



Story: Allan Jones | Photo: Contour/Getty

LIFE'LL KILL YOU

At last: how WARREN ZEVON negotiated a gangster father, alcoholism, drugs, guns and boundless extremes of unhinged behaviour, collaborated with Dylan, David Gilmour, Springsteen and REM, “took everything to the edge and usually over it,” and made some of the greatest albums of our time. All hail Mr Bad Example!

THE FORMER GOLDEN boy of West Coast rock is backstage at a dingy north London venue, standing in dim light, alone, at the far end of a corridor down which he might have swept in his '70s heyday, flanked by a pampering entourage.

It's September 1992, however, and we find Warren Zevon in somewhat reduced circumstances. He's just played a show at a sparsely populated Town & Country Club, drawing extensively on a breath-taking back catalogue of songs that when they were recorded featured luminaries galore, including fans Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Bruce Springsteen. Those glory days have long-since ridden out of town, taking with them the lavish budgets and advances that bankrolled them. Tonight, he didn't even have a band. “They're gone,” he says of those high times. “This is who I am now.”

From the cut of his duds – a Prada overcoat, a cashmere scarf that looks like it might have cost

as much as a small car – he's not exactly on his uppers. But in the gloom of this corridor, water from a dripping pipe gathering in a puddle at our feet, he looks like someone used to much better than this dire circumstance.

“I don't have a band,” he says, sounding a bit raw about it, “because my records don't sell and I don't have any money.”

How much would he need to put a band on the road? He looks at me with an eyebrow raised and a pirate's grin. “How much money do you *have*?” he asks, looking disappointed when I tell him not enough, actually, for my cab fare home. “That's too bad,” he says as a light bulb somewhere further down the corridor flickers and dies. “I guess that means

we're both shit out of luck.”

“WHO HAS BEEN
THAT GOOD?
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BUT NOT TOO
MANY OTHERS”
ANDY SLATER

AS FAR AS I was concerned, he was one of the great writers of our time,” says Andy Slater, the former music journalist who rescued Warren Zevon's career in the mid-'80s, after it had been derailed by alcoholism and



Zevon recording his self-titled album with producer Jackson Browne, 1976

EYEWITNESS

"A WHOLE DIFFERENT PERSON WHEN HE'S SCARED..."

Warren's literary fan club

As a documentarian of LA's gorier aspects, it was clear from the start that Warren had more in common as a writer with James Ellroy than James Taylor. Zevon's influences, in fact, were mostly literary, Hemingway, Mailer and Chandler to the fore. He was a close friend of Ross Macdonald and Thomas McGuane - Chet Pomeroy, hero of McGuane's *Panama*, is clearly reminiscent of Warren's talent for mayhem. Later, he would become close to writers Carl Hiaasen, Dave Barry, Amy Tan and Stephen King and play in their garage band, The Rock Bottom Remainders. Hunter Thompson, with whom he raised occasional hell, was also a fan.

"Warren Zevon is a poet," Thompson wrote. "He has written more classics than any other musician of our time, with the possible exception of Dylan. He is also a crack shot with a .44 Magnum and an expert on lacrosse. I have learned not to argue with him, about hockey or anything else. He is a dangerous drinker and a whole different person when he's scared..."

much unhinged behaviour. "I was horrified when I came to California in 1983 to work at the management company that represented him and at our first client meeting the guy who ran the company went down the client list that had names on it like the Eagles and Steely Dan. When he got to Warren, he said, 'Warren Zevon. He's \$180,000 in debt to the IRS, he has no deal, he doesn't want to work, he's drunk and he's living in Philly. We're terminating him. He's off the roster.'"

"I just jumped up and said, 'You're kidding. Warren is the best writer we have. We can't terminate him.' The guy who ran the company said, 'OK. You manage him.'"

Slater called Warren in Philadelphia, breezily announcing himself as Warren's new manager. Warren hung up on him.

"I naively thought we'd been disconnected," Slater recalls. "So I called back and just got the answering machine. This went on for four or five days. Eventually, I get him on the phone and he says he can't talk because he's just been to the dentist. He was drunk, completely loaded. But I thought he could still be great and I wanted him to be working again. I convinced Warner Bros to give me \$5,000 to make some demos and called Peter Buck, who was a friend from college, and asked if REM, who were not a big band at the time, would back Warren on some demos, knowing Peter was a fan. I called Warren and said, 'Have you got any songs? I've got 5,000 bucks to make some demos and a great young band to play on them.' He said, 'You've got five grand? Give me that money. I need it.' He sounded pretty desperate, but I said, 'No, Warren. I can't just give you the money. Go down to Atlanta and make a demo with these guys.' He said, 'Will you fly me first class?'"

