicts of a more personal nature. Part of the magnificence of "Roland" is the way it brings both together in a brilliant, bloody display of songwriting genius. The themes and the story itself are epic, but Zevon has no trouble conveying all of it in under four minutes.

And Roland, despite now lacking eyes and ears, has no trouble tracking down Van Owen:

*Roland searched the continent  
For the man who'd done him in  
He found him in Mombasa  
In a ballroom drinkin' gin*

*Roland aimed his Thompson gun  
He didn't say a word  
But he blew Van Owen's body*

*From there to Johannesburg*

These lines are pure Zevon. From the clever rhyming of “word” and “Johannesburg,” to the subtle insertion of something funny into this grim climactic scene: *of course* Roland didn’t say a word. He has no head!

In this scene, Roland exacts his revenge on the one who betrayed him, though he does not mention the CIA, who was ultimately behind it. One might guess that the CIA has long forgotten Roland and Van Owen both, having moved on to some other scheme or scam. Roland moves on too, in the song’s final verse, a series of lines which take “Roland” beyond the scope of traditional ghost stories. Typically, the spirit is laid to rest for good once its reason for haunting is resolved, but not so for Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner. He spent his life in murderous labor for resistance forces, only to be killed by one of the adversaries they tried to resist. His personal revenge is not enough; Roland knows all too well how many scores there are to settle, and so his watch continues:

*The eternal Thompson gunner  
Still wanderin’ through the night  
Now it’s ten years later  
But he still keeps up the fight*

*In Ireland, in Lebanon,  
in Palestine and Berkeley  
Patty Hearst heard the burst  
Of Roland’s Thompson gun and bought it*

“Ten years later” refers to the time of the song’s writing, the nineteen seventies, in contrast to its sixties setting. In that time, Roland has been quite busy, visiting Ireland during the Troubles of 1968-1990, where a battle was fought over the status of Northern Ireland’s independence from or inclusion in the United Kingdom; the Lebanese Civil War of 1975 to 1990, another lethal conflict not unrelated to the impacts of colonialism; Palestine, which for decades has fought painfully for independence and human rights against aggression by the state of Israel; and, in one final jab of Zevonian oddness, Berkeley, California, where Patty Hearst lived (and, presumably, heard the burst of Roland’s gun). Hearst was notoriously kidnapped in 1974 by a left-wing terror group, the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA), only to later embrace its doctrines in what is now a classic example of Stockholm Syndrome.

It is unclear exactly what is meant by the final lines. Did Roland join up with the anticapitalist SLA, causing young Patty Hearst to “buy” the concept of revolutionary violence and so adopt her captors’ ideology? Or was Roland an adversarial agent, a counter-terrorist who helped bring the SLA to justice, suggesting that “bought it” occurs here in its other slang sense, “to die”? Either view is plausible: Roland’s habit of aiding resistance forces suggests he might have helped out the SLA as he did the Congolese, but he might also be opposed to their terroristic methods. Zevon, ever literary and ever ironic, leaves it ambiguous in an undoubtedly intentional use of double-meaning.

What is clear from this and the other songs I have discussed is Zevon’s interest in historical (and, for him, some contemporary) events involving violence. Taken together, songs like

“Veracruz,” “Roland,” and even “Frank and Jesse James” may be seen as reflection on the “slaughter bench of history” concept posited by the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel. It is at least plausible that Zevon, an almost superhuman bookworm, would have been familiar with this thinker, if not with other ideas about historical progress and the conflicts it entails.

It is also curious to note that Zevon seems interested in historical violent conflicts somewhat outside of the mainstream (relative to his mostly American audience): the most well-known front of the First World War is Europe, not Mexico, but that is where Zevon focused his attention, and certainly narratives about the Cold War, at least in the United States, focus on the primary antagonist of Russia and the major proxy wars in Korea and Vietnam. In my view, this willingness to go beyond the familiar and into lesser-known territory is part of what makes Warren Zevon such a special songwriter. His music has the power to give listeners a wider understanding of the world and its conflicts. Many of the allusions rely on prior knowledge in order to be understood, it is true, but that is only a problem if one assumes that the only purpose of allusion is to be understood at the first encounter. But allusion also provokes curiosity and a desire to learn more so that one *can* understand the reference, be in on the joke, know the full meaning of a scene, story, or song. Warren Zevon, one of the most curious (in multiple senses of the word) figures to ever hit the songwriting scene, surely understood this, and injected that understanding into many of his literary, historical, delightfully intelligent, and, yes, violent songs.

