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In His Time of Dying

By JON PARELES

In the lobby of the Ed Sullivan Theater, two perky handlers for "The Late Show With David Letterman" were giving their nightly pep talk to the people headed for the front rows. They encouraged laughter, the more enthusiastic the better. They warned against whistling, which could overload the microphones. They also had one more caution. "If you hear sad news, don't make that sympathy sound," one instructed. "You know, 'Awwwwwww. . . . ' "

The audience understood why. The show's only guest would be Warren Zevon, the songwriter known for the twisted humor of songs like "Lawyers, Guns and Money," "Werewolves of London" and "Poor Poor Pitiful Me" and for troubled love songs like "Hasten Down the Wind" and "Accidentally Like a Martyr." Zevon, 56, is a dying man.

He has mesothelioma: the same kind of lung cancer, he dryly noted, that killed Steve McQueen. He has been informed he has only months to live. And in the part of that time that he is not spending with family and friends, he is writing and recording songs.

"I just thought right away that I wanted to work," he told me this fall over bacon and eggs in Hugo's, a restaurant near his apartment in West Hollywood. He was dressed like a junior faculty member, in jacket and jeans; his energy came and went. "This is a good job. It's been a good job. Work is the most effective drug there can possibly be.

"I'm on the periphery of a lot of despair, of course," he said. "You'd have to be stupid not to be. I have my moments when I'm not too thrilled about this whole deal. But at the same time, the songs have never come like this, so I'd have to feel more gratitude than anything else. I'm probably in the intensest creative period of my life."

Zevon and his longtime bassist and collaborator, Jorge Calderon, have been writing whenever ideas strike them -- including, Zevon says, via cellphone conversations "from the aisle of the health-food store. I have to move fast, because I don't know what's going to happen."

The album in progress is sometimes somber, sometimes rowdy, and while the new songs are conscious of mortality, they're not daunted by it. In one called "My Dirty Life and Times," Zevon sings, "Some days I feel like my shadow's casting me/Some days the sun don't shine/Sometimes I wonder why I'm still running free/All up and down the line."

Zevon says: "I've talked to people who have, you know, paralyzing illnesses and those kinds of debilitating illnesses. And compared to that, this is a walk in the park, however it turns out. But there's certainly a limit to how explicitly I want them to tell me it's going to go."

The Letterman appearance, in October, was likely to be Zevon's last public performance. He had a long connection to the show; when the band leader, Paul Shaffer, took time off, Letterman called on Zevon to lead the band, and Letterman makes a cameo appearance (shouting "Hit somebody!") on Zevon's 2002 album,

"My Ride's Here." Now he walked onstage as the band played "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead," a Zevon song from 1976, and bluntly described his situation. "I might have made a tactical error in not going to a physician for 20 years," he told Letterman. "It's one of those phobias that didn't pay off."

Letterman asked Zevon if his condition had taught him anything about life and death. "How much you're supposed to enjoy every sandwich," Zevon answered.

Weeks later, Letterman was still struck by the reply. "Here's a guy looking right down the barrel of the gun," he said. "And if a guy wanted to indulge himself in great hyperbole in that circumstance, who wouldn't forgive him? But that was perfect, the simplicity of that. If this guy is not a poet, who is?"

Zevon can calmly itemize some of the things he doesn't have to worry about anymore. High cholesterol. Getting fat. Going bald. "Technology's on the decline, and that's a comfort to me," he says in a staticky phone conversation.

But between jokes, he has been saying goodbyes and rationing his time. He had been a constant reader and moviegoer; a conversation with him is peppered with references to Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Graham Greene, Oscar Wilde, Thomas McGuane, Czeslaw Milosz, Martin Scorsese and Krzysztof Kieslowski, along with musical idols from Igor Stravinsky to Paul Simon to Jimmy Webb to Ian and Sylvia.

Now his reading time is limited. He carries a small copy of Rainer Maria Rilke's "Duino Elegies" with him, because, he says, "Rilke seems to write about a universe where everybody's dead except for a brief shining moment when we're not." He has also been playing the DVD of "The Maltese Falcon" over and over, he says, "to watch Bogie smoke."

Zevon was a lifelong smoker himself. And during the 1970's, he led the fast life of a hitmaking Los Angeles songwriter. He drank; he took drugs. "I ran around like a psychotic," he says. He did his time in rehab during the 1980's.

During the summer of 2002, he had been exercising when he started to feel chest pain and shortness of breath. He thought he had strained a muscle, but it didn't go away. Eventually, Zevon's dentist -- the only doctor he saw regularly -- insisted he go to a physician. From there, the news was bad. Zevon decided to make a public statement about his illness in September, and he has allowed a video crew from the cable channel VH1 to follow him as he makes what he expects will be his final album.

"It's a very weird situation because I keep asking myself how I suddenly was thrust into the position of being travel agent for death," he says. "You know, spokesperson for the doomed. But then of course the whole point of why it's so strange is that I had already assigned myself that role so many years of writing ago."