Slater flew him down to Atlanta where he cut four songs in three days with REM. "Warren wasn't in the best shape," Slater goes on. "But one of the tracks he gave me was a song called 'Reconsider Me' and when I heard that, I knew his power as a writer was undiminished by what he'd been through - the drink, the drugs, the guns. I brought him back to California and although he was still deep into what he called his 'chemical engineering' phase, I was determined to get him sober and put his career back on track."

How had it come to this desperate pass for Zevon, whose early career had been so full of bright promise?

"The '70s were like a decade-long Lost Weekend that a lot of

people were devoured by," says Jordan Zevon, Warren's son.

"My dad was one of them. I have an early memory of my grandmother taking me to see him in LA at the Universal Amphitheatre. We had to buy our own tickets. We got backstage and I was taken into this room to meet him. He was just sitting there, barely said a word, just stared at me. Then he got in his limo and left. He was totally fucked up."

"When Warren was drinking, he was crazy and that caused problems," says Jorge Calderón, whose 30-year friendship and songwriting partnership with Warren started when Jorge, as a favour to Warren's girlfriend, Crystal, who Zevon later married, picked Warren up from an LAPD drunk tank where he'd spent the night after being arrested. "He was out to lunch a lot, did a lot of wild things. He drank too much. He was reckless. He took everything to the edge and usually over it."

WARREN ZEVON'S LIFE in headlines would up to a point read like this. Warren William Zevon is born in Chicago on January 24, 1947. His father, Stumpy Zevon, a Russian-Jewish immigrant and former boxer, is a gangster with fond memories of Capone and connections to infamous Mob overlord Sam Giancana. His mother, Beverly, comes from a Mormon family who are appalled when their daughter takes up with the raffish, possibly dangerous Stumpy. Warren would write about his parents' fractious relationship on "Mama Couldn't Be Persuaded" on his first Asylum album.

He grows up mostly in California - Fresno, San Pedro, San Francisco and Los Angeles. He has formal tuition in classical piano, meets Stravinsky at his home in the Hollywood Hills. He drops out of high school at 16 and heads for New York, intending to become the new Bob Dylan. Back in LA, he writes advertising jingles, plays sessions (he's on Phil Ochs' *Pleasures Of The Harbor*). By the mid-'60s he's signed to label White Whale as part of a boy-girl pop duo called Iyme & cybelle, who have a minor hit with "Follow Me", produced by Bones Howe, who's just had great success with The 5th Dimension and The Turtles, who put a song of Warren's, "Like The Seasons", on the B-side of their monster hit "Happy Together".

"White Whale weren't sure what they had with Warren so they asked me to meet with him to see if



Fan and friend, Hunter S Thompson



I thought he could make a pop record,” says Howe, who would later produce Tom Waits. “When I first met him he was still searching for who he was, artistically. He was an extremely intelligent young man, extremely articulate and a gifted classical pianist. I thought in fact that his future might be in classical music, but he was very clearly taken with the idea of becoming a pop music star of some kind. I got on very well with him but he was already rehearsing with a bunch of guys out in West Hollywood. They were a screaming rock’n’roll band and I’m more of a pop guy, but I helped Warren get a deal with Imperial and put him in touch with Kim Fowley.”

Fowley, the infamous LA entrepreneur, has one question for Warren: “Are you prepared to wear black leather and chains, fuck a lot of teenage girls and get rich?” Warren is, unsurprisingly, and the pair start work on the little-known *Wanted Dead Or Alive*, which does nothing for Warren’s career. He gets a gig as bandleader, pianist and arranger for the Everly Brothers, hiring guitarist Waddy Wachtel, who becomes a lifelong collaborator. He’s already drinking heavily, but the songs he’s writing bring him to the attention of Jackson Browne, an early champion who becomes a long-suffering friend. Browne recommends him to David Geffen, who’s just launched Asylum Records, but nothing happens. In 1975, a disillusioned Zevon splits for Spain with his wife, Crystal. They settle in the small coastal town of Sitges, where Warren plays guitar in a bar run by a colourful ex-mercenary named David Lindell, with whom Warren writes one of his most famous songs, “Roland The Headless Thompson Gunner”. The he gets a message from Jackson Browne, who seems finally to have got him a deal with Asylum.

