MUSIC

His Sh*t's F***ed Up: The Complicated Legacy of Warren Zevon

The late singer-songwriter has been gone for 15 years, but his life and career still aren't any easier to make sense of: He was as gifted, haunted, and destructive as any musician from his generation.

By Steven Hyden | Sep 7, 2018, 5:40am EDT

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Steve Gorman was starstruck.

The then-37-year-old drummer spent the last weekend of October 2002 at Billy Bob Thornton's Beverly Hills home with the ostensible purpose to lay down tracks for the Academy Award winner's prospective solo album, down in his Snakepit recording studio. (Thornton's house had previously been owned by Slash of Guns N' Roses.) But for most of the time, the assembled musicians hung out, drank, and watched the hometown Anaheim Angels finish off the San Francisco Giants in the World Series. Eventually, they would stumble into the Snakepit each night for a session that lasted until dawn.

But Gorman wasn't awed by the presence of the *Sling Blade* star. Late that Sunday night, an unexpected guest stopped by—a larger-than-life L.A. music legend recently brought down to human scale by a terminal illness.

"I remember I went, 'Oh my God, that's fucking Warren Zevon,'" Gorman recalled 16 years later. "He was moving slow, and you could tell he didn't feel good. I went from super excited to really sad."

Two months earlier, Zevon announced to the world that he had been diagnosed with pleural mesothelioma, a form of cancer that affects the membrane surrounding the lungs and chest. Doctors gave him just three months to live. Almost immediately, he began assembling the songs that composed his elegiac swan song, *The Wind*, one of the most commercially successful and lauded releases of his 34-year recording career, released just two weeks before his death at age 56 on September 7, 2003. In the

end, Zevon outlasted his initial prognosis by 10 months—long enough to witness the birth of his twin grandsons, Gus and Max, as well as the unlikely renaissance of his career and reputation.

The public nature of Zevon's final months with terminal cancer forever changed how his life and work were perceived, softening his rough edges and sentimentalizing an artist who could be brutally *un*-sentimental. Throughout Zevon's prime in the '70s and '80s, he was very much the epitome of the "problematic" artist—in one of his best-known songs, he sings gleefully about an "excitable boy" who rapes and kills a woman and *then* takes her home. In his personal life, Zevon was a womanizer who raved maniacally (and sometimes violently) through alcoholic blackouts, terrorizing his wife, Crystal, and scarring his two children, Jordan and Ariel.

Zevon's talent had made him one of the most admired musicians and songwriters in Los Angeles—Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt, and members of the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, and the Beach Boys all lined up to back him on his classic self-titled 1976 breakthrough. But in time, Zevon would burn nearly all of those bridges, eventually retreating to Philadelphia in the early '80s for an extended lost weekend that dragged on for several years.

But in death, Warren Zevon was ennobled as a brave battler of the great existential void, a tough guy with a heart of gold who "kicked death right in the balls," to quote Zevon's friend, the humorist Dave Barry. A few days after his visit to Thornton's house, Zevon flew to New York City to appear

as the only guest on a historic episode of the *Late Show With David Letterman*, wryly bantering about his impending demise with his most famous fan. (Zevon referred to Letterman, who booked him numerous times over two decades, "the best friend my music has ever had.") The stand-out sound bite from the Letterman appearance—"Enjoy every sandwich"—became Zevon's epitaph, along with *The Wind*'s heart-rending final cut, "Keep Me in Your Heart," a beautiful if inevitably maudlin farewell that subsequently became a go-to tearjerker for melodramatic TV dramas.

Zevon's illness and untimely death also changed how some of his earlier songs sounded. Spitting in the face of adversity had long been a recurring theme in his work. In the anthemic "Play It All Night Long," from 1980's *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School*, Zevon sketches a vivid portrait of lower-middle-class Southern squalor: the grandpa has "pissed his pants again," the brother "ain't been right since Vietnam," the father is mired in an incestuous relationship with the daughter, the grandma has cancer, and "the cattle all have brucellosis." (Citing a specific bovine disease is a characteristically literary Warren Zevon lyrical flourish.) But in the chorus, these calamities are waved off by the fleeting power of Lynyrd Skynyrd, along with other unnamed stimulants: "'Sweet Home Alabama' / Play that dead band's song / Turn those speakers up full blast / Play it all night long."