Death has been the black-humored punch line in Zevon's songs from his first albums to his most recent ones, "Life'll Kill Ya" and "My Ride's Here." (The ride in question is a hearse.) The cover picture on "Genius: The Best of Warren Zevon" shows a skull. All three albums were finished before his illness was diagnosed. Throughout Zevon's career, he has always sung about calamity -- the murderous rampages in "Excitable Boy," a junkie's downward spiral in "Carmelita" -- with a stoic, matter-of-fact baritone. His songs are full of uneasy laughs, not all of them on other people.

Zevon commands a following among listeners, including a surprising number of authors, who admire his pithy storytelling. In songs like "Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner," he packs a screenplay's worth of incidents into a four-minute song. The journalist and novelist Carl Hiaasen was one fan who ended up collaborating with Zevon on lyrics. They met when Zevon showed up at a reading to thank Hiaasen for citing one of his songs. "Some of the songs I liked best he couldn't remember having written," Hiaasen says. "There are gaps in the tapes from his wild days."

When he got the diagnosis, Zevon told Hiaasen: "This is a lot harder for you than it is for me. If you had

gone to bed as many nights as I did in the old days knowing that you had taken so much stuff that could kill you and not knowing if you would wake up, this is not as shocking as you think."

Zevon had oddly matched parents: a Mormon mother, often in fragile health with heart trouble, and a Russian Jewish father whom he bluntly describes as a mobster. He was born in 1947 and named after his mother's brother, who died in World War II.

"I grew up in this family with a dead war hero kind of hovering over us," he says. "And my father was a gangster. So I was working the way any artist does, working through those two ideas, kind of linked together. If there's a logical explanation for why you write, then this seems reasonably logical.

"People write because it seems like it'll be an easier job than carpet laying, that they might meet more girls," he says. "And they write because the world strikes them as being a marvelous place, and they want to keep bringing that to everybody's attention. You know, a scary place, a menacing place, an exciting place because it's scary and menacing. But mainly, kind of glorious."

Zevon was in junior high school, studying classical piano, when he had the chance to watch recording sessions with Igor Stravinsky and the conductor Robert Craft. But he soon decided classical music wasn't for him. "I felt that it was music of another time," he says. "I couldn't add anything, and it wasn't necessarily so relevant anymore." Still, he never entirely renounced it; it's easy to hear Aaron Copland in Zevon's piano parts, and for "Genius," Zevon wrote a string arrangement that flaunts unlikely harmonies.

As a teenager Zevon started playing guitar and writing songs, and by the late 1960's he was already placing them. One, "She Quit Me Man," was on the soundtrack of "Midnight Cowboy." Another, "Like the Seasons," was the B side of "Happy Together," the Turtles' 1967 No. 1 single. "That paid my rent for years," Zevon says. His first album, "Wanted Dead or Alive," appeared in 1969 and was generally ignored. But songs like "A Bullet for Ramona" already revealed the gift for the pulp-fiction narratives that would run through his songs.

He didn't start with any plan, he says. "I was writing any damn thing I could. It would be anything that I could somehow stumble, stagger through and write, whether it was a folk song or a Burt Bacharach imitation. But I always knew when something was going to be worth working on, however long it took. And then I'd work on it for a year, sometimes just waiting for the words to come, waiting for the third verse. Or the bridge -- that can take 14 years. Or else you rationalize that it doesn't need a bridge."

During the early 1970's, Zevon wrote jingles and led the Everly Brothers' backup band; he spent a summer playing piano in a bar in Spain. Back in California, he fell in with a coterie of songwriters who were melding folk, country and pop into the soft rock that would dominate

the mid-1970's. In 1976, Linda Ronstadt made Zevon's "Hasten Down the Wind" the title song of an album, and Jackson Browne produced Zevon's first mature album, "Warren Zevon."

While royalties from Ronstadt's albums rolled in, Zevon built his own following. His 1978 album, "Excitable Boy," reached the Top 10. But he was out of control. His songs turned sketchier, his performances unstable. He announced in the early 1980's that he was fighting alcoholism. And in the years of Madonna and big-haired metal bands, Zevon's songwriting -- smart tall tales set to piano marches and Celtic-tinged guitar tunes -- grew further out of sync with the pop mainstream. There was a five-year gap between albums, from 1982 to 1987, before he reappeared with the album "Sentimental Hygiene," backed by members of R.E.M. It included "Detox Mansion," a sardonic view of a celebrity rehab center. Like many of Zevon's funniest songs, it has a distinctly vulnerable spot: "It's tough to be somebody/And it's hard not to fall apart."

