

STILL CREATIVE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS: A CONVERSATION WITH PAUL SIMON

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Paul Simon was born in Newark, New Jersey and raised in Queens, New York. As a sixth-grader, Paul noticed that one classmate was receiving a lot of attention for his singing at school pageants. After going to hear the classmate, Paul thought to himself "that doesn't look so hard - I can learn to sing." The classmate with the angelic voice was Art Garfunkel, and the two recorded their first album together while still in their teens under the name "Tom and Jerry." A few years later (returning to their own names), they were signed to Columbia Records, and Simon & Garfunkel were at the vanguard of artists who defined the genre now known as "folk-rock." They have always regarded their success with a healthy dose of humility. One night, while parked in Simon's Sunbeam Alpine in Queens with nothing to do and listening to the radio, the disk jockey played their new single, "The Sounds of Silence," and announced that it was the Number 1 song in the country. Garfunkel reportedly turned to Simon and said, "those guys must be having **so much fun!**"

Simon has always been heavily involved with the production of his albums, making him a charter member of an elite group of artists who have successfully (and consistently) produced themselves, along with Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, Prince, Neil Young, Richard Carpenter, Brian Wilson, and John Fogerty.

As a producer, Simon has embraced both musical and technical innovations throughout his career. In 1966, "The Sounds of Silence" was the first album to be recorded with 8 simultaneous tracks, accomplished by synchronizing two 4-track machines to one another. In contrast, the Beatles recorded "Sgt. Pepper" the following year with but four simultaneous tracks (they increased the available tracks by bouncing down between two 4-track machines). Similarly "The Boxer," recorded in 1969, was the first commercial 16-track recording, and this was accomplished by sync-ing two 8-track machines.

Through his use of Latin American polyrhythms and other third-world influences, Simon presaged the World Beat movement by over twenty years. 1970's "El Condor Pasa," based a Peruvian folk melody, featured Latin American musicians Los Incas. The following year Simon recorded the Latin-inflected "Me and Julio Down By The Schoolyard," and traveled to Jamaica to record "Mother and Child Reunion" with members of Toots and the Maytals. In 1986 he was the first pop artist to incorporate traditional African rhythms with "Graceland," an album which received X Grammys and was primarily recorded in South Africa.

A XX-year member of NARAS, Simon has been nominated for a total of XX Grammys in his 35 year career, and has received XX. For the past year, he has been working around the clock on a musical, collaborating on the lyrics with no less a talent than Derek Walcott, the Nobel prize-winning poet. The musical, "The Capeman," is set to open in Manhattan in January, 1998. It features not only some of the most compelling and memorable melodies of Simon's long career, but also some of the most rhythmically and harmonically innovative, creatively drawing on traditional Latin American rhythms and themes. Simon and I recently spent an afternoon together in his Manhattan office, following a day of rehearsals for "The Capeman." As we sipped tea, we leafed through a stack of some of the 25 albums he's released, and talked about his approach to recording and songwriting, and his creative process.

Daniel Levitin: How did you get started recording?

Paul Simon: I started recording when I was fifteen, and so I had several years of experience making demos by the time we made the first Simon & Garfunkel record. From the ages of 17 - 21 I was taking people's songs and recording them in the studio, you know, being paid as a demo singer and demo musician. I did hundreds of demos during that period, including some for Burt Bacharach. Sometimes I just sang, sometimes I did everything - I would play all the instrumentation and sing the backgrounds. If it was a doo-wop kind of song I would sing all the background parts, which is how I learned to do that. I was very influenced by doo-wop. During some of that time I worked with Carol King - this is before she and Gerry Goffin were working together, they had just started dating. We were both singers on some of the dates, and it worked out well because I could play guitar and bass and she could play piano and drums.

DL: What was your role in the production of the first Simon & Garfunkel records?

