

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

The remastery of Paul Simon

By David Yaffe

Discussed in this essay:

So Beautiful or So What, by Paul Simon. Hear Music. \$9.99.

“There’s no problem in the recording studio you can’t solve. It’s not like life.” This is Paul Simon in the Nineties, talking about his work for VH1’s *Classic Albums* series. The classic album is *Graceland*, and when the subject of the title track comes up, Simon is uncharacteristically self-regarding about his work. (Even receiving the Songwriter’s Hall of Fame award for “Bridge over Troubled Water” four decades on, he still wondered whether he should have written the third verse.) “*Graceland* is my favorite record,” says a man who obviously does not take such preferences lightly. “My favorite record, my favorite song that I ever wrote. This is it. This is the best I ever did. This is all perfect.” When it seems it can’t get any better, the Everly Brothers, his teenage heroes, come in on backup. Simon, at a mixing board, isolates their vocals. He looks disturbed. “Too many words for them,” he says. When he hears the line “And my traveling companions/ Are ghosts and empty sockets/ I’m looking at ghosts and empties,” he waves his hand as if signaling the waiter that he wishes to change his order. “The only line I’d rewrite.”

It has now been twenty-five years since the milestone of *Graceland*, which sold 14 million copies, won Simon his third Album of the Year Grammy, anticipated the end of apartheid in South Africa—at least through music—by five years, and forever altered his sense of rhythm, a rewrite of another kind. “Rewrite”

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is also a song from *So Beautiful or So What*, his most recent album:

I’ve been working on my rewrite,
that’s right
I’m gonna change the ending
Gonna throw away my title
And toss it in the trash

Every minute after midnight
All the time I’m spending
It’s just for working on my rewrite
Gonna turn it into cash

The song is from the perspective of a Vietnam vet working at a car wash, a “day job” as opposed to a “pay job.” The protagonist is rewriting a screenplay that begins as confession and ends up Hollywood hokum. The draft seems unlivable, the polish that follows absurd. He wishes he could rewrite having a breakdown and leaving his family. He’d have some car chases and a heroic reunion with his children (after having saved their lives, of course). The song sounds more wistful than PTSD. It is a sadly giddy delusion, backed up by the sweet, intricate riffs and cadenzas of Malian kora master Yacouba Sissoko and Simon’s own ricochet acoustic fretwork.

The refrain somehow sounds a little different each time. Was Simon thinking of those perfect studio confines, so unlike life, where you can’t undo your mistakes? I had a number of questions for Paul, which he graciously answered. “If I think about whether I would change anything, the answer is no, I wouldn’t.” Characteristically, he amends by elaboration. “There has been the normal allotment of pain and loss and there are things that I regret. But I don’t know if my life would have turned out differently

because of things that I regretted . . . Fine, things have worked out pretty well. I don’t know what would’ve happened if . . . well, it’s a moot point since I can’t change it.” This is where a song begins.

Simon’s most noteworthy rewrite was, of course, his partnership with Art Garfunkel, the singer who had floated around the choral parts for “Benedictus” like a nice Jewish altar boy on the duo’s 1964 debut album, and alongside whom he became famous. They split up at the right time, just after they put out one of the biggest albums ever (*Bridge over Troubled Water* sold more than 25 million copies). “Cecilia” revealed an impatient rhythmic muse—liberated of backbeat—and “El Condor Pasa,” a folk song from the Andes, hinted at the global expeditions to come—where there were many rhythms but just one voice, the single persona of the songwriter carrying the tune. The singer-songwriter phenomenon allowed Simon to be composer, auteur, and character in his own way, like Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, and Joni Mitchell.

This growth was obvious on Simon’s self-titled solo album of 1972, which included one of the first non-Jamaican reggae tunes. He jammed with jazz royalty including Ron Carter on one track, Stéphane Grappelli on another; his guitar playing went past the emotive picking of “Overs” from *Bookends* or the bluesy figures of “Baby Driver” from *Bridge over Troubled Water*. Garfunkel’s harmonies were sumptuous but limiting; in their absence, on “Peace like a River,” Simon’s guitar phrases became longer, more ambitious, more developed. It was harder to be a singer-songwriter with two voices, particularly when the other, non-songwriting half had little feel for rock and roll and even less of an interest in Simon’s rhythmic and harmonic quests. The English affect from Simon’s formative period in London was gone; he sounded more like what he was—a New York Jewish sophisticate, one who could sing reggae, gospel, Latin, and rock and roll, without disap-



pearing into the genre. He was blissfully in no need of Art.