Zevon often wrote about how pain was a vital part of human existence, like "Ain't That Pretty at All" from 1982's *The Envoy*, in which he pledges to "hurl myself against the wall /'Cause I'd rather feel bad than not feel

anything at all." On his next album, 1987's *Sentimental Hygiene*, Zevon finessed those sentiments into a mission statement in "Boom Boom Mancini," one of his greatest songs, based on the real-life boxer active from 1979 to 1992. Over a relentless stomp accented by Zevon's slashing guitar, he sings approvingly of how Mancini was badly beaten by Alexis Arguello in his first attempt at winning the lightweight title in 1981, and was back in the ring just "seven weeks later." In the next verse, he pardons Mancini for killing the South Korean fighter Duk-koo Kim during a 1982 bout. In Zevon's estimation, enduring pain and inflicting it upon others lay on the same continuum, adding up to the ultimate cost of staying alive. "The name of the game is be hit and hit back," he snarls.

Later in life—though years before he was diagnosed with cancer—Zevon wrote about mortality in ways that seem profoundly eerie in retrospect. His 2000 album, the self-explanatory *Life'll Kill Ya*, includes the darkly hilarious "My Shit's Fucked Up," which opens with a first-person narrative about a disastrous visit to the doctor's office that all but predicted his own fate.

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."

Some fans viewed Zevon's decision to forgo treatment so he could work relatively undiminished on *The Wind* as a mark of macho authenticity, a perception that Zevon himself discouraged. ("It's a sin to not want to live," he says in a 2003 VH1 documentary.) Nevertheless, Zevon in the moment appreciated the marketing potential of his predicament. "Warren said, 'We have to go into show-biz mode,'" his manager Brigette Barr says in Crystal Zevon's hair-raising 2007 book, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon*. "'I'm giving you permission to use my illness in any way that you see fit to further my career right now.'"

Prior to *The Wind*, Zevon had been a respected but marginal figure, best known for 1978's "Werewolves of London," a novelty hit with a distinctive barrelhouse piano hook written (with frequent cohorts LeRoy Marinell and Waddy Wachtel) in a matter of minutes. The song was later given a second life in the mid-'80s when Martin Scorsese used it for a memorable sequence spotlighting Tom Cruise's swaggering pool-playing prowess in *The Color of Money.*

During Zevon's leanest years, Letterman was always a reliable patron, dutifully booking Zevon whenever he had a new album to promote, and even tapping him to be a substitute bandleader when Paul Shaffer was away. But in terms of the commercial mainstream, Zevon was a nonentity. By the early '00s, Zevon was recording albums largely by himself in order

to save money, and sustaining himself on the road by playing stripped-down solo gigs in secondary, Middle American markets.

For *The Wind*, Zevon's attitude was, "Okay, I'm going to die but I'm not going to go out John Prine–style with the record that sells ten thousand copies," his son, Jordan, says in *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead.* The gambit, for lack of a better term, worked: When word got out that Zevon was dying, doors that were closed to him for decades suddenly opened again. His label gave him a real recording budget. Old friends like Bruce Springsteen, Tom Petty, and Don Henley agreed to play on the album. Magazines rushed to profile him, and VH1 sent a camera crew to follow him around. After he died, *The Wind* became only his second-ever gold-selling record, and it was nominated for five Grammys, including Song of the Year for "Keep Me in Your Heart," winning two.

But that was all on the horizon that night in late October when Zevon arrived at the Snakepit, "nursing a big tumbler of something on ice," Gorman said. (After nearly 17 years of sobriety, Zevon fell off the wagon hard when he was diagnosed.) But Zevon was otherwise in good spirits. After all, he was hanging with his old friend Billy Bob, whom he had met when they were neighbors in the late '80s; they subsequently bonded over their mutual obsessive-compulsive disorders.

Zevon was feeling proud that night—one of his heroes, Bob Dylan, had recently played a three-night stand at the Wiltern in L.A., where he

performed several of Zevon's songs.

"People had to tell me because I couldn't recognize them," Zevon told the gathered musicians, according to Gorman. "Nothing tells a man he's about to die like when Bob Dylan starts doing your music."

Suddenly, Zevon had a flash of inspiration: I should cover Dylan's "Knockin' on Heaven's Door" for my album, to return the favor and also because … well, you know.

