



People to whom I've played Warren Zevon over the years have all-to-often reacted with a nod towards the turntable. "That's one very sick man," they'd say.

# WARREN ZEVON

Part Sam Peckinpah,  
Part Dean Martin

Reviewing Zevon's 1978 breakthrough album *Excitable Boy*, the *Washington Star's* Charlie McCollum wrote:

"Zevon is the Sam Peckinpah of rock. Both have a feeling of the internal workings of a violent society, both find beauty in the strangest of places, like death. Peckinpah lacks Zevon's humour so what listeners get is a cross between Peckinpah and Randy Newman — a combination born of some other world."

Informing these friends that Warren Zevon was playing the Gluepot on Friday 2 October, one shrugged, obviously ignorant of the man, another burst into the chorus of 'Werewolves of London', the third, a long-time fan, proclaimed that 'Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner' was one of his favourite songs of all time. Warren Zevon, on the line from LA, says: "The norm is that a few people really dig me. Someone once told me, 'In a way you're lucky, people either love you or they've never heard of you'."

Born 1947 in Chicago to an itinerant family, Warren Zevon spent most of his early years in California. His father was a professional gambler ("That's made me a little philosophical about the ups and downs in life"). He started playing piano at an early age and left home at 16 to pursue the muso's life, spending time in New York and San Francisco before resettling in LA.

Surviving as a session musician, his first album, 1969's *Wanted Dead or Alive*, died.

"I didn't have any expectations," he says, looking back, "my wife was expecting at the time so it was a great way of paying the expenses of having a baby at 22."

Zevon then spent two years as musical director for the Everly Brothers. When the bickering bros finally called it a day, he took time out in Spain, playing a small club and writing songs. And what songs they were.

Back in the States, Linda Ronstadt had already recorded 'Hasten Down the Wind' and Zevon's long-time friend Jackson Browne suggested to Asylum Records that the time had come for a Warren Zevon album. That

self-titled LP, released in 1977, introduced the wider rock audience to Warren Zevon. Not a blockbuster, Zevon made his presence felt with songs such as 'French Inhaler', 'Mohammed's Radio' and the twisted 'Poor Poor Pitiful Me'. But it was the follow-up which provided the commercial breakthrough.

The title track alone of 1978's *Excitable Boy* showed Warren Zevon to be heading in a totally different direction to his peers. The tale of a demented and depraved rapist, it was delivered in a comfortable commercial style complete with oo-oo-ah female backing vocals. The most well-known track was the single 'Werewolves of London'. It remains Zevon's only hit single to date.

In the years since, Zevon's career has plodded along. Some albums, such as 1980's *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School* and the recent *Hindu Love Gods* (a live in the studio throwaway effort with REM) have disappointed. Others, particularly *The Envoy*, *Sentimental Hygiene* (the real Zevon-REM collaboration) and the current *Mr Bad Example* have been inspiring collections of songs sadly underrated and ignored by the wider public.

Zevon may have rubbed shoulders and recorded with the likes of the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac but his songs have been altogether different from the traditional LA sound. Songs about rape, murder, heroin addiction, all belied by Zevon's jaunty melodic touches and a black humour running throughout.

Looking back at the impact his twisted songs made when he broke onto the scene, Zevon says "I did think at the time that there were enough songwriters writing nice romance songs. I was more influenced by Norman Mailer than Lennon-McCartney."

"I know some of my songs are violent but the subject matter is not strange compared to Mailer or Hunter S. Thompson, people who write books or people who make movies. My songs are not really shocking or disgusting compared to other art forms."

True, but there are few songwriters around who cover such

ground as digging up Elvis ('Jesus Mentioned'); the bride who disappears with a gang of local youths on her Hawaiian honeymoon ('Hula Hula Boys'); immortalising former lightweight boxing champion Boom Boom Mancini (who killed an opponent in the ring), or celebrating the fast lane with a song like 'I'll Sleep When I'm Dead'. And *funny*. Only Randy Newman has been so consistently funny (as opposed to merely clever) as a lyricist over the past twenty years.

Clearly not interested in the trappings of success, Zevon says, "I'm not worried about building the big house on the hill, but it becomes a problem if it hinders what you wanna do with a record or performance. Then it becomes worrisome."

Dropped by Asylum after the failure of *The Envoy* (1982), it would be five long years before Warren Zevon returned on record.

"With no contract, I wrote very little," he says, "I sorta retired from songwriting. But I was touring a lot. Between *The Envoy* and *Sentimental Hygiene* I toured solo once or twice a year. I became a performer instead of some guy who was thrust on stage to promote his record every two years."

Zevon has been receiving ecstatic reviews for his solo performances and the current crop of shows (including the Gluepot gig) are being recorded for a live album.

So what can we expect at the Gluepot? "Les Miserables, Miss Saigon, choppers and all. Everything from A to Z and beyond a little bit. I'll be playing some new songs... the show's ended up being two hours-plus, quite a big evening for me. There's a 15 minute break, a great luxury of my middle years. No one seems to mind. The solo show is longer than any of the band shows I've done, which strikes me as interestingly backward. I enjoy being an entertainer. Musician? Composer? *Entertainer?* Stravinsky's a composer, Miles Davis is a musician. Dean Martin is an entertainer. I like that."

JOHN DIX

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