



I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon

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When Warren Zevon died in 2003, he left behind both a fanatical cult following and a rich catalog of dark, witty rock-n-roll classics that includes "Lawyers, Guns, and Money," "Excitable Boy," and the immortal "Werewolves of London." He also left a trove of misadventures and anecdotes, a veritable rock opera of drugs, women, celebrity, high times, and hard ways. As Warren once said, "I got to be Jim Morrison a lot longer than he did."

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead is an intimate and unusual oral history of one of our most original and distinctive rock-and-roll antiheroes. Narrated by his former wife and longtime co-conspirator, Crystal Zevon, the book draws on over eighty interviews with the likes of Bruce Springsteen, Stephen King, Billy Bob Thornton, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, and countless others who came under his mischievous spell. The result is a raucous and moving tale of love and obsession, creative genius and epic bad behavior. Told in the words and images of the friends, lovers, and legends who knew him best, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* captures Warren Zevon in all his turbulent glory.

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon Details

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From Reader Review I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon for online ebook

Linda says

Let me save you the trouble of reading this little missive: Warren gets drunk. Warren does something incredibly stupid and hurts someone very close to him. Warren responds with a sh*t-eating grin and a shrug.

Repeat over and over until he dies. The end.

D. says

The risk you run with biographies is that there's really only two ways to respond to them. Upon completion of the book, you either say, "Wow! What a life!" and your enjoyment of that artist's work is enhanced. SOCIETY'S CHILD by Janis Ian is a good example, as is JUST KIDS by Patti Smith. On the other hand, there's the book where you finish and you say, "Woah. What a jerk. What a broken person," and you find yourself struggling to separate the artist's work from the way they treated people and the selfish way they lived their life. PAPA JOHN by John Phillips is a good example of this type of book.

I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD falls into the second category, although I don't think anyone who is even remotely familiar with Zevon would be all that shocked by most of the stories told in the book.

There's little doubt that Zevon was a musical genius, and the book is filled with references to the people he hung out with: Jackson Brown, Bonnie Raitt, and many more share their thoughts about Warren, and share their anecdotes about times spent together.

A good section of the book is also taken directly from Zevon's journals, and it's there that readers see just how self-centered he was, as he casually recounts numerous stories of infidelity and drug and alcohol abuse, not to mention the snubs of family and friends.

There's no doubt that Zevon was a world-class musician, and that he didn't get the success he probably deserved. In the end, though, Zevon comes off as a really broken person, who pretty much sabotages his career at every opportunity, then whines about how he isn't as successful as he should be. Still, he shows at times that he tried to rise above some of his brokenness, especially once he was avoiding his alcoholic excesses.

brian says

zevon goes to the doctor b/c he's short of breath and is given two months to live. fear fear fear anger cynicism a return to alcoholism and drug addiction. shit smeared walls, floors littered with porn and empty bottles, and then he hits the studio and records a final album. and dies. jeez. as he wrote in 'life'll kill you':

**'The doctor is in and he'll see you now
He don't care who you are.
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.
That's what I said.
Life'll kill ya.
Then you'll be dead.'**

he wrote that BEFORE he was diagnosed.
from the same album:

**'Well, I went to the doctor
I said, "I'm feeling kind of rough"
"Let me break it to you, son"
Your shit's fucked up."
I said, "my shit's fucked up?"
Well, I don't see how-"
He said, "The shit that used to work-
It won't work now."**

**That amazing grace,
Sorta passed you by.
You wake up every day,
And you start to cry.
Yeah, you want to die
But you just can't quit
Let me break it on down:
It's the fucked up shit'**

i think about death with the frequency that that stupid statistic says the average male thinks about sex (freud was half right: there is something at the core of all we are, all we do... it just ain't the eros part, chap) and i obsess on the details. in the case of those 'awful, awful diseases' i think about that cellular tipping point: you're walking around and the fucked up shit is building and clustering and festering and then one day BLIP!, it's cancer. that millisecond at which it hits the point of no turning back, that millisecond when you're eating or laughing or shitting and it's BLIP! determined that yup, you're gonna be dead in a few months. it might be building up in my body right now and when i'm on a plane taking off or a too-slow elevator or some other shit, i swear i can feel it in there and my body just feels like a fleshy bag holding all these precious precious perpetually rotting organs that are just a BLIP away from blowing out into cancerous bloodbags. and if i croak out in two months y'all will read these words with the same air of dread and prophecy with which i listen to zevon's 'life'll kill ya' album; again, recorded less than two years before he was handed the death sentence.

the final verse from the final song on the album:

**'Don't let us get sick
Don't let us get old
Don't let us get stupid, all right?
Just make us be brave
And make us play nice
And let us be together tonight.'**

Annetta Ribken says

I'm about halfway through this book, and wow. I have been a fan of Warren Zevon since the late '70s -- his music has had a profound influence on me. I saw an interview of Crystal Zevon in which she stated Brother Z wanted his story told unvarnished, and that's exactly what you're getting here. He was a musical genius, a total asshole and a unique personality. It's a fascinating story about a fascinating artist. I can't wait to see what the second half of the book holds.