"And everybody laughed," Gorman said. "It was like, *yeah, this would be the time, dude*."

But when Zevon made it clear that he wasn't joking, the musicians—which included Zevon's long-time bassist Jorge Calderón as well as Styx guitarist Tommy Shaw and journeyman arena-rock singer John Waite—quickly exited the control booth, worked out an ad-hoc arrangement, and prepared to play. From his drum stool, Gorman could see Zevon in the vocal booth, struggling for breath as the song opened. But he pulled it together when it was time to sing, throwing his whole body behind a quivering vocal.

As the take lurched toward its climax, Zevon deviated from the lyrics and improvised an impassioned prayer, which you can hear on the album—"open up, open up, open up the gates," he hollered, standing up on weakened, crooked legs.

"I mean, I have goose bumps right now just talking about it," Gorman said

softly. “It was really, really something.”

Ten minutes later, Zevon was spent. “He goes, *Well, guys, I don’t even know how to thank you so I’m not even going to try*,” Gorman said. “And he just stood up and left.”

Warren Zevon was hit, but he also hit back.

On the 15th anniversary of his death, Warren Zevon would seem ripe for the kind of revisionism that typically bolsters the legacies and streaming numbers of deceased musical icons. But even with the feel-good patina that *The Wind* cast on his career, Zevon resists easy canonization, especially now, when critics and music historians tend to recoil against the thornier aspects of classic-rock mythology.

Put another way: Many of the things that made Zevon seem like an iconoclastic outlaw in the ’70s make him disreputable in the “virtuous music listening” era. As a songwriter, he was attracted to ironic humor and lowlife characters; as he sings in 1991’s “Mr. Bad Example,” many of the people who populate the Zevon-iverse “like to have a good time” and “don’t care who gets hurt.” Music critics now tend to prefer earnestness and unambiguous virtue, as well as a straightforward progressive political agenda. Zevon, at best, was apolitical, though his estranged wife, Crystal, recalls that he once declared himself “to the right of your father and Ronald Reagan.” (In 1999, Zevon played at the inaugural ball for Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura, a self-described fiscal conservative and socially

liberal candidate for the Reform Party.)

And then there is Zevon's checkered personal life, outlined with bracing candor in Crystal Zevon's book. In his drinking days, Warren was physically abusive; when he got sober, he kept apologizing for a specific instance when he struck Crystal, giving her a black eye, which made her resentful. *Why didn't he say sorry for all of the other times he hit me?* And then she realized that he had been too drunk to remember those other instances.

Later in life, he made amends with Crystal, and personally asked her to write his biography, warts and all. That's not an excuse for his worst behavior, or a plea against "canceling" him, but rather an acknowledgement that his transgressions have long been part of the historical record, which is more than you can say about many of his peers.

Ultimately, it's up to the listener to dismiss, condemn, or contextualize Zevon's personal history on his or her own terms. But in life as well as art, the scars and blemishes we all carry on our souls were what fascinated Zevon the most—starting with his own defects. The redemptive quality of *The Wind* was a departure for Zevon; most of the time, he wrote about deeply flawed people muddling toward uncertain resolutions, with a dubious shot at any greater transcendence. They own their sins without ever quite reconciling them.

That honesty is still bracing, though it also puts Zevon outside of the acceptably "sensitive" boxes for artists of his ilk—both when he was a wild-

card cult favorite rubbing shoulders with more palatable commercial behemoths during the Me Decade, and in the afterlife.

“I find that with some people, there’s almost an aesthetic barrier with Warren Zevon, unfortunately,” says Taylor Goldsmith, the 33-year-old frontman of the L.A. folk-rock band Dawes, and a committed Zevon acolyte.

Goldsmith and I have had similar experiences as members of the Zevon “church,” as he puts it—you try to turn newbies on to *Warren Zevon* or *Sentimental Hygiene*, and it’s usually a tough sell. In the pantheon of dearly departed singer-songwriters, Zevon isn’t romantically doomed like Townes Van Zandt or Nick Drake. He’s not beautiful like Jeff Buckley, or ugly-beautiful like Elliott Smith. He’s … difficult.

