

The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon

What happens when you're asked to write the life story of your terminally ill, rock star ex-husband?...If you're Crystal Zevon, you do it.

by Dave Korzon

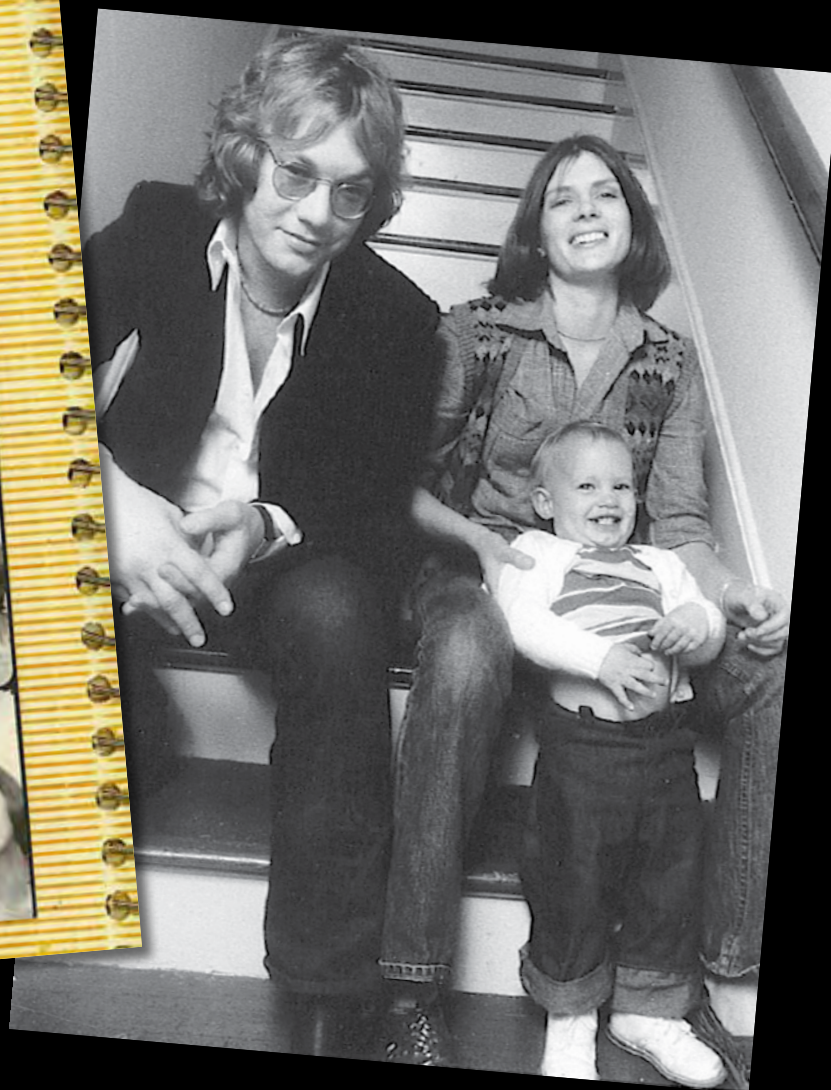
Crystal Zevon, the ex-wife of late singer-songwriter Warren Zevon, is fighting a bad cold this afternoon. Crystal and I are sitting at the kitchen table in her studio apartment in Barre, Vermont, getting ready to discuss her book, *I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon*, a startlingly honest biography she promised her ex-husband she'd write about him after his death from a rare form of lung cancer.

Warren Zevon, best known for the novelty hit song “Werewolves of London” (with its famous “a-hoooo” refrain), was a gravel-voiced singer and as Crystal begins to talk, her throat a shambles, she says what we're both thinking: “God, I even sound like him today, don't I?”