## *II: The Name of the Game*

In leaving Roland’s allegiances ambiguous at the end of his tale, Zevon omits any guiding political or moral principles he may have. This is a common feature of Zevon’s violent songs: he does not moralize or politicize any of the moral and political subjects he writes about. We might infer something about Roland’s character from the conflicts he chooses to fight in (as well as from the fact that he once fought for money), but Zevon does not provide this information directly. In others of his violent songs, he is similarly amoral, and this is the second aspect of his approach to violence I wish to examine.

When it comes to the violent characters and activities in his songs, Zevon nearly always prefers to sing from a perch of neutrality. He is an observer and a storyteller, just the messenger who ought not be blamed for the news he bears. Some lines from 1987’s “Leave My Monkey Alone,” another historical song and another return to Africa (one wonders if the headless ghost of Roland might have been among the Mau Mau rebels), illustrate this attitude well:

*Down in Kenya where the Masai roam  
And the grass grows tall on the veldt  
In our old colonial home  
We drank our bitters while the empire fell*<sup>108</sup>

These words are sung in a smooth, calm voice, over an overproduced funky eighties beat. These effects punctuate the casualness of the lyric, which depicts people just having a drink in the comfort of their home while rebellion flares all around them, details of which come later in the song. It is nowhere near the literary epic that “Roland” is, but it is a revisitation of the anticolonial theme

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<sup>108</sup> Warren Zevon, “Leave My Monkey Alone,” recorded 1987, Track 10 on *Sentimental Hygiene*.

found in the earlier songs and reflects the calm, neutral demeanor of Zevon's narration of violent events.

This non-judgmental attitude is evident even in Zevon's earliest music. In "A Bullet for Ramona," a quirky blues ballad from the obscure *Wanted Dead or Alive* record, the narrator delivers a perfectly dispassionate account--in a letter to his own mother--of how he murdered his girlfriend for being unfaithful to him. Violence, appearing here in its vengeful form as it does more dramatically in "Roland," is a fact of life and an element of stories, and that is all Zevon makes it.

*Well I tried and tried to ride away and leave her  
With my head hung low, teardrops filled my eye  
I rode back to town and found her with a drifter  
And I knew right then, Ramona had to die*

*Oh today I shot Ramona, Ma  
She ain't gonna cheat on me  
Two years I've been searchin' for her  
Two years she's been free<sup>109</sup>*

A more straightforward moralist may have written these words in the third person, then intervened with a verse in the first person denouncing this barbaric act, or at least narrating the bringing of the killer to justice. Not so Zevon. He is less interested in providing moral satisfaction, and more interested in just telling a story. He does, however, imply that Ramona's killer must now go on the run, presumably to avoid the law (which, given the implied old west setting, would likely punish him violently). Curiously, he makes the tale into a tragedy as well.

*Well, I'm writing you this letter from Laredo  
And tonight I'll ride across the Rio Grande  
If I never live to see another sunrise  
You know I loved her, Ma, I hope you understand*

Despite having killed her, the man apparently loved her, perhaps so much that he preferred to see her dead than with another man. This brand of violence is not quite unique to Zevon. A far more popular rock standard, made legendary by the Jimi Hendrix experience, "Hey Joe," contains a similar narrative, with similar moral neutrality. It may be, then, that Zevon's own attitude toward violence is influenced by the musical tradition in which he is operating, where old tunes like "Delia" and "Jack-a-Roe" and surely others narrate romantic tragedies tinged with violence.

But there is also something different about Zevon's particular approach, which largely has to do with his subject matter. For a songwriter who came of age in the era of the protest song and, by extension, the era of some of the most protest-worthy events in American history, he does very little protesting of his own. Not in the previously discussed "Veracruz" or "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner," and not in 1982's "The Envoy," another U.S. foreign policy song about American diplomat Philip Habib, President Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East from

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<sup>109</sup> Warren Zevon, "A Bullet for Ramona," recorded 1969, Track 8 on *Wanted Dead or Alive*, Liberty.

1981-1983. In what could well have been an opportunity to criticize America's growing, controversial status as the global police, Zevon keeps things fairly simple.