I really like the format -- it's told in snippets from the people around him who loved him best and were closest to him. They don't pull any punches. And that's exactly how Warren Zevon wanted it.

He was a terrible husband, a philandering boyfriend, a horrible father for the most part, and by all accounts, one of the biggest assholes that ever walked the planet. He had weird personality quirks that drove people crazy; he could be very cruel to those who loved him most and he gave a new dimension to alcoholism and drug abuse. But, that's only part of the story of Warren Zevon. If he was such a total prick, why was he so loved? Why were people so eager to work with him, get involved with him?

Because he was special. That doesn't excuse any of his behavior, but in this book by his ex (and only) wife, Crystal Zevon, you get a picture of one of those rare people who shine so bright they burn out early. The true picture of Warren Zevon, however, is in his music. I can't judge his lifestyle, his choices or the way he lived his life because the heart and soul of Zevon was in his music. It seems he just didn't have enough left over for the people in his life. It's a sad, shocking, fascinating look at a man who had the soul, intelligence and sensitivity few people are blessed (or cursed!) with, and he had a way with lyrics and musical arrangements that will grab you on a visceral level and never let go. Yes, he was a total asshole right to the very end. He lived balls out or nothing. But he was a lot more than that.

He was vastly underrated by the masses, but other artists in the music industry and his devoted fans knew what a genius he was. If you only know Warren Zevon through "Werewolves of London" or "Excitable Boy", you are missing out. Try "Mutineer". Listen to "Accidentally Like a Martyr", "Mohammed's Radio", "Keep Me in Your Heart", "Reconsider Me". Hell, pick one. His sardonic wit, extreme intelligence and unique perspective on life is all there. All the pain, joy and confusion one life can hold.

This book is raw and bleeding. Exactly the way Warren Zevon lived his life.

Kyle says

more accurately 3.5 -- took me a long time to finish this -- don't know why but i have some theories -- #1 i

guess is it wasn't what i would term compelling, but #2 would be that i didn't want it to end either -- i always respected zevon though before reading this i wouldn't have called my self a huge fan -- i am now -- i am glad i familiarized myself with his life and more of his music than i had before -- quite an enigma -- one of those guys who is his own worst enemy -- at times hated him, loved him, admired him, pitied him, the list goes on -- this was the first for me of i guess what you'd call an oral history -- i enjoyed that, but also could've used a little more exposition -- editing seemed non-existent in that some successive quotes were complete non-sequiturs -- weirdly organized so a little distracting --but much like the robert peace bio, if the goal was to tell the truth, the whole truth, including the "ugly, awful parts" then the book appears to have achieved its goal -- more importantly, even after reading it all, you will find yourself with a deeper appreciation for warren zevon, the artist and affection for warren zevon, the man -- recommended for the most die-hard to even just the curious/interested fan --

Bob Mayer says

I enjoy some of his music. I always find it interesting to learn about creative people and their process. I respect Warren for telling his ex to have people tell the truth about him. We need more of that.

You learn a lot about the people commenting on him as you do about him. Bruce Springsteen comes of as very flat.

The artist community of the time is inspiring-- I doubt that exists these days when everything is a corporation. One thinks he should have stayed in Spain-- Roland the Thompson Gunner time. That song was our unofficial dirge in 10th Special Forces.

Jeremy says

I love Warren Zevon. I think he's just the best. Even when he was alive, his voice sounded kind of like how a ghost might sing - all wiggly and sad and weird and funny. Though he undoubtedly would have been fun to have a drink or two with, I feel bad for the people who had to spend any significant amount of time with him, since, as this biography, not to mention his own lyrics, will often attest, the guy behaved like a drunken asshole most of the time. I simply do not care. He never did anything to me, other than provide me with practically half my favorite songs. He could have drop-kicked his newborn infant off a cliff (in a perhaps rare moment of forethought, he did not do this) and I'd still be into him, and that's if the only thing he ever wrote was "Carmelita".

