



## Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles (Tempo: A Rowman & Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and Culture)

By George Plasketes

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Warren Zevon was one of the most original songwriters to emerge from the prolific 1970s Los Angeles music scene. Beyond his most familiar song—the rollicking 1978 hit “Werewolves of London”—Zevon’s smart, often satirical songbook is rich with cinematic, literary, and comic qualities; dark narratives; complex characters; popular culture references; and tender, romantic ballads of parting and longing.

*Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* is the first book-length, critical exploration of one of popular music’s most talented and tormented antiheroes. George Plasketes provides a comprehensive chronicle of Zevon’s 40-year, 20-record career and his enduring cultural significance. Beginning with Zevon’s classical training and encounters as a youth with composers Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky, Plasketes surveys Zevon’s initiation into the 1960s through the Everly Brothers, the Turtles, and the film *Midnight Cowboy*. Plasketes then follows Zevon from his debut album with Asylum Records in 1976, produced by mentor Jackson Browne, through his successes and struggles from a Top Ten album to record label limbo during the 1980s, through a variety of music projects in the 1990s, including soundtracks and scores, culminating with a striking trio of albums in the early 2000s. Despite his reckless lifestyle and personal demons, Zevon made friends and alliances with talk show host David Letterman and such literary figures as Hunter S. Thompson and Carl Hiaasen. It was only after his death in 2003 that Zevon received Grammy recognition for his work.

Throughout this book, Plasketes explores the musical, cinematic, and literary influences that shaped Zevon’s distinctive style and songwriting themes and continue to make Zevon’s work a telling portrait of Los Angeles and American culture.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

Warren Zevon (1947–2003) was one of the most innovative songwriters in recent popular music history, and Plasketes captures the full range of Zevon's skills in the first full-length biography of the artist. Plasketes provides a comprehensive analysis of Zevon's entire body of work—from his self-titled debut in 1976 to *The Wind*, recorded and released during his last year alive—that serves as an almost definitive look at his 'legacy of tortured brilliance,' which still attracts new admirers today. Especially fascinating is Plasketes's look at how Zevon's debut 'endures as one of the most delightfully dark visions of Southern California culture, demystifying the Hollywood scene, its desperation and decadence.' Also good are his in-depth looks at some works that critics overlooked at the time of their release, such as 'Transverse City' (Zevon's most ambitious record) and 'Life'll Kill Ya' ('a gem, a modest masterpiece'). Plasketes admits his reliance on 'I'll Sleep When I'm Dead: The Dirty Life and Times of Warren Zevon'—the exhaustive posthumous oral history compiled in 2007 by Zevon's ex-wife, Crystal—but he adds plenty of original work to fully illuminate the art behind the wild stories from Zevon's alcohol and drug binges. (*Publishers Weekly*)

By taking Zevon's music chronologically, pulling each record apart down to its smallest constitutive parts, Plasketes crafts a highly readable account of Zevon's life that is also chock full of information. Even the tangential factoids, such as a lengthy aside about how the rise of MTV led to the reinforcement of the music industry, feel relevant and closely tied to Zevon's under-the-radar career.... What Plasketes has achieved with *Desperado of Los Angeles* is a book that on the whole resides somewhere between the fandom/objectivity continuum, the tenuousness of that construction notwithstanding. Zevon has been long overdue for a scholar's examination, and Plasketes proves himself more than up to the task. This volume is both a helpful bedrock for future studies of Zevon's music and an interesting case study in what it means to do academic music writing. Fans of Zevon's music will quickly gobble up Plasketes' carefully assembled critical history, and curious newcomers to Zevon's oeuvre would do well in using this book as a guide. But Plasketes' research has value beyond the reaches of Zevon's musical output; anyone interested in the business of writing about music critically would learn a great deal from the strengths and weaknesses of analysis in this book. Undoubtedly, Zevon would be proud that his work has inspired conversations like these. (*Popmatters*)

[*Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* is] one of the most interesting and in-depth books I've ever read about a musician.... Plasketes does an admirable job in exposing this truth in astounding detail while making it a very enjoyable read, giving us a much larger understanding and empathy for one of the most underrated but important musical artists of our time. (*The Corner News*)

*Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles* is a full-on academic analysis of Zevon's discography by a straight-up uber fan of his who happens to be an uber intelligent writer too. Plasketes' unique perspective makes for a wonderful book, a serious study happily colored by the writer's genuine love for Zevon and his work. One wonders why there are not more books like this when it comes to Zevon's canon, which offers much to take apart and delve into. (*Red Paint Hill Publishing & Poetry Journal*)

#### About the Author

George Plasketes is professor of media studies and popular culture in the School of Communication and Journalism at Auburn University in Alabama. He has written on a variety of music, media, and popular culture subjects in books, essays, and journal articles.

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