The album that follows in 1976 is *Warren Zevon*, which Browne produces. It’s a measure of the esteem in which Warren is held by LA’s rock aristocracy that they turn out in droves for the session. The album’s full of handsome ballads, including “Hasten Down The Wind” which is prettily covered by Linda Ronstadt. But the songs that stunned were the ones with a whiff of cordite. These included bleakly hard-boiled songs like the coruscating “I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead”, “Mohammed’s Radio” and “Desperados Under The Eaves” – a song about personal Armageddon, looming catastrophe and an unpaid hotel bill – that cast Warren as the cynical laureate of the LA scene, an heir to the sardonic likes of Nathaniel West, Billy Wilder, Howard Hawks, Ben Hecht and Raymond Chandler, who he idolised, in whose fast-talking company you imagine he would have been at home.

The album is well-received and a modest hit, but even as Zevon’s career is taking off, he is increasingly in the grip of a fearsome alcoholism that eventually costs him his marriage, a large part of his career and very nearly his life. The latter at this point is descending into often violent chaos, but he manages at least to write the songs for his second album, *Excitable Boy*, another collection of songs that much like Warren at the time are frightening and hilarious, among them “Lawyers, Guns And Money”, “Roland The Headless Thompson Gunner”, “Accidentally Like A Martyr” and the deranged title track. “Even on the first album, the vodka was a problem, but his drinking got progressively worse,” recalls Jorge Calderón. “The sessions for *Excitable Boy* were more out of control. Jackson and Waddy were producing, trying to rein

in Warren’s wild, drunken side and trying to keep him straight. But they were doing a lot of stuff themselves, cocaine, pot. We used to smoke a lot of pot. It was like a big party and people were in and out all the time. You never knew who was going to be there.”

The big names of LA rock were again in attendance. What brought them out to support Warren? “He was just unique,” says Calderón. “Jackson told me after Warren passed: ‘He was the best of all of us’, meaning him and Henley, all those people. They were great, but Warren’s songs went deeper. He dug a deeper ditch, as we say, he threw himself in it and came out with these



“HE JUST STARED
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songs that described an LA that was dark, romantic and full of hurt, like something out of Chandler, who we loved, along with all those hard-boiled writers, like Ross Macdonald.”

EXCITABLE BOY IS Warren’s biggest success. He even has a hit single from it with “Werewolves Of London”. Meanwhile, his drinking is escalating. There are black-outs, memory loss, violence. He seeks help, ignores it. He promises to stop drinking, appalled by his own behaviour, and then almost immediately is drinking again. His periods of sobriety are brief. These are what he later calls his “cowboy days”. Was he playing the role of legendary hell-raiser, hard-drinking, unrepentant, who might have stepped out of one of many of his own songs? “Every generation has its Barrymore, its legendary drinker,” says Jordan. “There was part of my dad that saw himself in that tradition. He loved The Rat Pack, the idea of these really cool guys, always with a drink in his hand. But my dad didn’t drink for effect. He drank to get drunk. He was an alcoholic.”

HOW TO BUY...

WARREN ZEVON ON RECORD PART 1



WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE

IMPERIAL, 1969

5/10

This primitive curio, instigated by Kim Fowley, is essentially a one-man-band exercise in psycho blues, outlawry, and country schtick. It looks good on paper but it was early days. Only the heartbreak of “Tule’s Blues” and the dark, chaotic “Traveling In The Lightning” truly deliver.



WARREN ZEVON

ELEKTRA, 1976

10/10

The madness begins. Produced by Jackson Browne with cameos from The Eagles and Fleetwood Mac, Zevon hits his stride. Every line dazzles, from drug-weary pleas (“Carmelita”) to sleazy LA noir (“The French Inhaler”). Anthem-of-eternal-energy “I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead” and “Mohammed’s Radio”, spiritual ode to the majesty of rock’n’roll, are immortal highlights.



EXCITABLE BOY

ELEKTRA, 1978

9/10

Though marred by the stray throwaway, *Excitable Boy*, from Zevon’s ‘Bezerko’ period – as Browne coined it – establishes his legend. Everyone knows “Werewolves Of London” and “Lawyers, Guns And Money”, yet the haunting, lovelorn “Accidentally Like A Martyr”, the rock’n’roll classicism of “Johnny Strikes Up The Band” (signature Waddy Wachtel guitar), shine too. The knives come out on both the homicidal title track and “Roland

The Headless Thompson Gunner”, a mercenary’s bloody revenge.