It's a good icebreaker, and I'm glad we can share an early laugh, because so much of Warren Zevon's story is cloaked in regret and tragedy. His life at times came perilously close to being a rock 'n' roll cliché, complete with legendary tales of violence, excess, and eccentricity. But despite his “Excitable Boy” reputation, Zevon was anything but a cliché to those who appreciated his work. His admirers—and there

are many—include music legends such as Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, and Neil Young. But his appeal extends beyond the music industry. Personalities such as Stephen King, David Letterman, Hunter S. Thompson, Billy Bob Thornton, and Dave Barry all shared an affection and admiration for Zevon, a misunderstood artist for most of his career when it came to mainstream acceptance.

Warren Zevon was the underappreciated genius, the musical wild man who fought lifetime battles against alcoholism, sexual compulsion, and an almost debilitating obsessive-compulsive disorder. His career showed promise from the start, when his self-titled album, *Warren Zevon*, was released in 1976. The songs on that album, including “Frank and Jesse James,” “Desperados Under the Eaves,” and “Carmelita,” were hailed critically and earmarked Zevon as an important new voice coming out of the '70s California music scene. His 1978 album, *Excitable Boy*, included the Zevon classics “Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner” and “Lawyers, Guns and Money.” But what critics and a small, devoted fan base recognized as genius would always seem to elude the public at large



during Zevon's thirty-plus years in the music business.

"It's a big mystery to me," Crystal Zevon says of his lack of mainstream success. "He would have loved to have been huge, but at the same time, I don't know how well Warren would have dealt with it." Perhaps she has a point. Zevon was notorious for shooting guns from hotel windows, blowing things up with Hunter S. Thompson, drinking vodka by the bottle, and using and discarding women at a prodigious rate. But he was also a gifted musician and songwriter who read Kierkegaard and Heidegger, a brilliant lyricist who infused his songs with mordant humor. It's not surprising that he was a favorite musical guest on *Late Night with David Letterman*, and a natural as fill-in bandleader for the show on occasion.

But for all his songwriting abilities and his reputation as a musician's musician, Warren Zevon's biggest accomplishment arguably took place on March 19, 1986, his first day of sobriety. With the help of AA, Zevon stayed clean and sober for the next seventeen years. This release from alcohol and drugs granted him a period that saw some of his best work. The albums *Sentimental Hygiene* (1987), *Mutineer* (1995), and *Life'll*

Kill Ya (2000) are highlights of a songwriter clearly at the top of his game. Yet there was an increasing foreboding in many of his later songs, which focused on death and a sense of time running out. The Zevon gallows humor was there, but the songs also betrayed an awareness of something bad coming on the horizon. These later songs, which included "Don't Let Us Get Sick" and "My Shit's Fucked Up," proved to be the most haunting examples of Warren Zevon's prophetic genius at work.

In August 2002, Zevon was diagnosed with mesothelioma, a rare form of lung cancer (the same kind Steve McQueen had, as he often pointed out). Knowing he only had months to live, he embarked on his final musical journey, completing the Grammy-award-winning album *The Wind* with long-time friend and collaborator Jorge Calderon. VH-1 made a documentary of *The Wind* being recorded, which included luminaries such as Tom Petty and Bruce Springsteen stopping by to play on the record. David Letterman dedicated an entire *Late Show* to Zevon on October 30, 2002. And while all this was going on, Zevon made sure to get Crystal's solemn word that she would write the book about him that would tell, as

he emphasized to her, “the whole truth, even the awful, ugly parts.”

Warren Zevon lived a year beyond what his doctors predicted, long enough to see his twin grandsons born. But Zevon’s health tragedy was compounded by his choice to throw away his seventeen years of clean living and return to drinking in earnest as his cancer progressed during the last year of his life. He died on September 7, 2003, at the age of fifty-six.