On “Still Crazy After All These Years,” Simon’s melancholic attempt to revisit (though not rewrite) a past relationship, turmoil and complex chords pile up as he and an old lover drink themselves some beers; the voicings—stacked and suspended, taken from the harmonic language of jazz—gave a broader range of colors to match deeper and more complicated memories. On the verses, Simon

was hearing the chords as surrounding a single tone before adding the only two tones that hadn’t already been used for the bridge. It shows how he took advice from his bandleader father, who told him to use every note to leave listeners refreshed, even though few will realize why. The album of the same name went over big at the Grammys, but his life, as he sang elsewhere on that album, was a mess.

Another rewrite came in 1981 when half a million people showed

up for a Simon and Garfunkel reunion concert in Central Park. After the victory, the regrets: Simon and Garfunkel went on tour and their relationship quickly re-deteriorated. They still somehow recorded an album together, and then Simon removed Garfunkel’s tracks. A couple of songs they made in those sessions survive, for now, on YouTube. One is called “The Song About the Moon,” which is really an instruction manual for *how* to write a song about the moon. Garfunkel sounds more vulnerable than usual, as if he knew his part was cutting-room-floor bound. In the midst of this, Simon married Carrie Fisher. It lasted about a year, although, according to Fisher’s 2008 book and 2009 one-woman Broadway show *Wishful Drinking* (in which she said she was still a fan of his music, even the less-than-flattering songs inspired by her, like “Allergies” and “She Moves On”), they resumed their relationship and were off and on throughout the Eighties. A reconceived breakup, a revised marriage.

As Simon got older, the decisions and revisions—the negotiations and love songs—began to take more time. He was more grateful when the good material came, and if it came right into his head—the way it did effortlessly in callow youth—he learned to recognize a gift with more grace. Simon could always tell the wheat from the chaff.

An opening line like “When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school/ It’s a wonder I can think at all” is pearls beyond price. Where does this stuff come from? The Vietnam vet in “Rewrite”:

But I say
Help me, help me
Help me, help me
Thank you!
I’d no idea
That you were there

When I said help me, help me
Help me, help me
Thank you
For listening to my prayer

This is sung with a harmonic leap and even a falsetto “thank you.” The would-be screenwriter presumably does not hear what we do: the sound of a descending whistle, a fizzling-out. Simon knows how to tell a joke, but he’s not exactly joking. The cycle of inspiration and deflation is real.

The songwriting has slowed down since *Graceland*. He tends to make an album and then tour every five years or so, and when he’s finished with both he is so spent he wonders what he has left to give. He questioned whether he could write another album after 9/11, which occurred about a month before he turned sixty, even as his performances of “The Boxer” in the aftermath of that event conveyed his tenacity; he opened the first post-9/11 episode of *Saturday Night Live* singing the song with an FDNY cap and firefighters behind him. Simon sounded fragile, even wounded, but he also sang of the fighter that still remains, a character he had thought up thirty-three years before.

Years go by, wars begin and don’t end. And Simon slowly writes phrases in his notebook, most of them unused. No pop songwriter stares at the blank page so ingeniously: an abyss can become a subject, an absence a presence. Writer’s block is usually a bad subject. Some can make it sing—Philip Roth, Robert Lowell, Federico Fellini, Simon. One man’s ceiling is another man’s floor, Simon once sang. In one notebook he wrote, “Life is either so beautiful or so what.” Thank you, Miles Davis.

Simon loves to chew on clichés, poke at them, make them bleed or scurry away. “Everything About It Is a Love Song,” from *Surprise* (2006) is another instruction set, this time about trying to write a love song. Words, music, and the rest of the universe don’t want to cooperate, until their lack of cooperation becomes a subject—and the source of a ravishing image:

Locked in a struggle for the right
combination
Of words in a melody line,

I took a walk along the riverbank of
my imagination.