“When people think, ‘Oh, here’s a new singer-songwriter,’ they’re going in with a certain expectation of a man with an acoustic guitar and harmonica,” Goldsmith said. “And then you hear Warren Zevon talking about political shit in the Middle East and drug overdoses, and these wild lyrics and concepts that really go against the singer-songwriter umbrella.”

For members of the Warren Zevon tribe, your favorite Zevon song says a lot about you. I don’t mean his *best* song—that is pretty clearly “Desperados Under the Eaves,” from the self-titled album. Lyrically, “Desperados” is his most writerly tune, with his most evocative opening line (“I was sitting in the Hollywood Hawaiian Hotel”), his most quotable verse

(the one that starts with “And if California slides into the ocean / Like the mystics and statistics say it will”), and his most compelling ending (“I was listening to the air conditioner hum / it went mmm …”). Musically, it features his grandest melody—“Desperados” billows like an Aaron Copland fanfare, a flex of his boyhood background in classical music.

In an old *Late Show* episode from the ’90s, when Zevon was guesting as bandleader, David Letterman asks Zevon to play “Desperados Under the Eaves,” which he had never performed on the show. Zevon demurs, suggesting that he needs an orchestra backing him to do the song justice. Maybe he just didn’t want to play his big hymn about L.A. on the opposite coast from that “beautiful, sensual morgue.” Either way, Dave never was able to convince Warren to play it for him.

The *best* song can’t ever be your *favorite* song, because the best song belongs to everybody, whereas a favorite song belongs only to you. Goldsmith goes with “The French Inhaler,” a telling choice for a songwriter—it boasts a parallel narrative that references Zevon’s bitter break-up with the first love of his life and mother to Jordan, Marilyn “Tule” Livingston, and the controversy over Norman Mailer’s 1973 biography of Marilyn Monroe. It’s the sort of song—sophisticated without making a big deal about it—that professionals wish they had written.

For me, it’s “Splendid Isolation,” originally released on 1989’s *Transverse City*, Zevon’s inevitable “weirdly overproduced ’80s” LP made under the

spell of William Gibson's pioneering cyberspace novel *Neuromancer.* That album has grown on me over the years—check out "Networking," in which Warren Zevon invents Facebook 15 years before Mark Zuckerberg—but I prefer the flinty live version of "Splendid Isolation" from *Learning to Flinch,* recorded during one of his many unglamorous early '90s tours.

For starters, I love the title. Zevon has the best song titles in the business. Another personal favorite: "Something Bad Happened to a Clown," from 1995's medium-fidelity *Mutineer*, his Guided by Voices record. But there are many other contenders: "Seminole Bingo," "Gorilla, You're a Desperado," "Even a Dog Can Shake Hands," "The Hula Hula Boys," and, of course, "I'll Sleep When I'm Dead."

"Every time we would write together, it was title first," Calderón tells critic James Campion in his insightful new book, *Accidentally Like a Martyr: The Tortured Art of Warren Zevon*. "We'd get a title and he would write it on the top of the page and our job was to fill in the song."

"Splendid Isolation" is about the difference between being alone and loneliness—a state of living vs. a state of mind—and how slippery those distinctions can be. In the first two verses, Zevon fantasizes about living by himself in the desert, like Georgia O'Keefe, and being rich enough to rent Disneyland and keep away the other visitors, like Michael Jackson. In the final verse, the song's curmudgeonly humor curdles into something more sinister:

I'm putting tinfoil up on the windows
Lying down in the dark to dream
I don't want to see their faces
I don't want to hear them scream

At the risk of revealing too much about myself, there are few songs that I relate to more than "Splendid Isolation." And I don't know how to feel about that. Like "Desperados Under the Eaves," I've played "Splendid Isolation" dozens of times and yet I don't know if the song is deeply depressing or triumphant *in the face of being deeply depressing.* Sometimes I vote the former, and other times the latter. When Warren Zevon owns up to his complicated life, he makes you see how complicated your life is, too.

Before he made up characters in Warren Zevon songs, Warren Zevon was a character in a Warren Zevon song.

Born in Chicago on January 24, 1947, Zevon's mother, Beverly, came from a nice Mormon family and his father, Willie "Stumpy" Zevon, was a hard-bitten Jewish immigrant from Russia who found work as a bookie connected with notorious L.A. gangster Mickey Cohen. His parents split up and made up endlessly during Warren's childhood, ping-ponging the precocious boy between different households after they relocated to California.