PS: In the early days of Simon & Garfunkel, the record label had assigned us producers. But between Roy Halee who was the engineer, and Artie and me, we already knew how to make records. I was writing the guitar parts and the guitar parts were implying the charts that the musicians would play. The dates were all head dates, with chord sheets, and I had the guitar things pretty well worked out ahead of time. So, at the sessions we tried to find a groove around the pattern, and then Artie and I sang our parts and then we doubled them - we always doubled our parts. The typical Simon and Garfunkel sound is doubled, you know. The instrumentation we used came from early rock and roll sounds, and from English/Celtic folk music; I had just been living with those sounds because I was living in England in the early sixties. The other thing about instrumentation, is that my father was a musician -

DL: Lou Simon, the bass player -

PS: Yeah, so I knew a lot about...well, I didn't know a lot about anything, but I knew more than a typical person who just began to play. I knew what all the instruments in the orchestra were, for example. I didn't necessarily know how to *write* for them but if you said "Oh, maybe an oboe would be nice here," I knew what an oboe sounded like. And Roy Halee was a classically trained trumpet player. Roy had recorded our original demo tape, that's how long we've worked together. And Artie had studied music too, he understood harmony and could read notes. I was a very poor reader, and I still am. I never used written music; I never really wrote much more than the chord sheets.

DL: Richard Carpenter doesn't read or write music either. He orchestrates by playing it on the piano and he has somebody sit over his shoulder and copy down what he is doing.

PS: Mm-hmm. Yeah, a lot of people do it that way. That's how Paul McCartney does it. And Stevie [Wonder] doesn't write either.



DL: Many of your albums were groundbreaking for the sounds they introduced - on "Bookends," for example, there are sounds and instrumental textures that nobody had ever heard before. "Fakin' It," "Hazy Shade of Winter"...

PS: A lot of that was Roy. I really think that except for the Beatles' engineers Roy was the best. Phil Ramone was also a great engineer. Before he became a producer, he was a great engineer. He used to do Sinatra dates with a full orchestra, balance the thing out and it would be perfect. And that was in the days of two-tracks. He had a good sense of orchestration and things, and he had a wide vocabulary of players; Phil knew a lot of players. That was one of his strengths, that was one of those things that he brought to the equation. And so did Bob Johnston, you know [Producer of the "Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme," and "Sounds of Silence" albums]. The people that I met through Bob Johnston were important; Fred Carter, the guitarist who played on "The Boxer" - he played on all of those kind of folk/rock sessions with Simon & Garfunkel. He was a good guitarist who blended well with me as a guitarist so it made the record sound big. [Carter also played for Joan Baez, Paul Butterfield, and Dylan. - DL]

DL: And then you also had Hal Blaine and Joe Osborne on drums and bass.

PS: Well Hal was great... That's right, it's all coming back to me. That was a great little unit - Hal, Larry Knechtel, and Joe Osborne. It was a great, great band out of L.A. And of course until they got really tired because everybody used them, they were fantastic. Very musical...very musical guys. They made life easy. I preferred to work with them, and that's probably why I was recording in California. I preferred working with those guys rather than what I had to work with in New York.

DL: Maybe we can look through these albums, and I can ask you some questions about specific things ...

PS: I don't know if I'll remember, but I'll try (laughs)...

DL: It's funny, isn't it? I was talking to George Martin and I was asking him, 'how did you get this sound? how did you get that sound?' And he said something that of course is true, but it never dawned on me until he articulated it - he said, 'I don't know what's on those records because I haven't listened to them in years. I made them, but I don't listen to them, McCartney doesn't listen to them. It's gotten to the point where there are people in the world who know those albums better than we do because they've been listening to them all these years.' So I understand that some of the details might be lost...

PS: It's alright... ask me what it is, I'll tell you if I remember.

DL: Well, the snare drum sound in "Bridge Over Troubled Water" I've heard that it was recorded in an elevator shaft.



PS: No, you're thinking of the snare drum on "The Boxer." It was recorded in the elevator shaft of the CBS studios in New York at 52nd Street. That was a pure Roy sound. He situated the drum in the elevator shaft and he hit it and he recorded that. It was just huge.



DL: That was fifteen years before Springsteen and Clearmountain used a big snare on "Born In The USA" - you had the biggest sounding snare drum in the world. It's like a cannon shot. Actually, I don't think theirs was any bigger than yours, they just pushed it up in the mix.