BAD LUCK STREAK IN DANCING SCHOOL

ELEKTRA, 1980

8/10

Warren had a stockpile of songs at hand for the first two albums, but sustaining that calibre proved challenging. *Bad Luck Streak* evidences the strain – its mercenary/outlaw themes seem forced, its classical pretensions intriguing but discordant. Still, it has moments: “Wild Age”, on the mythos of burnout, and “Gorilla, You’re A Desperado”, the best-ever jag on rock-star ennui. “Play It All Night Long”, showcasing David Lindley’s transcendent slide, is Zevon’s all-time best rocker.



THE ENVOY

ELEKTRA, 1982

9/10

Warren Zevon’s mainstream moment was fast fading in the MTV age. Newly sober, though, he returned with a faultlessly sharp effort. The vulnerable “Let Nothing Come Between You” was the shoulda-been hit, but a character-driven mix of regret, nihilism and his slickest, driest humour (“The Hula Hula Boys”) made for a winning, sonically stunning disc.



SENTIMENTAL HYGIENE

VIRGIN, 1987

8/10

The big comeback, *Sentimental Hygiene* clutched at what made Warren special – the explosive tribute to boxer “Boom Boom Mancini”, the comic skewering of celebrity rehab in “Detox Mansion”. Overly slick – even REM are rendered as anonymous backers – the strength of sardonic songwriting prevails. Neil Young’s guitar on the title track helps spark a respectable return to form.

WARREN ZEVON ON RECORD PART 2

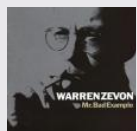


TRANSVERSE CITY

VIRGIN, 1989

6/10

Zevon's dalliance with cyberpunk, aided by superstar support (Gilmour, Garcia), is ambitious but overwrought. The black-as-night "The Long Arm Of The Law" transcends, as do occasional prescient insights amid surprisingly bouncy arrangements. Best song "Splendid Isolation" – about the bliss of solitude – stands on its own sweet groove.



MR BAD EXAMPLE

GIANT, 1991

8/10

Shunned in the time of hip-hop and Nirvana, *Example* reunited Warren with the Elektra-era crew, including producer Wachtel. Zevon's nastiest rockers ("Finishing Touches", "Angel Dressed In Black"), rub shoulders with his last stab at the mainstream, "Searching For A Heart" – out-Eagling the Eagles – and "Suzie Lightning", his sweetest love song ever.



MUTINEER

GIANT, 1995

9/10

A homemade job, this is his best post-Elektra set of compositions. By now leaning hard into literary influences (Martin Amis, Carl Hiaasen), he also presents "Monkey Wash Donkey Rinse", an outrageous Zevonian preview of the afterlife.



LIFE'LL KILL YA

ARTEMIS, 2000

10/10

If "Monkey Wash..." held one view on expiration and its repercussions, this late-career masterpiece – opening salvo in a trilogy essentially portending his own early death – essayed variations galore. This was Zevon coalescing a lifetime of dark visions, across a wide range of characters, with wicked humour and a folk-rock beat, led by "My Shit's Fucked Up" and "Porcelain Monkey".

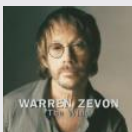


MY RIDE'S HERE

ARTEMIS, 2002

7/10

Considering the strengths of its predecessor, *My Ride's Here* is a letdown. A pastiche of sorts, though not without subtle pleasures and madcap narratives ("Basket Case", "Lord Byron's Luggage"), several indulgences tip the scale downward. The title cut, though – death arrives in a Western fever-dream, cameos by everyone from John Keats to John Wayne – is a masterpiece.



THE WIND

ARTEMIS, 2003

9/10

The Wind's heroic last stand, art racing death to the end, is an incredible final chapter, Zevon saying his goodbyes, cracking jokes, voicing regrets. While the more personal expressions are almost too intimate to bear, Warren's playful side is all smiles: "Disorder In The House", uplifted by Springsteen's cosmic guitar solo; "Numb As A Statue", benchmark Lindley slide; and the piquant, self-mythologising "Dirty Life And Times", an anapologetic, self-accepting summation. **LUKE TORN**

and he started thinking nobody cared about him. Someone would call and he'd get mad at them, phones would get thrown at walls. He was out of control a lot of the time. When he actually cleaned up, I thought he became more prolific and a better musician," says Calderón. "But in the old days he was crazy. The worse time was when he ended up living in this sleazy place on Sunset with John Paul Getty III, the kid who was kidnapped. I don't know how he met him but they had this place together and they had something going on with these girls and there were a lot of drugs, guns, all sorts. I don't know what was going on over there, but it was crazy."