The book does a good job stressing that Zevon was well worth knowing when he was at his best, but doesn't shy away, at all, from his less-dignified moments, of which there are apparently many to select from. I'm typically not too fast a reader, but I blew through 450 pages in about an hour and a half. It's one of them deals where a bunch of people who knew him take turns relating various incidents and takes on things, like that SNL book awhile back. It's an approach that seems to mesh well with tales of celebrity indiscretion.

I would recommend this more for people who already knew they liked Warren Zevon. Otherwise, the albums "Excitable Boy" and "Life'll Kill Ya" are probably better intros. If you were to read this book knowing nothing of him, you might come away thinking he's just a weird dick, as opposed to a weird dick who made beautiful songs.

Jeff says

I am a die-hard Warren Zevon fan and have been for many, many years. Someday someone will write a biography of Zevon worth the time to read. I know I am probably even now being excommunicated from the legion of Hammerheads, WZ fans, but so be it. Before he died Zevon turned over his diaries to ex-wife Crystal and instructed her to tell his story warts and all. I wish Ms. Zevon would have decide to include the "all" part of that instruction. This focuses far too much on the dark side of Zevon's character, his addictions and shortcomings and seemed not only to rush to tell all those illicit incidents and highlight the character faults, but seems to relish pounding the reader over the head with just how clay his feet really were. Perhaps I am being too harsh, but if this weren't trumpeted as an officially sanction "biography" I'd ease up. This is, at best, a second hand, second rate memoir of those books which are currently so popular - or at least prolific - the "Look-how-messed/screwed up was my/his/her-life-and-how-I/He/She-triumphed-despite-their-horrible-rotten-parent(s)/circumstances/addictions" type. Someday someone will take the time to properly research with an academic and objective eye Mr.Zevon's dirty life and times. One hopes that while the story may or less turn out to be the same, at least the story telling will be even-handed and professional.

karen says

maybe biography month was a bad idea.

it's just making me angry at people i used to like. not so much byron - but with him i'm in love with the *mythology*, and that's the whole point of byron - you know what you're getting into. but it turns out warren zevon was rather unpleasant,too, both in the obvious drunken blackout wife beating way, but also in the name dropping/writing down all the funny things he said that day in his journal like a self-involved teenager that makes me a little queasy/shy.

and make no mistake - if anyone ever set about to write my biography - it would be clear that i, too, am an asshole, without any of the explosive talent that zevon had. so i guess that's the end of that complaint. thanks for working through it with me.

"reconsider me" has been in my head on a more or less constant loop since i decided to read this. and it's as good a place to start as any when discussing warren zevon. because the song really shouldn't be as good as it is - it should be cheesy. lyrically, its a standard take-me-back song with a little heart, but a little greeting-card in it, too. the only thing that makes it stand out is some inventive key changes throughout - unexpectedly dipping and rising against the typical pop song formula. he manages to elevate this song until it transcends the simple love song it is at its heart. and i've always liked it without knowing why, because its not a standard caustic-humor zevon song. but see now that i've read the book, i can only associate it with this horrible thing he did to his daughter, and how it's probably one of the saddest memories of her dad and it just makes me feel bad for people i've never met. and that's all i need - must purge these feelings.

when i was in high school, pretty much all i listened to was leonard cohen and zevon. i mean, there was smiths and cure and depeche mode and chris deburgh (yeah - go ahead and say something, i dare you), but i would always come back to those two. this, and marching band, made me wildly cool in high school. when zevon announced his diagnosis, suddenly he was everywhere, and every celebrity was trying to tell me (on teevee - i'm still too wildly uncool to be hanging out with celebrities) how great and underknown warren zevon was. where were these people when i was in high school, i wonder? at first, all the publicity was ghoulish to me - these vultures circling a still-warm body, but i'm grateful now that the same ghoulishness allowed him to finish and finance the album that is probably one of the best and saddest albums of all time.

when i found out he had died, i was out and about and i went to tower records(this is back when there were actually places that sold music in new york), and of course they had his new album at the listening station and of course i had to go listen to it and have me a good public cry. and it wasn't even keep me in your heart, which is such an obviously moving "i know i'm about to die so i wrote this" song-song, it was indifference of heaven. and this is why:

I had a girl
Now she's gone
She left town
Town burned down

there has never been a more perfectly warren lyric. only he would go that extra mile and have the fucking *town* burn down.

this is worth a read, but i think i'm personally going to stop reading about people whose work i admire - the less i know about their fallible bits, the better.