PS: Yeah, that's right. Well, Roy's brilliant. He's a brilliant sound guy. He was great with echoes, he always had a great sense of echo. The drum from "Bridge Over Troubled Water" was recorded in the echo chamber of a studio in LA, but it was recorded on one machine and played back on another machine to create the effect of a misalignment so that's what created that feeling of (sings drum delay sound - "tu-tu-tu-tu-tu"). It was because the heads of the machines didn't match up. It was a fortuitous thing.

DL: Roy also had a way of blending your voice with Art's...

PS: That was the double. As soon as everything was doubled, then the blend was there. It was there without doubling, but if we doubled it exactly - then there really was a blend. We really didn't have to do anything - just sing it, double it, there it was.

DL: In producing vocals, I've heard that you are extremely particular - fastidious. To the extent that during the "Bridge Over Troubled Water" album you were comping Art's takes not just to combine words from different takes, and not just syllables, but individual consonant sounds and vowel sounds to create the perfect master take.

PS: Well, if we were really stuck...basically you're looking for as long a take as you can get, one that has continuity and feeling. That's all. But if you get that and then you've got some passage or some notes that are either not phrased right or are out of tune, maybe you try and repair it. But basically you're looking for as long a take as you can find. I wasn't looking to make up words...

DL: Once you start though, doesn't it get kind of fun? Isn't it addicting, the power of being able to get it exactly the way you want it?

PS: That was more Roy's area - he had more patience for that than I did, and he definitely did have the patience for that. And Artie got very patient too. So those records are unusually clean because those guys both had a lot of patience to sit there and get things to sound just so. On my records I think things were a little sloppier than that. I didn't have that patience.

DL: Did that approach drive you crazy?

PS: It could, yeah. But then I'd always know that it [an imperfection] didn't have to be there. What it comes down to is a sense of musicality. If something feels musical and right to me then I leave it. I don't feel like it's all about being perfect. But, you really don't want to hear too much out of tune - out of tune is hard to take. A little bit can be nice.

DL: The Beatles used to sing flat a lot in the early days.

PS: Not a lot. Everybody's flat a little bit here and there, but what happens is it haunts you; when you hear the record again you never say 'Oh, I don't mind it.' Once you hear it, once you're aware that some notes are a little funny, you always hear it, it drives it crazy afterwards, so you might as well fix the out-of-tune stuff.

DL: In the song "Bridge Over Troubled Water," the sounds on the "Sail on silver girl" section come in from out of nowhere and it's just right. The bass, drums, strings, and harmony vocal all come in - it's one of those transitions in a song where...

PS: Yeah, the transition is nice, but I didn't like the way the strings turned out.

DL: Why, did you think it was overdone? Didn't Jimmie Haskell write that?

PS: It wasn't Jimmie Haskell. Jimmie Haskell ended up getting a Grammy for it, but he didn't write the strings. That was some kind of misunderstanding. I remember he said at the time, 'I don't know what I should do. I didn't write the strings, I just got a Grammy.' I said, 'Keep it! You could have easily have written it, you wrote so many other things for us.'

DL: Who wrote it?

PS: I forgot who wrote it, but it wasn't Jimmie Haskell. Maybe I blocked it out.

DL: [Shuffling through a stack of CDs] Oh, here on the album notes I see it was Ernie Freedman.

PS: There you go.

DL: What about "The Only Living Boy In New York?" The bass and organ in there are great. And the vocals...(sings the ah-ah-ah part)

PS: Yeah, I remember that. The vocal backgrounds on that are really good. Artie and I did it in the echo chamber. But I remember he was breathing differently than I was. He was, like, holding notes longer across the breathing lines. There was a difference in the rhythm of our breathing, and how long he was holding the notes. Anyway, that sound for some reason's really the best of that type of thing. I have a lot of records that have vocal groups in them that are my voice or my voice and somebody else's voice. They're all about imitating doo-wop sounds which have falsettos in them.

DL: Do you use falsetto a lot?