WARREN STARTS AND aborts numerous periods of detox and rehabilitation. By 1980, he's well enough to release *Bad Luck Streak In Dancing School*, which opens with two gunshots and includes his mercenary epic "Jungle Work" – "We parachute in/We parachute out!" – as well as one of his most profane songs, "Play It All Night Long". The same year sees the release of an outstanding live LP, *Stand In the Fire* (dedicated to Martin Scorsese), recorded over five rollicking nights at the Roxy in L.A. But Warren's no longer troubling the charts or the people who compile them.

The Envoy (1982) is another fine collection of songs about fractured lives and geopolitical dread, but it's the last album he makes until Slater gets him a deal with Virgin for 1987's *Sentimental Hygiene*, his comeback, which in part reflects with a mix of apology, astonishment, extremely black humour and bracing candour on his hell-raising heyday on songs like "Detox Mansion", "Trouble Waiting To Happen", "Even A Dog Can Shake Hands" and "Reconsider Me", which three years earlier had so excited Andy Slater. There were appearances by his regular West Coast cronies, but also valuable contributions from REM, Neil Young and Bob Dylan.

"The great thing about working with Warren was you could call *anyone* and they'd come play on his record," says Slater. "He was the ultimate songwriters' songwriter. He represented all those things we love about rock'n'roll – rebellion, living on the edge. Then there were the songs. How many people have been that good? Dylan has, but not too many others."

How did Neil Young and Dylan end up on the record?

"We had a session called for two o'clock," Slater recalls. "At noon, I get a call from Warren. 'I'm at the studio. You've got to get down here right now.' I said, 'Warren, the session's not 'til two.' He just said, 'Andy, now. Bob Dylan's here.' I'm like, 'What? Do you even *know* him?' Warren says, 'No. Just get down here. He just turned up and no-one knows why.' I get down there and Dylan's sitting there with this kid, his son.

They're just sitting around. We played some songs then he split. I thought, 'We've got to get him on the record!' I said, 'Why don't we call and ask him to play harmonica on "The Factory"?' We were doing overdubs at a studio on La Brea. He came in, played three or four passes on the song and that was it. He didn't stay long. He did his solo, was super-gracious and was gone. Warren loved him. He was Warren's hero.

"We were recording at Record One, which was like a house, two studios on either side of a living room, and Neil

☛ Alcoholism is a disease. He was sick."

"I heard all the stories about him before I worked with him," says Niko Bolas, who co-produced *Sentimental Hygiene*, Warren's 1987 'comeback'. "I was completely enamoured. I thought he was the coolest guy on the planet. He was like a cowboy. I don't think he was acting at all. The Warren I knew was the Warren you read about. He really was that smart. He really did drink that much. He really did take all those drugs. He was really that guy. A lot of the time he didn't want to be him, but that's who he was. If you told him the river is too deep to cross he'd get a wet suit 'cos he was still going in. That was him."

"I met him at a time in his life when he was a reformed wild man," says Noah Snyder, the young engineer who first worked with Warren on 2002's *My Ride's Here* and went on to produce his last album, *The Wind*. "So I never had to deal with that Warren, who was sorry about a lot of the things he'd done, especially when he was drinking and doing all those drugs. I think he felt he'd sacrificed his young family and some of his most important relationships to his desire to ultimately be famous. He had a lot of regrets."