*Nuclear arms in the Middle East  
Israel's attacking the Iraqis  
The Syrians are mad at the Lebanese  
Baghdad does whatever she please  
Looks like another threat to world peace  
For the envoy<sup>110</sup>*

As appropriate as it might have been to mention the United States's own habit of stockpiling nuclear weapons and the various roles U.S. foreign policy played in exacerbating Middle Eastern conflicts, Zevon refrains from doing so, instead focusing on paying tribute to Habib, the titular envoy. When asked about the song by David Letterman, Zevon confirms that it is in fact about Habib, and explains that "it originated from a natural desire, I think, on my part, to play James Bond at some point in my career." This amusing tidbit is an intriguing insight to the mind of Zevon the writer: he is not interested in moralizing or protesting, but rather in using storytelling as a way to access worlds which he cannot otherwise be a part of. But still, regardless of his intentions, Zevon does remind us, as he alerted us in "Roland," that the CIA is up to more shadowy behavior:

*Things got hot in El Salvador  
CIA got caught, couldn't do no more  
He's got diplomatic immunity  
He's got a lethal weapon that nobody sees  
Looks like another threat to world peace  
For the Envoy*

The CIA was indeed involved in the civil war in El Salvador, a conflict which was unfolding when the song was recorded, but this information was not actually revealed until some time after the release of "The Envoy," which suggests that Zevon was operating on suspicion, and chose, for whatever reason, to voice that suspicion in a song. Once again, he fits it in as a fact of the narrative, not a warning or a claim about how the American public should feel about its tax dollars being used to finance and influence violent conflict abroad.

Even a few years later, when Zevon finally did tip his toe in the gray waters of morality in the brutal boxing song "Boom Boom Mancini," he does not do so conventionally, or aggressively. After narrating some events of Ray Mancini's boxing career, culminating with an account of the ultimately lethal fight he won against Kim Duk-koo, who died not long after the fight due to injuries sustained, Zevon does not condemn Mancini for not pulling back, does not blame him for causing Kim's death. Instead, plainly and honestly, he intones:

*They made hypocrite judgments  
After the fact  
But the name of the game*

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<sup>110</sup> Warren Zevon, "The Envoy," recorded 1982, Track 1 on *The Envoy*, Asylum.

*Is he hit and hit back*<sup>111</sup>

Here, Zevon is effectively maintaining his amoral standpoint, stepping away from it only briefly, to call out hypocrites rather than the violent nature of the sport. To him, calling out the violence of boxing *is* the moral violation, insofar as hypocrisy may be considered morally deleterious. That violence, as he says, is the name of the game. Zevon knows this, and knows too that violence permeates our world, and perhaps feels that to call it out would risk entering dishonest territory. After all, if one calls out violence in boxing, is one then supposed to call out fights in hockey or hard hits in football? If one protests the occupation of Veracruz, are they barred from moral purity until they have written a song in protest of *every* violent conflict?

When I asked James Campion about Zevon's frequent use of violence, he said, "It comes down to the fact that the violence is just there, in our lives. He was also inspired by Stephen King, Hunter Thompson, and Norman Mailer, who wrote about violence as a rule. But they weren't advocating violence; they wrote about it as a warning, an examination of our self-defense mechanisms, or knee-jerk violent reactions."<sup>112</sup> This last point is important: Zevon is *amoral*, not *immoral*. Just as he does not condemn violence, neither does he advocate or celebrate it. He writes about as a very real aspect of the human condition, as honestly as he can, and does not feel compelled to risk sounding too moralistic or preachy in the name of resisting something that, perhaps, cannot be resisted, regardless of whether it ought to be or not.

Rather than make hypocrite judgments, Warren Zevon stayed wise enough, mindful enough, to know the name of the game.

### *III: Something Bad Happened to a Clown*

An inescapable (at least in a discussion of Warren Zevon) extension of Zevon's amoral approach to violent writing is the humorous aspect of it all. This is not strange to us--it is there in dark jokes and satirical pieces like Swift's "A Modest Proposal" from centuries ago, and, says Campion, "We see it everywhere from the Three Stooges to *Home Alone*."<sup>113</sup> But, as with all things, Zevon brings a weirder edge to bloody humor.