Crystal Zevon kept her promise. *I’ll Sleep When I’m Dead*—a compilation of eighty-seven interviews conducted over four years, with a foreword by Carl Hiaasen—does tell the whole truth about her former husband. The book is a mosaic of friends, music-industry people, family members, and lovers talking about the Warren they knew and loved—and sometimes hated. Crystal also includes excerpts from Warren’s journals, which lend the book a unique intimacy not often found in the rock-bio genre. Ultimately, the book illuminates the mind of one of the greatest songwriters ever to write rock music. Through their eight years of marriage (1974–1981) and their years of living together in the early ’70s before that, the Zevons partied, fought, raised a daughter, got drunk together, and never fully fell out of love. Crystal Zevon’s book describes it all and does so unflinchingly.

DAVE KORZON: How did Warren come to ask you to do this project?

CRYSTAL ZEVEN: The day Warren was diagnosed with cancer, he called our daughter, Ariel, who then called me. He didn’t tell her that it was a terminal diagnosis, because she was leaving for Portugal two days later, and he didn’t want to ruin her trip. But she said to me, “Mom, he went to the doctor. It *has* to be bad.” Warren never went to the doctor. So I called him immediately, and he told me everything. We go back a very long way, so we just cut to the heart of the matter. He was making jokes, but then he’d get serious. His mood was fluctuating.

So we talked probably five or six times a day from that point on for a long time. He asked me right away—maybe the second conversation—if I would come stay with him when it got real ugly. He thought “the wife” should come stay with him. We’d been apart for twenty-six, twenty-seven years, but neither one of us had remarried, so to him I was always “the wife.” I said yes because I didn’t know what else to say. I had a job, I had a life, but I couldn’t say no. So we talked a little bit about the logistics of all that. Then he started talking about what he’d be leaving behind. He made this conscious decision to market himself in his last year, because his career was gone. His career was not just in the toilet; it was flushed and in the sewage plant. Nobody wanted to hire him. Not even as a solo for club tours.

Finally he called me after he had talked to Carl Hiaasen, probably his closest friend, and they discussed who should write his biography. They both agreed that I was the one who was there during the rise and fall, as it were, and that we’d remained close and that he trusted me. He also knew that if I said I’d do it, I would. He wanted the truth told, and I probably knew that better than anyone. So he called, and it wasn’t

so much that he asked me. He just assumed I’d do it.

I think the other part of all of this is that I’ve always written. All I’ve ever wanted to do is be a writer, but somehow my karma is to be in the company of really great writers, really great minds. I would never lay claim to having that kind of mind. I always feel privileged to be in the company of these people, but it sort of inhibited my aspirations. But Warren always supported the idea that I should be a writer, so I think he also saw this as an opportunity for me.

Warren used to say weird things to me that I would only understand later. Like, “I have to do this fucking interview with a right-wing talk show host! And it’s all so that I can support you in your retirement!” This was years after our divorce, and we had no financial agreement; he only paid five hundred dollars a month child support when Ariel was young. After he died, when I was writing this book, I thought, Oh my God, he was prophetic. He knew somehow this situation would come about, and this project was his gift to me.

KORZON: Warren’s life was filled with rock ’n’ roll excess: women, drugs, alcohol. It amazes me that he was so specific about wanting the biography to reveal all that.

ZEVEN: He wanted a book that told the whole truth. He said that immediately, and then again a year later, during our last conversation, when the deal was cemented. By this time he had started drinking again, so I never went and stayed with him. There were periods of time when we didn’t talk—not long periods, but there were periods when he didn’t talk to anybody. He just sort of dove into the depths of his alcoholism again during that last year.

But at the very end we were in touch because our grandchildren were born. He called a week before he died and said, “So you’re going to do this book.” I said, “Well, yeah, I guess so.” And he said, “If you are, you’re going to have to tell the truth. You have to tell the whole truth, even the awful, ugly parts. Because that’s the excitable boy who wrote them excitable songs.” So I took him at his word. After the book came out, his writer friends Carl Hiaasen and Stephen King, and other people too, like Billy Bob Thornton, all said this is what he would have wanted. Of course I had many misgivings along the way. I remember saying to Warren, “I don’t know what the whole truth is.” He sort of laughed and said, “Oh, you’ll find out.”