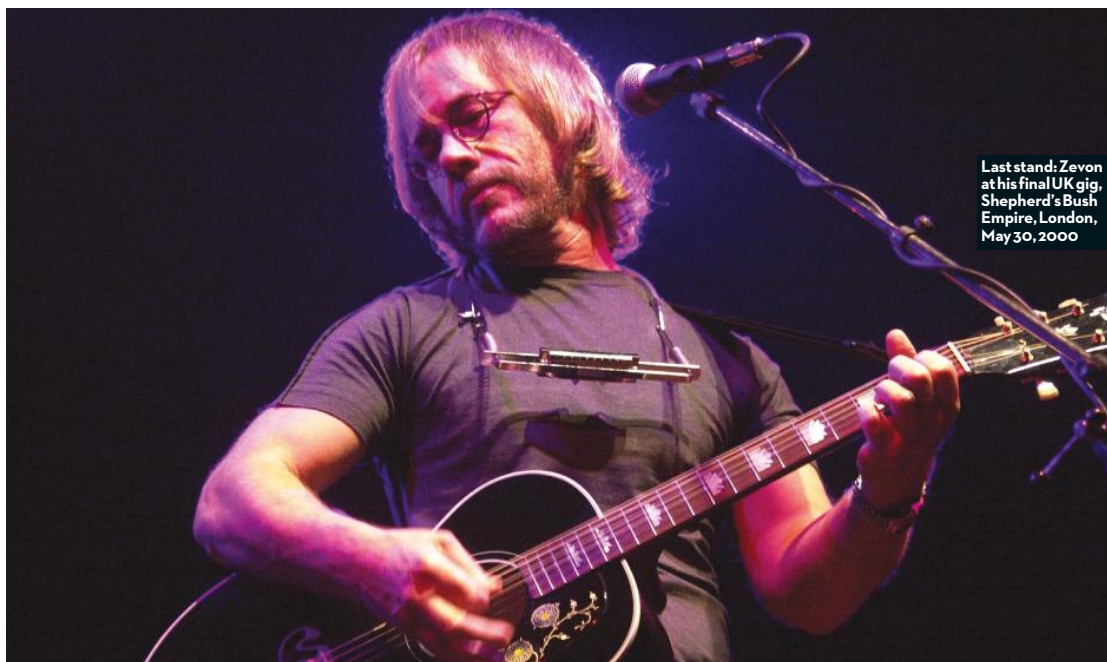
"He was tormented, he was insecure," says Jorge Calderón. "There was a lot of anger, especially as his career went down



Food'll kill ya: Excitable Boy's innersleeve



Zevon with REM's Bill Berry, Mike Mills and Peter Dinklage



Last stand: Zevon at his final UK gig, Shepherd's Bush Empire, London, May 30, 2000

was working across the hall from us. Niko knew him and was working on a record with him. He came in and we asked him to play on 'Sentimental Hygiene'. He picked up Warren's guitar, this Blackknife guitar with a moulded graphite neck that didn't have the same resonance as a wooden guitar. I said to Niko, 'He's got to play on this track. But we've got to get him back with his own rig.' So he came in with his guitar, Old Black, and his red pedal board. He told us to turn the speakers up and play the track as loud as we could. He stood in the middle of the studio facing the speakers and blew through three ferocious solos like he was onstage. When he finished, Warren looked at me and said, 'That was like *Woodstock*.'

Sentimental Hygiene isn't the commercial success Warren and Slater have been hoping for but sells well enough for Virgin to bankroll a follow-up, the somewhat grandiose *Transverse City*, an LP about perestroika, shopping, traffic jams and the end of the world, partly inspired by Thomas Pynchon and the cyber-punk novels of William Gibson.

There's another stellar lineup of musicians, among them Jerry Garcia, Little Feat's Richie Hayward, Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady from Jefferson Airplane. The soloists include Young, again going splendidly amok on "Gridlock", Chick Corea on "The Long Arm Of The Law" and on the apocalyptic "Run Straight Down", Pink Floyd's David Gilmour.

"We were recording the *Momentary Lapse...* album and had moved to LA because our deal with [producer] Bob Ezrin was that we would do part of it in LA," Gilmour tells *Uncut*. "We were in the big A&M complex which had two or three studios. Warren was recording in one and asked if I'd play on a track, so I did. That's it. Nice guy. Only met him the once. Bob Dylan dropped in while I was there."

After *Transverse City*, Zevon records sporadically. There's 1991's wonderfully acerbic *Mr Bad Example*, the *Learning To Flinch* live album (1993) and *Mutineer* (1995), then a five-year silence, many people figuring that Warren had either died or retired. Then in remarkably quick succession, there's *Life'll Kill Ya* (2000) and *My Ride's Here* (2002), a pair of albums whose songs are mostly about death. Because of what Warren is soon going through, the albums are retrospectively seen as somehow prophetic.

