

Tribute to Warren Zevon by Miranda Yaver

If you're anything like me, music is not music so much as a soundtrack to your life, evoking in you the emotions that you yourself cannot in the moment express, or providing that magical disappearance into the *foggy ruins of time, far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow* when you need it most. A song's return on the radio or playlist reminds you of your first kiss in the backseat of a car, or your first heartbreak, or the concert you were at when you knew that that artist *got* you. Most of my memories have Springsteen and Dylan associations, though Petty's "Breakdown" is not without its reminders of my five year-old self rocking out to it in a Janis Joplin-esque voice that made me sound as though I had been raised on a diet of whiskey and cigarettes, and I cannot listen to "Harvest Moon" or to Justin Townes Earle without thinking of my last relationship. I can without question recite my top five artists of all time, no questions asked: Springsteen, the Beatles, Dylan, Peter Gabriel, and Joni Mitchell, in that order. Done. Simple. Yet there is someone else to whom I formed an attachment somewhat later in my life, and to whom I have felt a special bond despite his death shortly before my discovery of his music. That artist is Warren Zevon.

I will always remember the day I first listened to his music (knowingly). It was March 4, 2011, and my mother had just had a heart attack, with bypass surgery to follow the next morning. I was at her apartment to feed the cats, and I needed to listen to something that would capture the emotional turmoil that had defined that day. Flipping through her CD collection, I came across an album titled *Life'll Kill Ya*, and I put it on. Immediately, I was sold.

I knew that the native Chicagoan Zevon was no longer living, but did not know at the time that when he wrote the songs of this album, he had not yet known his fate of cancer, making the album all the more haunting to listen to, with the more sardonic "My Shit's Fucked Up" as well as the title track's, "Some get the awful, awful diseases. Some get the knife, some get the gun. Some get to die in their sleep at the age of a hundred and one. Life'll kill ya..." and the song's consideration of heaven and reincarnation. "Don't Let Us Get Sick" is hymn-like, and his cover of Steve Winwood and Will Jennings' "Back in the High Life Again" calls attention to the need to savor the present and beckons toward a brighter future and regaining his previous joy – "All the eyes that watched me once will smile and take me in." Yet he sings it with the poignancy of one reflecting on a life, not just a career, that is coming to a close.

Perhaps it was his long-time fear of doctors which led him to consider so closely these often morbid themes (though never in a morose manner), but what ultimately emerges is an at once humorous and heartbreaking contemplation on mortality that ultimately proved prophetic. Similarly haunting is Zevon's 2002 album *My Ride's Here*, which he described as a meditation on death yet which was released several months before his diagnosis of cancer for which he declined treatment, with "every single cure seem[ing] to be against the law" as his blues rubbed him raw.

Part of Zevon's artistry lies in his ability to be at once poetic and edgy, vulnerable and angry, bleak but with a sense of humor, a delicate balance that is bested only by Dylan, with whom he collaborated on "Knocking on Heaven's Door" on *The Wind* and who is a known admirer of

Zevon's work. From "Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me" to "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" on his eponymous album, he writes and sings with a gritty humor that is cherished by the true fans. Perhaps his most well-noted album, *Excitable Boy* (1978), features the hits "Werewolves of London" and "Lawyers, Guns, and Money," along with the more tender "Accidentally Like a Martyr," in which "the hurt gets worse and the heart gets harder" and he laments, "should have done, should have done, we all sigh." There is at once a toughness and a vulnerability that shines through in his lyrics, which led *Rolling Stone* to declare Zevon one of the four most important artists (alongside Neil Young, Jackson Browne, and Bruce Springsteen) to emerge from the 1970s.

I have fewer memories attached to Zevon's music, as I did not benefit from seeing him live and our relationship is much shorter than that with other classic rock artists (e.g., the Boss), and yet at the end of one of those days when nothing seems to go quite right, I turn to the sanctuary of "Life'll Kill Ya," or allow myself to be soothed to sleep to "Tule's Blues," a spectacular re-recording of which is on a special edition of *Excitable Boy*. ("I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" often feels a tad too close to home as a campaign-junkie-turned-grad-student). Perhaps the word that best encapsulates Zevon and makes him so relatable is "human." One can tell from his lyrics and from his biography that for all his character and charisma and talent, he was not without his challenges and bordered on self-destructive, and he left us far too soon.

Zevon's farewell album, *The Wind*, featuring collaborations with such artists as Springsteen, Henley, and Browne, ends with "Keep Me In Your Heart For A While," as honest a goodbye as one can hope for. September 7, 2014, will mark the 11th anniversary of his death, and he will not be forgotten.