The most obvious source, of course, is the comical imagery from his greatest hit, "Werewolves of London." Set over of pleasant, easily danceable riff and rhythm, the listener is treated to a narrative where "a little old lady got mutilated late last night"<sup>114</sup> by the titular beast, to which the only response is a lyrical version of an amused roll of the eyes: "Werewolves of London, again." Meanwhile, the singer muses about wanting to meet the werewolf's tailor, and shows us the monster enjoying a pina colada at Trader Vic's, at which time "his hair was perfect." It is all meant to be amusing, and it is.

But there are better bits in Zevon's catalogue. I am partial to "If I start actin' stupid I'll shoot myself, and I'll sleep when I'm dead!"<sup>115</sup> from Warren Zevon's "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead." Suicide hardly seems like an appropriate punishment for simply acting stupid, and "I'll sleep when I'm dead!" feels like an absurdly casual attitude toward taking one's own life. But it works because it's

<sup>111</sup> Warren Zevon, "Boom Boom Mancini," recorded 1987, Track 2 on *Sentimental Hygiene*, Virgin.

<sup>112</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>113</sup> James Campion (writer) in discussion with the author, January 2020.

<sup>114</sup> Warren Zevon, "Werewolves of London," recorded 1978, Track 4 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

<sup>115</sup> Warren Zevon, "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead," recorded 1976, Track 8 on *Warren Zevon*, Asylum.

funny, albeit morbidly so. The humor is in that very excessiveness and absurdity: it's goofy, discomfoting, over-the-top, and, for all those reasons, darkly hilarious.

Funnier still is one of Zevon's great characters, the werewolf of London's partner in crime (the songs appear back-to-back on the album), the Excitable Boy. The track is one of Zevon's wildest and darkness narratives, despite being one of his cheeriest compositions (a juxtaposing technique Zevon often employs, from the catchy stomping rhythm of all "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" to the fun, jaunty pace of "Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead"). It begins oddly, though innocently enough:

*Well he went down to dinner in his Sunday best  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 And he rubbed the pot roast all over his chest  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 Well he's just an Excitable Boy<sup>116</sup>*

This first verse is based on Zevon's own behavior, but from there the rambunctiousness escalates, and fast:

*He took in the 4 A.M. show at the Clark  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 And he bit the usheress's leg in the dark  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 Well he's just an Excitable Boy*

Given the ungodly hour, it is likely that the screening was of the adult variety, an appropriately unsavory setting for the Excitable Boy to wreak his havoc. Already, the song is funny, because in spite of these behaviors, everyone around him just laughs it off: he's just an Excitable Boy. This trend continues through ever darker and more depraved acts:

*He took little Suzie to the junior prom  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 And he raped her and killed her, then he took her home  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said*

If released today, it is almost certain that these lines would not be met with approval from the public, given the way they might appear to make light of rape, as well as murder. I do not think this is the case though. As ever, Zevon is amoral when it comes to the violence: he does not condemn or glorify, nor does he mock. The humor, here, is in the absurdity of the Excitable Boy returning his date home *after* he has done these horrible things. The way the line is delivered--completely casual, even happily, in accordance with the song's pleasant pop melody--makes it that much funnier. The joke here is not about sexual or other violence against a young girl; rather it's the incongruity of the musical tone and the lyrical content, and the silliness of bothering to take his date home after all of this.

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<sup>116</sup> Warren Zevon, "Excitable Boy," recorded 1978, Track 3 on *Excitable Boy*, Asylum.

All this, and we are only through three verses. There is one more to go, and what happens next is just as crazy and perverse:

*After ten long years they let him out of the home  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said  
 And he dug up her grave and built a cage with her bones  
 "Excitable Boy," they all said*

Once more, one cannot help but find a little humor in the ridiculousness of all this. Interned in a mental health facility for an entire decade, the first thing the Excitable Boy does after his release is dig up his junior prom dates grave and fashion a cage out of her bones? It is unbelievable, obnoxiously over-the-top, and once again therein lies the humor.

If viewing this song as an outright comedy is too much, there is an alternative view worth mentioning, offered by Justin Joffe in an article for *The Observer* in 2016.<sup>117</sup> The song may also be a commentary on the inattention of our society towards those with severe mental health problems, and on the way a "boys will be boys" mentality is often used to blame victims of sex crimes for the actions of the perpetrators. Of course, as has been duly noted by now, Zevon offers nothing in direct support of this view, preferring as always to just tell a story, rather than pursue a larger political point.