Scott says

Amazing, I must be the only one on this site who loved this book. It really could be my favorite biography. This captivated me from the start and reignited my early interest in Zevon's music, turning me into a current huge fan. Yes, it's not a flattering portrait, but it's a very real and human one. The book not only acknowledges the debauchery of his life (which is what makes these kinds of biographies best-sellers), but really pays attention to Zevon's musical craft and genius. You can really feel Warren through this book, and it's not always pleasant - yet this is not just an exploitative portrayal of a wild monster as "Wired" had been about John Belushi. This book was a real experience for me, would easily read it again.

Diann Blakely says

As deliciously exhaustive as this biography remains, even after a second and third reading, you wish Zevon's process weren't scanted, and that there were more pages devoted to the formation of his songwriting's verbal genius and how it has sustained itself as a growing, if still largely underground, influence. "He raped and killed her / Then he took her home," he wrote in a single line of "Excitable Boy," satirizing the horror genre, conventional dating mores and male sexuality, including his own. The last is particularly important, as during his later 18-year period of semi-sobriety, Zevon transferred his death-defying consumption of alcohol to sex. Addictions provided him with a means of avoiding love, and yet love's lack, beginning in his insufficiently parented childhood, and his rage against it, produced some of our era's best songs. Many aren't even recognized as Zevon's, like "Poor Poor Pitiful Me" and "Hasten Down the Wind," which Linda Ronstadt made famous.

Zevon's lifelong sense of darkness, plus his incomparable musicianship, transformed a diagnosis of mesothelioma into THE WIND, arguably his masterpiece. Ry Cooder, Bruce Springsteen, Emmylou Harris, Jackson Browne and Billy Bob Thornton are among Zevon's co-players and/or -writers here, we're told in I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD's foreword, composed by one of the literary friends Zevon cherished, Carl Hiaasen.

Largely an autodidact, Zevon—whose first music lessons were from Stravinsky—possessed a spookily high

IQ and loved quoting Schopenhauer. He wanted to be known as a writer, not just a songwriter, thus he was more than elated when Tom McGuane, Hunter Thompson and recently appointed New Yorker poetry critic Paul Muldoon became longtime fans, friends and even collaborators. At the very end of his life, when Zevon tumbled off the wagon, he nonetheless remarked with typically sharp-minded drollery that his death from terminal cancer might make him—finally—“really famous.” Zevon’s unforgettable appearance on a David Letterman show devoted entirely to him accomplished that, and I’LL SLEEP WHEN I’M DEAD continues to spread the word. The book induces us to see past the alcohol, OCD, sexual insanity and just plain looniness—for a long while he would only wear gray, seizing upon Calvin Klein T-shirts as particularly lucky and buying dozens—in Zevon’s life. We’re irresistibly lured back to the funny, mordant, powerful, brilliant, informed, scary and ultimately wise music.

(originally published in the NASHVILLE SCENE in 2007; since then I've found two quotations I used as sources that might add to others' understanding of what remains, with Martin Amis's EXPERIENCE; Jill Bialosky's HISTORY OF A SUICIDE; Frederick and Steven Barthelme's DOUBLE DOWN; Larry Brown's ON FIRE and BILLY RAY'S FARM; Andrei Codescu's NEW ORLEANS, MON AMOUR, a collection of essays and NPR broadcasts that may well be read as a memoir itself; Joan Didion's THE YEAR OF MAGICAL THINKING and BLUE NIGHTS; Mikal Gilmore's SHOT IN THE HEART; Meghan O'Rourke's THE LONG GOODBYE; and Patti Smith's JUST KIDS, among the best memoirs published in past years-- and my study is currently being painted, so forgive me, please, those I've omitted! By the same token, I've reviewed many of these books, and the pieces can be located here on NBCC/Goodreads.)

"In the '60s," Zevon explains, "I couldn't have conceived of owning a gun. Now in the '70s, I feel that nobody's going to mess with me. You go from mindlessly believing in peace to arming yourself to learn how to have it."

"But in order to do what he did, he had to jettison anything extraneous, to limit himself. He couldn't spend time bidding farewell to the many people that wished they could spend time with him. He told me he wanted to be there for the birth of his grandchildren. And he was. He wanted to finish this record. And no matter how much we celebrate the album and the people who came around to do it with him, making a record is real work. He had to retreat into his most personal, essential friendships. I have no problem saying that we were much closer a long time ago. And my admiration and affection for him has never diminished."
Jackson Browne
?

