

WARREN ZEVON

(WARREN WILLIAM ZEVON)
LUNG CANCER

Born: January 24, 1947

Died: September 7, 2003



Tupac prophesied his own death, Johnny Cash and Ian Curtis created sonic epitaphs...but no one chronicled their own demise more meticulously than Warren Zevon—and got Springsteen, Dylan, and the Pixies to pay tribute.

Death shaped the singer-songwriter's discography from 1969's *Wanted Dead Or Alive* to *Life'll Kill Ya* (2000) and *My Ride's Here* (2002). If blackly comic lyrics provided insufficient clues, a skull with shades and a cigarette stared from many of his album sleeves.

Born in Chicago, Zevon was raised, he told *Rolling Stone*, "with a painting of an uncle, Warren, who looked just like me. He was a military man, a golden boy, an artist. He'd been killed in action... and I was brought up to follow in his footsteps. I guess that kind of background gave me the idea that destroying myself was the only way to live up to expectations." Accordingly, Zevon spent much of his career fueled by drink and drugs. He got clean in the mid-1980s, although a drunken jam with R.E.M. appeared as the *Hindu Love Gods* album in 1990.

After the failure of *Wanted Dead Or Alive*, Zevon began the 1970s as the Everly Brothers' musical director. His own career, kickstarted by friend Jackson Browne, peaked commercially with 1978's *Excitable Boy*, featuring the classic "Werewolves Of London." Other fine albums include 1981's live *Stand In The Fire* and 1982's flop *The Envoy*.

In August 2002, he was diagnosed with an inoperable form of lung cancer. "I might have made a tactical error in not going to a physician for twenty years," he told chat show host David Letterman. "It was one of those phobias that really didn't pay off."

Asked what he had learned, he said "I know how much you're supposed to enjoy every sandwich."

Given three months to live ("It'll be a drag if I don't make it to the next James Bond movie," he said), Zevon promptly fell off the wagon. "I said the one thing this guy should not do is die a cliché," admonished novelist and collaborator Carl Hiaasen.

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With the help of friends, family, and stars like Springsteen, he channeled his remaining energy into *The Wind* (2003). Its recording was documented in VH1's *Keep Me In Your Heart*, during which producer Jorge Calderon suggested redoing a song when Zevon was feeling fresh. "I'm dying, Jorge," he replied, "I don't have no 'fresh.'"

"If you're lucky, people like something you do early and something you do just before you drop dead," said Zevon shortly after his diagnosis. After he died in his sleep, at home in L.A., *The Wind* won two Grammys. The star-studded tribute *Enjoy Every Sandwich* appeared in 2004. His ashes were scattered in the Pacific Ocean.

"What we're essentially dealing with is an existence that we don't understand," Zevon told *Songwriter* magazine. "That's why a lot of my work is about death...I don't consider it a subject to be avoided."



RIGHT "I'd like to meet his tailor..."—Zevon onstage, around 1980.