PS: All the time. All the time. There's always a falsetto at the top. A lot of times two in there, a very heavy falsetto sound. Falsetto is one my best voices. I'm good at singing falsetto. That doo-wop thing was one background sound I went for and the other would be something like the Crickets, Buddy Holly's group. And those two background sounds were all over those [Simon & Garfunkel] records. So "The Only Living Boy in New York" is an interesting record for that. And the 12-string guitar - I never played it quite right. The song was about Artie going to Mexico to make "Catch-22." "Tom, get your plane right on time..." It was "Tom" from "Tom and Jerry." And, so it was like wishing him well to go and make his movie.

DL: You speak with such affection when you mention him.

PS: Artie?

DL: Yeah.

PS: I don't feel very much affection toward him these days I must say. But I used to of course, I loved Artie - he was one of my best friends, but the friendship is probably irreparably strained now. I certainly had great times with him when we were young, I really liked him. And I had a lot of affection for him then. I don't feel that way now.

What else?

DL: To what extent did you write parts for Fred Carter and the other guitarists? Did you write the guitar parts that you didn't play?

PS: I probably didn't write parts I didn't play. Because I was playing too on all of those dates. So I played, and if somebody was playing the second guitar part it was just what they were playing. And a lot of times we worked with guitarists who were better than I was - Glen Campbell did some dates for us.

DL: You're a hellaciously good guitarist and yet among most fans you're not known for your guitaring, I guess because you're not flashy about it. But anybody who has tried to play some of your parts realizes how intricate and how difficult they are and yet you haven't positioned yourself as a guitarist, and you don't show off as a guitarist...

PS: Well, I don't know, what's that got to do with me? I mean... I'm playing and I'm writing the music; however people perceive it is how they perceive it. If people notice the guitar work, OK, they don't notice it, it doesn't matter. Mostly my guitar work is about me wanting to be playing with good musicians. I always work with good musicians. But you can't work with good musicians unless you're a good writer; they don't want to work with you. You can't put together a really good band and keep that band unless you're interesting. Otherwise they're bored - they go to somebody else. You know, almost everybody can pay triple-scale which is what these guys get. So if they want to be on your album, it's because they like the music. I always had a good rapport with musicians, my father being a musician. And I liked hanging out with musicians. I liked playing.

Once I started making albums, I tried to find bands that were compatible with the sound I was going for at the time. Several times I found bands that were really like the music that I was writing. Hal [Blaine] and Joe Osborne and Larry [Knechtel] for the last two Simon & Garfunkel records, that was a good band. Then, when I worked with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section - that was a real find for me...

DL: For your second solo album, "There Goes Rhymin' Simon."

PS: Yeah, that was a good sound, I really liked those players. Barry Beckett [keyboards], Jimmy Johnson [guitar], Roger Hawkins [drums], and David Hood [bass]. And they had a very good engineer. What was his name? I've also forgotten that.



DL: Jerry Masters.

PS: He was an *excellent* engineer, excellent. He came into that studio and he turned on the switch and immediately everything sounded better, it was all good. Immediately. There were rare mikes that the studio had found, they knew how to get their sounds, and they got what they wanted right away. And then later, Richard Tee [keyboards] Steve Gadd [drums] and Tony Levin [bass] was a very good band.

DL: A very different sound.



PS: Yeah, it was a different sound, but I'm always moving from one sound to another, you know. And the percussionists have been important, such as Airtio. If it wasn't for Airtio, I wouldn't have been able to make "Me and Julio." [From his first solo album, "Paul Simon."] There are no drums on that song, just percussion. We used a solid-body electric guitar miked but unamplified to get that little ringy sound you hear. It had a simple but hooky guitar intro. You know for that matter, "Mother and Child Reunion" had a really good band. That band was mostly the guys from Toots and the Maytals. That was before the "Harder They Come" came out. We went down to Jamaica and recorded it there at Dynamic Sound Studios in Kingston, with Roy Halee engineering.

DL: It always felt to me that "Everything Put Together" and "Run That Body Down" were really two sides of a similar song, and they're right next to each other on that album.

PS: I never noticed.

DL: They're both songs about bodies being run down. You know the lyric idea of health and abuse...