IN MAY 2000, a show Warren's due to play at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire is cancelled when he's taken ill. He's still complaining about feeling unwell at the re-scheduled concert, but people are laughing so hard at his songs, patter and Tom Waits impersonations no-one really pays attention. Back in LA, friends are worried by his declining health, a dread of what might be wrong with him, which turns out to be mesothelioma, a rare form of lung cancer that also killed Steve McQueen.

GALLOWS HUMOUR

"IT'S GETTING DARK, TOO DARK TO SEE..."

Warren records "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" for *The Wind*

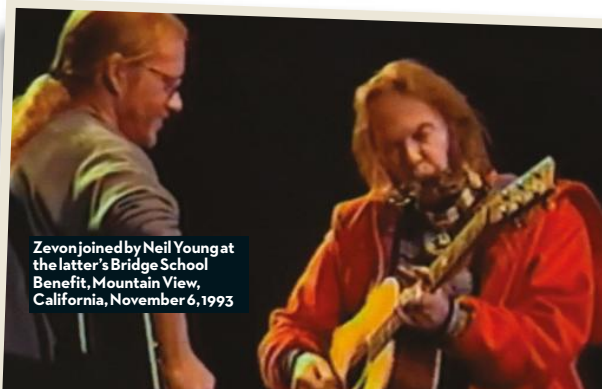
"It took me a minute to warm to the idea," says Noah Snyder of Warren's suggestion they cut a version of Dylan's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" for *The Wind*. "We did it on a whim. Billy Bob Thornton had offered us the use of his studio, The Cave, in the basement of the house Billy Bob had bought from Slash. Warren was hanging out there and said, 'Let's do a version of "...Heaven's Door"'. The dude was just like that. The morbid was not out of bounds. I thought initially it was a bit much, but they cut a fantastic version. Warren found a truth in those lyrics. This really was a man at heaven's door and to face what he faced and be able to stare back at it and poke fun at it and not be paralysed by it showed incredible strength. I've seen people weep the first time they hear that track."

"CANCER GAVE HIM THE CHANCE TO BE LIKE ONE OF HIS TOUGH-GUY HEROES"
JORDAN ZEVON

As in his heyday, LA's rock elite gathered to him. Among those at the sessions for the album that would become *The Wind* are Ry Cooder, Jim Keltner, Tom Petty, Jackson Browne, Don Henley, Joe Walsh, Dwight Yoakam, Timothy Schmidt, T Bone Burnett, Emmylou Harris, Billy Bob Thornton and Bruce Springsteen, who blows in to play on a song called "Disorder In The House".

"We sent him a rough of the track and he came up with a guitar part and an idea for a solo and flew in to do it," says Jorge Calderón. "It was insane. We had a rented amp, a Fender Twin, very powerful. When he finished that solo, the speakers were blown, it was so raucous. He loved Warren, they had a great time together. It was one of the better days."

"I was in awe of Springsteen," Noah remembers. "He was in the middle of, like, a 120-date tour. He flew in on his own dime. He took his own private jet and flew in overnight from Minneapolis or somewhere, came straight to the studio and played. His solo killed the amp, which kind of reached the pinnacle right there of being an amp. There was nothing left for it to do. It just died. He played this awe-inspiring solo and Warren just turned to me when he was done and said, out of the side of his mouth, 'Did anyone know Bruce Springsteen could play guitar like that?' It was very emotional. He was just a tornado of joy that blew through the studio and left. I don't"



Zevon joined by Neil Young at the latter's Bridge School Benefit, Mountain View, California, November 6, 1993



Final years... Zevon after his diagnosis, with son Jordan and daughter Ariel

● think he was in town for more than 12 hours. It meant a lot to Warren at a very bad time.”

In October 2002, the album still unfinished, Warren makes his last public appearance, on *The Late Show With David Letterman*. His performance gives the impression he’s wise-cracking his way to the grave.

“It was the role he was preparing to play all his life,” says Jordan. “It gave him the chance to be like one of his tough-guy heroes. He got to be John Wayne, at last. But a lot of the time he was depressed, scared. He was on powerful painkillers, liquid morphine. He started drinking again.”

“People don’t know how close we came to not getting the record done,” says Jorge Calderón. “Warren was putting on a brave front, laughing, making jokes about dying. But I saw him getting more and more depressed, especially when he started drinking again after all those years. He was afraid. He was trying to hide his drinking from me. I said, ‘Dude, I don’t care. But at least get the album done, be there for the sessions.’”

