

Life'll Kill 'Ya

The plume from an unfiltered, partially lit cigarette petered out as it lay on the lip of an empty beer can. The ascending smoke made the can stand out among the dozens of others on the table. The clutter of cans covered the panoply of more nefarious intoxicants well-used by reasonably-famous musicians in the early 1980s. And on the floor, in drunken repose, below that cigarette, as it choked and waned, was Warren Zevon.

Not long after that night-- the night he lay unconscious in his dressing room instead of appearing onstage for his second set or possibly after one of the nights he was carried away, also unconscious, from his performance by stage hands-- Warren would admit he had a problem. With drinking. He wouldn't have to worry about quitting those other old stand-bys of reasonably-successful musicians: success would quit him first. And so would his wife.

Over the next decade or so Warren's music would be perennially well-received by critics and applauded by his more prominent musical peers. His public success would oscillate unpredictably. He no longer commanded the popularity to support his own tours, instead he found himself resigned to the occasional festival appearance.

"Mr. Zevon, you're on," the top half of the stage hand peeked through the doorway of the dressing room, a headset, pulled back from one ear rested atop his mangy hair.

"What altitude is this town at?" Warren enquired in dyspneic exhaustion.

Perplexed, the stage hand shrugged and responded dutifully, "I'm not sure Mr. Zevon, but you're on in two."

In indefatigable defiance to his own malaise, Warren stood, grabbed his guitar and slowly ascended to the stage.

"Well, Hello Edmonton!"

He began to strum the rhythm to "Poor, Poor, Pitiful Me". The crowd responded in kind. For the first few songs Warren was energized by the crowd, multitudes smaller than his largest audience but substantially larger than his latest. The years had undeniably affected his stage presence: he stood practically still save for a slight sway of the hips and the strum of his wrist and forearm. His chaotic, enthusiastic cavorting had become far too taxing for his fifty-four year old body and he definitely no longer felt comfortable unbuttoning his shirt, let alone ripping it off entirely. Today, though, even standing there took more effort than he could muster.

After the close of "Don't Let Us Get Sick", as he transitioned into "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead" he collapsed. Once again he would be carried off the stage despite not having touched a drink in fourteen years or a cigarette in four.

Warren wrenched in delirium as his pony-tailed pallbearers carried him to his dressing-room, casketless.



"All good stories end in death, my boy."

"Don't I know it, I've spent my entire career singing about it, always teetering on the edge of it myself"

"Well then it's high time you step back from that unyielding precipice son, a better view may await you."

"Maybe I should, right now I feel like a brisk wind might send me over"



Reality came crashing back. Not a totally unfamiliar sensation but in the past it was least partially allayed by the lingering effects of the narcotics.

His tour manager's staunch, corporeal voice was the first he heard, "Warren, I think you should see a doctor."

"If Dr. Stan can't fix it I rather not know."

"Warren, Stan is a dentist."

"But he is a doctor."

Days later, on the insistence of his dentist, Warren saw his first non-orally focused doctor in over twenty years. By that day's end he left the hospital with a headache and a death sentence: untreatable peritoneal mesothelioma, three months. That night, in quiet contemplation Warren penned a song. In it he hoped he could say all things, hoped he could give penance for the years he abused his body, abused and neglected his family. The song was not enough, he needed more, he had more to say, he needed more time.

"Warren, I cannot advise that you refuse treatment," the doctor was adamant.

"Doc, chemo will destroy my body, distort my voice and tire my mind. I won't be able to finish my record."

"Mr.Zevon, do you not want to live?"

"That's all I want to do, Doc, but you've made it abundantly clear that this thing is all but hopeless. I need to finish this record, I need to finish to it to say goodbye, to say I'm sorry. I need to tell this one last story. When the record is done, I'll take whatever course of treatment you recommend."

"Alright, Warren. I'm going to prescribe you some medications that should help minimise your symptoms without disrupting your work too much. These will eventually cease to have an effect, though. When you're symptoms worsen we'll have to move to a more aggressive pain

maintenance regime that will probably incapacitate you. I can't say when this will happen, hopefully it will give you the time you need."