So far, I have used examples from fairly early in Zevon's career to illustrate his talent for humorous violence; they are also, as it happens, among the more popular songs in his catalogue. But he would pursue this theme throughout his career, most effectively in one of his very strangest songs, 1995's "Something Bad Happened to a Clown."

Even the title is a bit funny. What happened? Why a clown? Zevon offers little in the way of answers to these questions, but he does deliver one of his sharpest, most darkly comical lyrics over an odd, bouncing chord pattern with an electronic flavor in its production. A grimly satisfying anthem for coulrophobes<sup>118</sup>, "Something Bad" begins on a much more serious note than might be expected.

*Every touch is measured out  
 Every word is written down  
 Sunny skies are seldom seen  
 In the land of few and far between  
 And everybody wears a frown<sup>119</sup>*

Is this the sad reality of a world lacking the amusement clowns are meant to provide? Or is this the world as seen through the eyes of a clown, a world that has, for one reason or another (Stephen King's *IT*, maybe) come to dislike and even fear clowns? Zevon, always one for ambiguity, leaves the matter unclear, shifting instead to the fate of the clown himself in one of my favorite series of lines the man ever wrote:

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<sup>117</sup> Justin Joffe, "How Warren Zevon's *Excitable Boy* Brings the Horrors of History to Life," *The Observer*, October 25, 2016.

<sup>118</sup> Coulrophobia is the persistent, irrational fear of clowns.

<sup>119</sup> Warren Zevon, "Something Bad Happened to a Clown," recorded 1995, Track 2 on *Mutineer*, Giant.

*Someone lost their squirting rose  
 There's his red nose on the ground  
 No one's seen his painted smile  
 He's been gone for quite a while  
 Something bad happened to a clown*

As a writer, of lyrics and prose alike, I cannot help but envy the sharpness of these images. And, as one of the strange souls who can get down with Warren Zevon's bizarre aesthetic, I cannot help but laugh. Whenever I hear, "There's his red nose on the ground," I picture something unspeakably violent, as though this clown has been brutally attacked--it is possible, I suppose, that he just abandoned his nose on the road somewhere, but for some reason, the eerie tone of the music and the vocals evokes violence for me, and for some reason, I find it funny. The humor is in the surprise, the inevitable question of, *Hey, wait a minute, what the hell happened to this clown?* From the title, maybe he only lost his job or broke up with his girlfriend, but now we find out that his signature red nose is missing, not to mention his squirting rose, *and* he seems to have gone missing? *What happened?*

The answer, in Zevon's typical sardonic fashion, is simply "something bad."

Admittedly, there are reasons to think that this is not actually a violent song, but I see it as open to interpretation. It may even be that the violence is, this time, not physical, but more emotional. There is some ground for this view in the song's other verse:

*He used to honk his horn and everyone would laugh  
 He used to honk his horn  
 She doesn't think he's very funny anymore  
 Footprints in the sawdust leading to the edge of town  
 Something bad happened to a clown*

Whether alive or dead, apparently the clown does not honk his horn or get laughs anymore. Perhaps he has been bullied out of his position by people who have decided clowns are creepy. That may be said to be a kind of violence.

The "footprints in the sawdust" line, wonderfully sharp and weird as it is (I will admit I have no idea where the sawdust came from) probably implies that the clown has survived whatever ordeal he went through, and has left town in response. It offers room for yet further interpretation: perhaps the clown himself has perpetrated some kind of violence (and so is no longer thought funny), and been ousted from town as a result.

In any case, I have always found the song funny, and primarily because my own interpretation has involved some senseless violence toward the clown, which I picked up from the irreverent, somewhat random observation of "there's his red nose on the ground." Perhaps I am a little off in my view (or just excitable), but that is how I have always heard this obscure track in the Zevon oeuvre.

*IV: Fightin' to be Done*

This essay, it seems, has reached quite a length, so I will not go on too much longer. I only wish to say that the subject of violence appears in various other places in Zevon's catalogue that I haven't mentioned here, and so there remains room for further writing and analysis of this topic, for those whose fascination with Zevon, like my own, is endless. I chose to focus on the roles of history, amorality, and humor in his music, because that is where I was drawn, but on these topics as well as others there is plenty more to be said, from the once again darkly comic "Model Citizen" to the war song "Jungle Work" and additional violent romance "Jeannie Needs a Shooter." An exploration of Zevon's claim from "Searching for a Heart," that, "they say love conquers all, you can't start it like a car, you can't stop it with a gun"<sup>120</sup> in light of "Jeannie" and the older "A Bullet for Ramona" could likely form an essay in and of itself, for the inclined writer.