“He locked himself away, eventually. We had four songs without vocals and he went home and wouldn’t come out. He wanted me to put the vocals on. I said, ‘Are you kidding me? I can’t sing these songs.’ He disappeared for three months. Eventually, his kids, Ariel and Jordan, and some people went to his apartment and confronted him.”

“A friend who used to leave groceries outside his door called to say she was worried as the groceries weren’t being taken in,” says Jordan. “I basically camped outside his door until I got in. The place was a mess and so was he. The apartment was blacked-out and all the grocery bags were lined up against a wall. The food hadn’t been touched, but there were empty bottles everywhere. I got him cleaned up and organised nursing help for him. He was in terrible shape.”

“He pretty much disappeared for three months,” says Noah. “We kept working as long as we could. We polished every song we had and then ran out of stuff to do. He was drinking, yeah. I think the doctor made two terrible mistakes. First, he told Warren he only had six months to live, when in fact he had longer. He also told him, ‘You know all those rules you have for yourself about these things you don’t do because they’re bad for you? They don’t matter anymore.’ I think that was a dangerous thing to say to a recovering addict. He didn’t just disappear down a bottle, though, that’s not quite what happened. He did have some days when he was out of it. There were days when he was not well, when he was just not there, when he was drunk. But it wasn’t every day. And certainly the last times I saw him, he was himself. He wasn’t fucked up. He wasn’t high. He was Warren.”

to nurse him through those final sessions. But we did it. He sang them. We had an album.”

The Wind is released in August 2003, to the kind of ecstatic reviews Warren hasn’t enjoyed in 20 years, and wins two Grammys. And now there was nothing left for Warren to do but die.

“TOWARDS THE END,” says Jordan, “I’d go around to his apartment, lie on the bed next to him and watch terrible movies and TV shows, hold him. As he got worse, he didn’t want me to see him. His hands had started to swell. He wanted to spare me, so I stayed away.”

“I last spoke to him a few months before he died,” says Andy Slater. “He was very funny. He reflected on the things he wished he’d done differently and the mistakes he’d made. It was a very difficult moment. I loved the guy. It was never about business and all that bullshit for me with Warren. It was about something much deeper, and now, he’s in the wind.”

“I think I saw him one more time after the last session,” says Jorge Calderón. “But we continued to speak on the phone when we could. The last time I was at his house, we never got to a place where we said goodbye. We knew what was going to happen. He was extremely afraid and he hugged me and said, ‘Man, I’m so scared.’ And I hugged him like a brother and said, ‘Dude, it’ll be OK.’ We were family.”

“He was one of the most unique songwriters the United States ever produced,” Calderón goes on. “The way he looked at life, his humour, he was always pushing things to a different level. He wrote many wonderful things. He was the best of them all.”

“I saw him at his place just after the record came out,” says Noah Snyder, “maybe six weeks before he passed. That was the last time I saw him. There wasn’t

much to say. There was nothing left unsaid between us at that point. Life is fragile. If there is someone you love, let them know. Because you don’t know what’s going to happen. He had been such a mentor and I learned so much from him in such a short period, it was insane.

“Warren was not just one person in the sense that different people who met him at different points in his life met different people, they met a different Warren. He was a very complex man and he understood how dark things can be, that this is a dark world. But that didn’t stop him from valuing and rejoicing in the light that shines in all that darkness and that’s what I’ll always remember about him.” ●

“HE UNDERSTOOD
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NOAH SNYDER

EYEWITNESS

“ENJOY EVERY SANDWICH...”

Warren on *The Late Show...*

On Wednesday, October 30, 2002, a month after he was diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, an entire edition of *The Late Show With David Letterman* was devoted to Warren. Letterman was a long-standing fan, and had appeared on *My Ride’s Here*, bawling away on “Hit Somebody! (The Hockey Song)”.

“You look and seem remarkably healthy,” Letterman said. “Don’t be fooled by cosmetics,” Zevon told him, his features clearly gaunt beneath his studio make-up, but his gallows humour still intact. Letterman wondered if his former hell-raising lifestyle had contributed to his current illness, which made Zevon laugh out loud. “I think I chose a certain path and lived like Jim Morrison and then lived for 30 more years,” he said.

From his ‘current perspective’, did Zevon know more about life and death than the chat show supremo did? “Not unless I know how much you’re supposed to enjoy every sandwich,” Warren replied with a hard-boiled grin, before playing “Genius”, “Mutineer” and a rousing version of “Roland...”, which ends with the valedictory holler: “Talkin’ about the man!”