"Thanks, Doc. You know, if my last doctor was as decent as you I may have come 'round one or twice in the last two decades. Although, in fairness, the last one drew my ire for recommending I stop pretty much everything fun. All things considered, I guess he wasn't such a quack."

Warren stood pensively for a few moments in front of the medical building he'd just left. His resolve was strong but his recalcitrance had always been quite potent also; as he gazed up at the starless city sky, the light from the east still illuminating the wafting haze of chemicals in resplendent scale of red and yellow, he reached for his inside jacket pocket. He pulled out a single unfiltered cigarette and with a flick fueled by equal parts obdurateness and defiance he lit it. He remained in that spot, drew on the cigarette slowly. He pondered where the stars had gone, why they no longer illuminated the city whose denizens desired so much to reach out and touch them. Perhaps, he thought, the city had dealt that comforting glow of the night's firmament for the brighter, but admittedly more contrived, gleam of electrical current through tungsten and halogen gas. He concluded, in hindsight, it just may have been a cosmic swindle.

The proceeding months were far too hurried for a man with Warren's prognosis. Collaborators on his album included Bruce Springstein, Tom Petty, Jackson Brown, Don Henley and others. In a final trade-off with his contemporary and long-time co-conspirator Bob Dylan he covered the classic "Knockin' on Heaven's Door". The rest of the tracks on the album were all unique compositions, written in the first part of those frenzied few months.

"Mr. Zevon, I'd just like to say how much I admire what you're doing," a fan managed to corner him outside the studio.

"Why thanks, man." He pondered the statement for moment. "What is it I'm doing you so admire, exactly?"

"Refusing treatment."

Zevon was incensed, "Son, I'm not refusing treatment. I have a thing I've got to get done. You know how much I'd love to be with my family, fighting the good fight and spending quiet evenings alone with them? No, instead I'm compelled to be in this damn studio, like I have my whole life, just trying to get this done so I can go peacefully. I'm not refusing treatment. I'm not suicidal. Treatment refused me, I'm just doing the best I can with what I have left." He trudged back into the studio, sending the cigarette of his thumb and onto the sidewalk with his index finger.

"Warren, you're all red in the face," his producer was worried, constantly worried. He had worked with Warren on many projects and was passionately invested in this one, he wanted to see it through, for his friend.

"I don't get it. I lived a fairly private life as a musician, now I'm living a public life as a dead man. I just wanted to make a record. What would you do if you were me, Jorge?"

His producer took in a deep breath, probing the air, "I probably wouldn't be smoking."

Warren's cheek tightened in a wry smile.

Warren's companion propped up from the sofa behind the mixing table, "Jorge, that's his very own Hemlock!"

When the calendar had shed the three months Warren had initially been given by his doctors, the album was not complete. He began to struggle immensely with his symptoms, recording the final and most poignant song "Keep Me in Your Heart" from his living-room. It was the song he penned that night-- over six months ago, when he was only given the hope of

three-- saved for last as if to harvest those nuances that only a man so close to death can communicate. When it was done he laid back, thanked his producer and the small contingent of captivated family and friends sitting in the room with him and breathed a full, deep, un-laboured breath.

"You know, that was a pretty good album. Too bad I didn't think of it earlier."

The room reverberated with an awkward, furtive chuckle.

"It was a lot of fun, Warren. You've been a real inspiration to us all. Your music has always told a story and this album has a damn fine story to go along with it." His producer was weeping solemnly, gently clasping Warren's frail hand.

"Hemmingway did say all good stories end in death."

Jorge retorted deferentially, "No offence to Ernest, Warren, but he ended his career with a shotgun, you ended yours with a record."

"I just hope people like it."

Warren died just two weeks after the album's release-- it was entitled *The Wind*. It would debut as well as his most popular endeavour, *Excitable Boy*. People really did like it. Warren was nominated for five posthumous Grammy Awards, the first nominations of his career. He won two.