I'll Sleep When I'm Dead recounts the most famous childhood story in Zevon lore: At age 9, Stumpy suddenly reappeared and gifted young

Warren with a piano that he won in a poker game. Warren beamed, though his mother immediately ordered the piano out of the house. A fight ensued. Warren then watched his father pick up a knife and hurl it at his mother's head. Fortunately, his aim was slightly off. And Warren got to keep the piano.

Zevon was a bit of a child prodigy—he later claimed that he had the highest ever IQ recorded in Fresno. (Now there's a good Warren Zevon song title.) At 13, he impressed his junior high music teacher enough to warrant an invite to a recording session for the great Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, who subsequently hosted Warren at his home several times. Once, he even let Warren sip some of his scotch.

By 16, Zevon had dropped out of high school and commenced a long, frustrating climb toward fame and fortune. After a failed stint in San Francisco, he formed a folk-rock boy-girl pop duo called lyme and cybelle—Warren was lyme, with emphasis on the lower case—and found contract work as a songwriter for hire. (His most memorable song from this period, an excellent Beatles knock-off called "Outside Chance," was recorded by the Turtles.) He also encountered one of the darkest characters associated with the Sunset Strip, the quintessential Zevonian hustler Kim Fowley, who asked the budding star, "'Are you prepared to wear black leather and chains, fuck a lot of teenage girls and get rich?'" Zevon recalled in a 1981 *Rolling Stone* profile, adding, "I said yes."

But after landing the menacing folk-blues number “She Quit Me” on the *Midnight Cowboy* soundtrack and releasing an undistinguished and barely noticed debut, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, in 1969, Zevon spent the next several years languishing in obscurity. Not that this prevented him from living the rock-star life. By the time his friend Jackson Browne helped to finagle a record contract from David Geffen’s Asylum Records in the mid-’70s, Zevon was a full-blown alcoholic convinced that genius was a destination on the road of excess.

In 1978, when he was riding high on the success of “Werewolves of London,” he hit a new personal low. Crystal pushed him to go to rehab. He refused. One night, she heard three gunshots ring out in the night. She rushed down to the recording studio set up at their Santa Barbara home. She found Warren pointing a smoking gun at his own face on the cover of his smash hit album, *Excitable Boy.*

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” he said with a nervous laugh.

This is one of many stomach-turning anecdotes shared by famed rock journalist Paul Nelson in that infamous ’81 *Rolling Stone* article, the most horrifying celebrity profile I’ve ever read. Nelson was close to Zevon, which afforded him uncommon access — he was even asked to participate in a 1979 intervention that he later recounts in the article. But Zevon was also uniquely open about the losing battle he waged against his demons.

“The last time I detoxed, I really thought I was going to die. I had my hand

on the phone, I was afraid that I was going to start hallucinating and shooting guns—I didn't know what was going to happen," Zevon tells Nelson. "From what I know about alcoholism … I'd say there's nothing romantic, nothing grand, nothing heroic, nothing brave—nothing like that about drinking. It's a real coward's death."

This candor went only so far, however. The thrust of Nelson's story is to present a sinner who has repented and put his past behind him—the implicit idea was to make Zevon palatable again to industry insiders who had written him off. (This included *Rolling Stone* publisher Jann Wenner, who had pledged to never again put Zevon in his magazine after Wenner saw Zevon act boorishly at a Bruce Springsteen concert in 1978.) But Zevon's drinking actually got worse in the years after the *Rolling Stone* article ran, until he finally cleaned up in 1986.

As a younger man, Zevon was attracted to drugs and alcohol because they supplied a sense of bravado he didn't otherwise feel as a shy, introspective person. For many of us who love Zevon's songs, this chemically addled bravado is itself a drug.

I noticed recently that I tend to drink way too much when I listen to Warren Zevon. I'm most attracted to the nonvirtuous Zevon, the indestructible lunatic who was never noble, earnest, or recognized by the Grammys. There's a small, adolescent part of me that still yearns to be like the noir hero of "Lawyers, Guns and Money," the one who gambles in Havana and

always goes home with the waitress. It doesn't matter that, as the child of an alcoholic, I already know there's "nothing romantic, nothing grand, nothing heroic, nothing brave" about that kind of life. I steer right into that fantasy anyway, turning those speakers up full blast, knowing I'll regret it all the next day.