Golden clouds were shuffling in the
sunshine.

In more overcast moments, Simon is haunted by Philip Larkin’s explanation for why he stopped writing later in life: the muse deserted him. For Simon, this is as nightmarish as the example of Irving Berlin, one of the most successful American songwriters in history, who went into an intractable depression after a Broadway flop when he was close to seventy-five, living another twenty-five years in misery. This did not happen to Simon after his troubled Broadway debut, *The Capeman*, back in the Nineties. His muse bounced back soon after with the playful, rhythmically ambitious *You’re the One*, an album on which the beats were local (as opposed to the globetrotting *Graceland* and *The Rhythm of the Saints*). One song, “Señorita with a Necklace of Tears,” is about how he would write a song with that title if he could only capture all of his memories in the neck of his guitar, another one for the meta-songbook. He prefers—why not?—the example of Stanley Kunitz: make it to three digits and die mid-stanza. When he hears about a poet who writes until death, it makes him happy.

These are the consolations for a pop star about to turn seventy. He is taking obsessively good care of himself: no alcohol, no caffeine, no dairy (bad for singing), no smoking of anything. The post-seventy pop star has to justify his or her existence more than the post-seventy blues master, jazz legend, classical virtuoso, canonized poet, or novelist. Dylan, McCartney, Joni, Mick, Keith—are all pushing seventy, and Leonard Cohen is past seventy-five. “Forever Young” is more ironic every day.

For an album with many splendors, probably the least remarkable thing about *So Beautiful or So What* is that Simon’s diet regimen has paid off, and he sounds closer to his

younger self. More extraordinary is the sagacity of threescore and (nearly) ten years. Rich instrumentation displays all the musical knowledge he's accumulated, and hints at what may lie ahead.

Simon wrote his first important song as a twenty-one-year-old student in his parents' Queens bathroom. "Hello darkness, my old friend," he sang to the tiles. The acoustics were, as those in bathrooms tend to be, conducive. Years later, the record, with a harmony by Garfunkel and a folk-rock band scored by Bob Dylan producer Tom Wilson, became a No. 1 hit. It was far better than anything before, a *Weltschmerz*, a precocious bleakness scored for young voices. Half a century later, darkness beckons again, this time for real. The world is too much with you when you're young. When you have more to look back on than you have to look forward to, the world's transience becomes clear; if you are a seeker and a pilgrim, you wonder what's next.

I talked to Paul Simon while he was rehearsing for this spring's U.S. tour, and he did something in conversation most songwriters—really, most artists of any kind—are unable or unwilling to do. He spoke spontaneously and walked me through his process of creation. He showed me why he opted for certain words here, particular chords there, clearing the way for the all-important rhythm. Some people—including those who bought his collected lyrics in 2008—might be surprised that he spends more time on composition than he does on lyrics. Sequencing the album, putting the songs in order—an endangered discipline that he still practices with meticulous care—could be interminable. Keep the customer satisfied, as he once said in song, even if the customer that matters the most is himself.

He began to analyze our own conversation about twenty minutes into it and to wonder whether some of the themes—mostly to do with his favorite poets—could provide an arc for a song. Or what if

we'd continued to talk about a different topic, what if it had been interesting enough, like the F train, which he used to take from Kew Gardens, or like Queens College, where he studied literature? Either might have yielded a line. Or not. "Maybe it's a cul-de-sac and you have to take it away and go back and continue cutting through the woods," he said, immediately regretting the latter metaphor.

Paul McCartney once went backstage after a Simon show to ask him, "Aren't you Jewish?" Last December, Simon invited such questions when he made an appearance on *The Colbert Report* to introduce the new album's first track, "Getting Ready for Christmas Day." He came, like Irving Berlin, as a Jew bearing a Christmas song. Simon's is based on a sermon by the African-American preacher and gospel singer J. M. Gates from 1941 (the year Simon was born), in which Gates points out that the jailer, the police, and the undertaker are also getting ready for Christmas Day. (Simon likes listening to such prophecy while driving.) Colbert asked Simon whether this meant that he was ready to accept Jesus Christ as his Lord and savior. Simon's response: "That is to be revealed later."