In any case, the core point of all this has been to show that Zevon, while not the first (nor the last) to ever write about violence in his art, evolved the tradition by incorporating his own witty, warped aesthetic, and further proved his talent as a songwriter by composing lyrics and music that give us cause to laugh and open the door for a broader understanding of history and human nature. I didn't learn about the CIA's involvement in the Congo Crisis in high school history class, and I don't know anybody who did. Nor the occupation of Veracruz, for that matter. I suspect Warren Zevon did not either, and instead found out about it himself as he researched and worked on his songs in his effort to bring his full intelligence, and his passion, to his craft.

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<sup>120</sup> Warren Zevon, "Searching for a Heart," recorded 1991, Track 10 on *Mr. Bad Example*, Giant.

## Afterword

Credit for the title of this collection is owed to one of Warren Zevon's friends, the actor Billy Bob Thornton. The full quote from which I borrowed the title goes like this: "Warren is a mad magical poet. It's astounding to me when I hear someone say they don't know Warren's music. For those of us who do, it's our duty to spread the gospel according to Warren."<sup>121</sup>

Since discovering Warren's work, and since reading those lines, I have taken that duty quite seriously. I will talk about Warren Zevon to anyone who will listen, for as long as they will listen. You could say I fancy myself a Zevangelist, if I may be permitted one final pun. I hope my enthusiasm has come through in the preceding essays, which together form some 20,000 words. The goal was anywhere from 9,000 to 15,000, but as I wrote, I found I had too much to say, and liked too much of what I said to cut any of it out. The reason is that all of it, even the parentheticals and preludes not directly related to the themes of my essays, feels worth sharing, worth knowing. There are surely some who will not understand, but those of us who've spent some time in what James Campion affectionately calls the Zevon Corner will, and those interested in joining us there will soon, if they have not already begun to grasp it. Warren's World is a special place, one of endless fascination and continual discovery.

I hope I have conveyed both the madness and the magic. Thanks for reading.

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<sup>121</sup> Crystal Zevon, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 431.

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### **Further Reading**

The essays I wrote were primarily commentaries which referenced biographical information when it was relevant or convenient. There is far more to Zevon's life than the allusions contained in my work; should you be interested, you will find a great deal of it in the following sources.

- *Accidentally Like a Martyr: The Tortured Art of Warren Zevon* by James Campion (2018)
- *Nothing's Bad Luck: The Lives of Warren Zevon* by C.M. Kushins (2019)
- *Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* by George Plasketes (2016)
- *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon* by Crystal Zevon (2007)
- *Everything is an Afterthought: The Life and Writings of Paul Nelson* by Kevin Avery (here, you will find the unabridged version of Nelson's legendary *Rolling Stone* article on Zevon) (2011)
- *VH1 (Inside) Out: Warren Zevon: Keep Me In Your Heart* (2003)

Stay tuned also for further news about the release of the documentary *Reconsider Me*, by Connor Reid, alluded to in the acknowledgements.

### **Further Listening**

Here, for your convenience, I list the studio albums of Warren Zevon--the primary output of his musical career--including live and compilation albums. However, his catalogue also includes music done for television programs, among other small tidbits here and there. These are commendably catalogued in the back pages of *Nothing's Bad Luck* by C.M. Kushins.

#### *Studio Albums*

- *Wanted Dead or Alive*
- *Warren Zevon*
- *Excitable Boy*
- *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School*
- *The Envoy*
- *Sentimental Hygiene*
- *Transverse City*
- *Mr. Bad Example*
- *Mutineer*
- *Life'll Kill Ya*

- *My Ride's Here*
- *The Wind*

#### *Live Albums*

- *Stand in the Fire*
- *Learning to Flinch*

#### *Compilation Albums*

- *A Quiet, Normal Life: The Best of Warren Zevon*
- *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead*
- *Genius: The Best of Warren Zevon*
- *The First Sessions*
- *Reconsider Me: The Love Songs*
- *Preludes: Rare and Unreleased Recordings*
- *Enjoy Every Sandwich: The Songs of Warren Zevon* (a star-studded tribute record produced after Zevon's death)