KORZON: Maryann Carver, Raymond Carver’s first wife, has said that she and Carver sacrificed their marriage in certain ways for the sake of Carver’s career. You and Warren were a young married couple with a daughter in the ’70s. You were a family, but Warren’s career seemed to always be the priority. Can you relate to what Maryann Carver said?

ZEVEN: Yeah, I can definitely draw parallels. I think one of the interesting things about Warren was that he was painfully honest. He would admit things that other people wouldn’t, especially artists, who can be secretive. He admitted to me that he would create drama so he could write about it. He once told me how lucky Jackson Browne and Neil Young were, because they’d had these real tragedies in their lives and they could write about them. He hadn’t had any tragedies, so he had to create them.

Back when Warren and I were married and fighting, Jack-

son Browne used to come in like the white knight and whisk Ariel and me away to safety, and then he'd go back and deal with Warren being drunk and crazy. During one of those times, I told Jackson what Warren told me about creating drama so he could write about it, and instead of saying something sympathetic about how horrible Warren was, Jackson just looked at me and said, "My God, nobody is supposed to

have a normal kind of life, he'd have to sacrifice the artist in him. I don't know if the book makes this clear, but I believe that at the end of his life, he came to realize what was really important. He completed *The Wind*. He did the stuff that he knew he *had* to do. He understood that what was really important was that we were going to have grandchildren. He finally realized what really mattered.

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be that honest." I mean, I was looking for sympathy, you know—"Isn't he a horrible person!" But instead Jackson was just blown away by the fact that Warren was honest enough to admit that was how he felt. That he needed to do these things in order to write. Warren would say, "I have to do this, you don't think I could have written a song like 'Hasten Down the Wind' otherwise." He almost played a game with people.

KORZON: So there *was* a sacrifice of your relationship.

ZEVON: Sadly, there's a lot of truth in that. We loved each other, but I realized during the process of writing this book that he also sort of ruined my life. I didn't want to be sitting here today at this table, sixty years old, and single. But after Warren, I could never stay with anybody. It was too big, too big. Yes, we loved each other, but the part of it that was so big—I don't know if I'd call it love. But it's something that, once you've had it, once you've lived with that, and you've watched that process, and how that person makes you a part of their process . . . [long pause]

I would really love to have a normal, picket-fence relationship. I really would. But I've never been able to stay in one. I think Warren was somewhat the same. What I embodied when we met was the kind of normalcy he never had in his life. He had that constant struggle in himself, the idea that to

KORZON: Can you talk about any spiritual or mental preparations you went through before taking on this project? Did you have to exorcise any demons?

ZEVON: That probably came more during the process. When he asked me to do this book, I didn't think through all the implications. I couldn't, because I might have said no. This book is not something I would have thought to do on my own, because I knew that those demons, regrets, what if's, all of that was still there.

I do a Buddhist meditation called Vipassana where you sit in silence for ten days. I mean total silence sitting in a cell. So I knew there were still residual demons because of doing these meditation courses and recognizing the things that will come back to interrupt your meditation process. Certainly on the surface, and even on a deeper level, Warren and I had worked through most of the issues between us, because we talked about everything. During the last year of his life, we talked about all these things openly. We didn't hold anything back. I think that was probably some of the most important preparation.

But other things happened that made me deal with some of this stuff. When *The Wind* came out, Warren thanked all these people in the album notes, and my name was not included. It took me some time to notice this, but none of the women that he was really close to were on that list. Warren had a funny thing about thanking people. There are songs on that album where everyone who knows Warren knows who they were written to, very personal songs. I think that was much bigger than the thank-yous, but it took me a long time to deal with feeling shoved aside or dissed in some way. I was still coming to terms with that when Warren died.

After his memorial service, there was a dinner given next to Fred Walecki's guitar store at this Italian restaurant. I sat with Ariel and her kids, not in the front part, but in this tented area in the back. All of a sudden I look up to see a line of women approaching me.

End of excerpt