He told me he wished he'd said, "Definitely." Rewrites of rewrites. Simon is not religious but believes in God; he was born Jewish and was bar mitzvahed, yet like many who share his background (particularly in showbiz), he's promiscuous when it comes to the divine. "God is old," he sang on the verge of turning sixty. "We're not old." "Mrs. Robinson" was, in 1968, the first top-ten hit with the word "Jesus" in it (beating out Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" by one year); reference to the Son of Man is likewise ironic in "Love and Hard Times," a song in which "God and his son/ Paid a courtesy call on earth/ One Sunday morning," only to quickly find that "these people are slobs here," so they'd better get going. The chord progressions are as complex as any he has ever written—intervals as

pleasing and refreshing to the ear as they are difficult to replicate—and the song took a year to write, centered as it is on a single note. There is always home base with him—a common tone, like on “Still Crazy”—but also the need to push, to give a listener something transfigurative while working around something simple.

Simon always makes the most of his harmonic toolbox. “Musicians like it when it’s a surprise and not the typical modulations, and so do I,” he says. A song about God’s dissatisfaction with humankind had better take a year to fashion, and had better take us to a higher harmonic plane. “Thank God I found you in time” is the earnest final trope. Man wakes up from his panic attack, finds his love, and thanks God, who shrugs. As Simon puts it at the devastating end to another song, “Love and Blessings”: “Love and blessings/ Simple kindness/ Ours to hold but not to keep.” The rhythmic premise is so hypnotic, the melody and chords so mellifluous, it’s easy to miss the mortality. What the singer has with his lover is deep and exquisite, but the older one gets, the more spurious it seems to say, as lovers often will, “forever.” What rhymes with “ephemeral”?

You can go back a few tracks to “The Afterlife,” a bureaucratic take on the hereafter in which “Buddha and Moses and all the noses from narrow to flat” have to stand in the same line to meet the same divine. Meanwhile, the speaker, shuffling with the song’s Bo Diddley variation and a snare drum flipped on every fifth beat, tries a pickup line on “A girl over there/ With the sunshiny hair/ Like a homecoming queen”: “By the way, how long you been dead?” It doesn’t work. He doesn’t get the girl, plus he’s still dead.

The new album’s title offers a choice: *So Beautiful* or *So What*. Grace or nonchalance? Beauty and truth or the nothing that is? A rhythm of the saints or a melody of the fallen? Hello darkness, my old friend.

Simon begins the title song with a rhythm track, an insistent beat: gospel meets Mali. “And it puts

down this symmetrical pattern or grid, and it allows a wide curve in the lyrics, because the symmetry underneath is insistent,” he explained. “It makes it cohesive, so that the repetition is always the same.” He also explained that the album’s sound is so distinct, in part, because of an absence. “The album has no bass on it. There are things in the bass register, but I can only think of one song that has a bass way back in the track. So what you get is a kind of openness and a clarity because the bottom end is opened so you tend to hear guitars and drums more clearly. In Fifties rock, which I often incorporate, there wasn’t much bass because there weren’t many mics, and the bass tended to be a stand-up bass. Those records seem to have a mystery to them, and part of it is this missing element.”

No bass, all depth. What happens next? Our ear is more attuned to rhythms and guitar licks, as well as to rhyme. We go from chicken gumbo to a bedtime story to a sense of being alone and purposeless, to, finally, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. “I went to the bedtime story,” Simon says, “probably because it sings easily. Then I thought I would stick with that ‘ot’ rhyme—a play without a plot. And the rest of it sort of follows. ‘I’m just a raindrop in a bucket, a coin dropped in a slot,’ still with the ‘ot’ rhyme.”

Simon’s not done thinking about these choices when a song is finished, but in this case he seems decisive. “The song needed to build an intensity. None of the illustrations compare to the life and death of Martin Luther King Jr., who was really the personification of how life can be this extraordinary thing ... he intensifies the question and tells you the choice.” The song ends with a repetition of “so beautiful” without the “so what.”

“I’m not on the fence on that,” says Simon. “I’m in the so beautiful camp.” This is the most optimistic thing I have heard in a long time. The notebooks proliferate. As long as time permits, there will be rewrite. ■