Zevon's albums have that "Saturday night/Sunday morning" quality, chasing hell-raisers like "Werewolves of London," "Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead," and "Trouble Waiting to Happen" with tender, remorseful ballads such as "Accidentally Like a Martyr," "Searching for a Heart," and "Reconsider Me." Those ballads are doubly affecting precisely because they come from a "bad guy" like Zevon, rather than a more typically thoughtful "hero" like Jackson Browne.

One of the most haunting passages from *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead* concerns "Reconsider Me," Zevon's most poignant love song. (Given how much Zevon labored over his lyrics, the use of "reconsider" seems especially crucial.) Crystal Zevon recounts how Warren showed up at her place at some point in the mid-'80s, before he got sober, to play her the song. In spite of everything, they were thinking about giving their marriage another go.

Their daughter, Ariel, was excited to show her daddy her report card and a drawing she made for him. But when he walked in, he ignored Ariel, instead fixating on Crystal as he played her his beautiful love song. The

little girl looked on, quietly devastated.

In that moment, Crystal knew she could never be his wife again. The next day, a family trip to Knott's Berry Farm was derailed when a disheartened and drunken Zevon showed up two hours late.

What does a person who is moved deeply by "Reconsider Me" think when he hears this story? Sometimes, I can't get over Warren Zevon being a bad father. Other times, I marvel at the romanticism required to believe that playing a song, even one as gorgeous as "Reconsider Me," would have actually *worked* in that situation, and I'm unexpectedly moved all over again.

Warren Zevon wasn't Dr. Jekyll trying to ward off his nefarious Mr. Hyde. That's a fairy tale we tell ourselves to believe that that "bad" can be quarantined and kept at the polar opposite extreme from "good." What listening to Warren Zevon songs tells you is that good and bad coexist and remain present in us at all times, amid idealistic gestures that crash into daily disappointments. Then you wake up the next day hoping for another chance.

In 2018, Warren Zevon still pops up in both the likeliest and unlikeliest of places. Foremost dad-rock band the War on Drugs semiregularly covered "Accidentally Like a Martyr" on its latest tour. "Werewolves of London" appeared in a recent episode of *Preacher.* A 2016 documentary about EDM musician Steve Aoki was called *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead.* And

surely there is some godforsaken modern-rock radio station somewhere right now playing Kid Rock's 2007 hit "All Summer Long," which mashes up "Werewolves of London" with "Sweet Home Alabama," a bad callback to *Bad Luck Streak in Dancing School.*

Zevon's music, like so much classic rock, is part of the atmosphere now. With his quirky turns of phrase, he set out to tweak the lexicon. He succeeded, though we're now far enough removed that even EDM fans can unknowingly quote him.

"Have you found that a lot of contemporary songwriters are influenced by him?" Taylor Goldsmith inquired when I first phoned. He sounded uncertain. There isn't anybody like Warren Zevon now—nobody so recklessly, and cursedly, messy.

Zevon's imprint is most apparent on the storytelling troubadours who straddle the lines between country, folk, and rock, such as Jason Isbell, Amanda Shires, and John Moreland. He also gets namechecked every now and then in Father John Misty reviews, which is fair, especially if the album in question is this year's *God's Favorite Customer.*

But loving Warren Zevon remains a lonely pursuit. Or, should I say, an interest that one chooses to pursue alone, preferably while drinking all the salty margaritas in Los Angeles, because his songs recognize something true and deep inside your heart that you don't feel comfortable sharing with most people.

Sometimes, however, you get to be a loner with another fan. That happened for Goldsmith in 2015, when Dawes played the Letterman iteration of *The Late Show* for the last time, about four weeks before the host retired. As a special favor that aired as an online-only exclusive, Letterman requested "Desperados Under the Eaves," the song he could never get Warren to play himself.

"He knew that we were fans and that his music meant a lot to us, and Warren was on his show so much and that one was one song [Letterman] always loved and he never played," Goldsmith said.

As Dawes started the number, Goldsmith watched Letterman pace by the cameras. His head was down as he took it in. Goldsmith thinks Dave was somehow communing with Zevon's lost, wild spirit. But I wonder whether he was straining to hear that air conditioner hum. ■

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