Stiv_Matters says

I grew up listening to Warren Zevon, bought all his records when they came out, and saw him live several times throughout his career. He is one of my favorite performers. Personal information about Warren was always hard to come by. I knew he had a legendary drinking problem back in the 70's/early 80's and he spent a lot of time getting on the wagon and falling off again. Rarely were there any specifics. This book gets specific about nearly all phases of his life and kind of beats you over the head with just how very flawed Warren was. Over the years as I listened to his songs I built up an idealized image of who he was and how he spent his time and this book effectively crushes any illusions. The book is fascinating and heartbreaking at the same time. Former wife, Crystal Zevon, interviewed most of the people who knew and worked with him during his career and this book is a chronicle of his life told through these interviews with occasional narrative from Crystal. The good news is that the book provides a detailed look at the 70's Southern

California rock scene with lots of great stories involving Jackson Browne, various members of The Eagles, Bonnie Raitt, and many of the musicians who played on some of the biggest records of the 70s. The book also tells the origins of many of Warren's songs and offers lots of behind the scenes stories about the recording of various Zevon albums. Over 80 people were interviewed for the book and it's well documented just how much Warren was respected not only by fellow songwriters and musicians, but also by noted novelists, actors, and politicians. Much of Warren's humor and charisma come through in this book. The bad news is that Warren had a difficult childhood, which made him grow up to be a difficult adult. He suffered from OCD, had an addictive personality, and was extremely selfish and self-absorbed. He spent much of his drinking years in blackout. During these blackouts, he sometimes became a violent, dangerous person who punched his wife more than once. He neglected his children and was wildly promiscuous. When he stopped drinking in the mid 80's, he appears to have filled the void of alcohol addiction with an insatiable sex addiction while still attempting to maintain serious long-term girlfriends. His OCD manifested itself in many strange personality quirks and he was extremely superstitious.

I find it hard to recommend this book to anyone who is not familiar with Zevon's music and even then, I'm reluctant. The book is heavily weighted with the negative aspects of his character and actions. Reading this book, it really doesn't come through why his friends and family loved him and overlooked or tolerated (and enabled) his behavior. The final chapter comes close to capturing why everyone loved him but I can imagine a lot of people who are not familiar with his wonderful songs, reading this book and coming away with the impression that he was just a monumental asshole. Even for me, a huge fan, many of the stories related here are just heartbreaking. The darker aspects of Warren's life were indeed dark. The man had a lot of demons and every single one of them is documented in this book. If you're a fan, this book is a dark and scary but vastly entertaining chronicle of Warren's life. If you're not familiar with the songs of Warren Zevon, your time would be better spent listening to some of his records. This book is exactly what Warren would have wanted but it fails to capture his heart and spirit. For that, you gotta listen to the songs.

Dan Secor says

I would have given this book four stars - I'm a big Warren Zevon fan, and it was well-written - but frankly this book depressed the living hell out of me. Zevon was a train wreck all his life. I remembered reading an interview with him in Rolling Stone years back about how he quit a bad drinking habit (two bottles of vodka, straight, every day), but this book shows his other excesses never really left him. He had tons of very close friends, but for some reason he sabotaged many of his friendships because of his temper and his antics.

The sad story of the circumstances around his death did nothing to bring any redemption to his life story, but it is a good warning to never take anything for granted and to be moderate in all things.

J.K. Grice says

I don't even know where to start with this book. I've been a huge Warren Zevon fan for years. So was David Letterman, and Warren often filled in for Paul Schaffer when he was absent. Zevon was also the only personality that Letterman ever devoted an entire show to, after his passing.

Anyway, I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD showcases the troubled history, the musical genius, and the upside of Zevon's life and songwriting. I liked hearing from his friends Jackson Brown, Waddy Wachtel, Bonnie Raitt, and Bruce Springsteen as well. Warren's wife Crystal compiled this wonderful lasting autobiography for her late ex-husband. I will definitely re-read this superb account again someday, as it was one of the best

I've ever experienced. Highly recommended.

Murray says

The more I read this, the more it grew on me. I never really knew much about Warren Zevon, and this book was filled with one rock n Rollin' escapade after another. Although it hints at Zevon's creative process at times, I would have liked to have read more. The witnesses- and Zevon's diary entries- reveal vey honest depictions of a troubled man who knew how to write songs and live hedonistically. And, man, he sure had a lot of girlfriends.

I loved reading the book with Spotify nearby so I could listen to any song as it was being discussed.