Along with other songwriters of his generation, Zevon was settling into a steady midlevel career. He made his most recent albums for an independent label, Artemis, and toured every so often, sometimes with a band, sometimes on his own. He supplied an occasional song for a television show ("Tales From the Crypt," "Route 66"). And he continued to write his terse, telling picaresques, like "Mr. Bad Example" (a pre-Enron

vision of amoral greed) and "I Was in the House When the House Burned Down." He was not a major star, but he could still headline clubs, field requests from longtime fans and meet his heroes. During the sessions for "Sentimental Hygiene," Bob Dylan showed up to pay his respects. "When I walked into the studio and they said, 'Bob Dylan's here,' I said, 'Why?' 'To see you.' " Zevon pauses. "That's worth a million records to me."

Dylan was in Los Angeles in October performing at the Wiltern Theater, and word had got around that he was singing some Zevon songs on tour. Arriving backstage, Zevon was greeted with the double takes a ghost would get. Johnny Depp eagerly volunteered to play "very bad guitar" on any session, anytime; Zevon said, "I'll see you again." A studio musician too eagerly told Zevon that he looked much better than he would have expected.

Soon Zevon was ushered upstairs to Dylan's dressing room, where the two songwriters traded a long glance. Dylan mumbled something about how sad he was to hear about Zevon's illness. "I have come to value every moment," Zevon replied. A few moments later, they were trading shoptalk on songs and musicians, and soon enough, it was time for the show. Dylan fixed a thoughtful gaze on Zevon. "I hope you like what you hear," he said.

That night Dylan would sing three Zevon songs without introduction or comment: "Mutineer," a love song that begins "I was born to rock the boat"; "Lawyers, Guns and Money"; and "Accidentally Like a Martyr," in which, for a moment, he did an unerring impression of Zevon's voice. Zevon listened with concentration, soaking up the moment as his idol paid tribute to him. But fatigue set in; he had to slip out before the concert ended.

"There are levels past which things no longer connect," he told me afterward. "There's nothing to relate them to; there's no way to really analyze them. To hear Dylan sing not just one song, but another. . . . It's a big thrill, but beyond the honor, it's just so strange, beyond even computing."

As news of his illness spread, Zevon found himself with all the eager sidemen he could ask for. The sessions have drawn his longtime friends, like Jackson Browne and Dwight Yoakam, as well as admirers like Bruce Springsteen and Dylan. One day in November, Browne, Ry Cooder, T Bone Burnett, the actor-director Billy Bob Thornton and his collaborator Calderon all converged for a 12-hour marathon; Zevon's 33-year-old son, Jordan, was there, too. "It was like 'This Is Your Life,' unplanned and unrehearsed," Zevon recalled. One song they recorded was "Prison Grove," which got started, like many Zevon songs, with a title phrase that struck him as both odd and singable.

"Jokingly we refer to it as my Robert Redford in prison song," Zevon said. "On another level it's really serious. Afterward, Jorge said, 'You know, your body's the prison.' And I said, 'Whoa, he knows me better than I know myself.' "

Cooder said after the session: "It's not easy for him. It's hard work, recording. All the routine stuff about studios -- 'Do you like the playback? Do you care about the microphone?' -- I said: 'Man, just let that go. You don't have time.' This guy has to make every minute count.

"It's unbelievably sad and unbelievably brave," Cooder added. "You get that kind of intense focus, and every word and every note is heartfelt. Plus, he is so funny. His asides while he was playing piano over the earphones, his remarks, I hope they keep it and make it part of the record.

Everything is accentuated and becomes meaningful in an oblique way. There's subtext all over the place. I went around in another mental atmosphere for quite some time after that."

In the back of his mind, Zevon grudgingly admits, he's wondering about posterity. He's hoping he'll be remembered better, he said, than the "bad watercolor" of Humphrey Bogart on the box for the "Maltese

Falcon'' DVD.

''Mostly I'm thinking about the next verse of the next song, 'Disorder in the House,' '' he says. ''But, you know, I'm also thinking and hoping and wondering if all these things mean something.

''The songs aren't all written,'' he continues. ''You don't know where they're going to go. That's the fun of the job. There's the usual malarkey, the usual gags, the usual stuff. And also a few songs written by way of kind of being farewells to people, goodbyes to people, gratitude to people. Expressions of, you know, this was a nice deal, life. But I don't think it's exactly weighted with sentimentality.

''We're not setting out to write doomed-guy songs. I'm not an agenda writer. I don't think you should set out to tell people, 'This is how the world looks from one's last few days on it,' any more than I think you should set out to tell people here's who they should vote for to be the mayor of Fresno, California.''

In fact, as he has been recording, he has noticed that the new songs are not as fixated on death as the ones he had been writing for the last three decades. He has recorded Bob Dylan's dying-cowboy song, ''Knockin' on Heaven's Door,'' but now that he is facing death directly, it has receded from his music. ''Somebody who won't go to the doctor for a normal checkup is fearful and nervous,'' he says. ''But once you find out what it's like on the other side, you can go beyond fear.''

Jon Pareles is a music critic for The Times.

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