PS: There's a joke at the end of "Everything Put Together Falls Apart."

DL: Did I miss it?

PS: Probably. "You can cry, you can lie, for all the good it will do you, you can die. When it's done and the police come and they lay you down for dead, just remember what I said." (both laugh). That's the joke.

DL: I like the joke in the other one, too. "Peg you better look around, or you're gonna run that body down." Because the narrator is the one who's been running his body down -

PS: Yes, that's also a joke. That's right. I don't know what they are, any of those songs, I guess they were just about me at the time. [Leafing through CD booklet] Look at these players! Mike Manieri [vibes], what a great player. Ron Carter played bass on "Run That Body Down" - wow. David Spinoza was a great guitarist.

DL: Spinoza played on McCartney's "Ram" album around that time.

PS: Really? Oh look, we used the harmonium here on this tune, "Everything Put Together Falls Apart." We were just talking about that the other day, about getting a harmonium, and I was saying we used it on something once before.

[Flipping through CD booklet] Oh, "Armistice Day." That was a hard song - we could never get it right. But Airtio's playing on it was good. Also it had a lot of harmonics in it, I remember we recorded harmonics, and dropped the tuning [on the guitars].

DL: The Stephane Grappelli track is gorgeous.

PS: Yes, we did that in Paris. Yeah, that was simple, just imitating the Django style.

DL: And just you playing guitar?

PS: Yeah, I was just playing in Django Reinhardt style, not very well but an imitation. And Stephane Grappelli was great - you know, he's Stephane Grappelli. I like this "Paranoia Blues" too, but it was better as a demo; the demo was really great.

DL: How come you didn't release it?

PS: I don't know. I think they said it was too... I think Roy wanted to get a better sounding recording. I would have put out the demo - the demo had it as far as I was concerned.

DL: You said in the film "The Making of Graceland" that you're not good at writing angry songs. But that one sounds pretty angry.

PS: Is it? Well they used to hassle me all the time when I came through customs.

DL: Were you a known drug user?

PS: *(laughs)* I don't know. No, I think they just hassled everybody that age who had long hair. I don't know why. I had a guitar and long hair, so...

DL: The other song I thought where you did a good job of communicating anger was with these lines: "The monkeys stands for honesty, giraffes are insincere, and the elephants are kindly but they're dumb." That last couplet really says a lot: "kindly but dumb." This sounds like a guy who's impatient with people who are nice but stupid.

PS: Well, I hate to think that that was me, but that's an interpretation. I don't remember thinking that but maybe...maybe that's how I really felt. I wouldn't want to think of myself that way.

DL: On your next album and the song "Loves Me Like A Rock": I always wondered about the lyric,

"If I was the president
the minute the Congress called my name
I'd say now 'who do - who do you think you're fooling
I got the presidential seal
I'm up on the presidential podium
My momma loves me, she loves me...' "

I always wondered if in some sense you were sympathizing with Nixon.

PS: Nooo!

DL: Which is so against your politics...

PS: Can't stand him, I couldn't stand him. I was just furiosus with what he did.

DL: But the song came out in '74 when he's in the middle of all of this...

PS: But I didn't mean it sympathetically. I meant: a guy does something terrible and he says, 'Oh, my mother! It's okay with my mother.'

DL: Right, so it must be okay.

PS: Yeah, it must be okay. Somebody must have told him that it was okay to behave the way he behaved. *(laughs)* No! It's not okay. It was ludicrous to me! And where he got the idea that he could possibly behave like that, to think that that behavior was proper. No, but he did. So

that's what I was writing about. That was my opinion at the time.

DL: One thing that I admire about you as a songwriter/producer is that in the 35 years of records you've been making, there's no sense on any given album that you were trying to repeat a sound or a style of a previous album.

PS: I wasn't ever trying to, it was the opposite. I never wanted to repeat, I always thought it would be boring. Miles Davis was one of my models for that. He always moved.

DL: And to hell with the audience if they didn't follow him...

PS: In Miles' case maybe it was 'to hell with the audience.' I didn't feel 'to hell with the audience' I didn't have any negative attitude about my audience. I only felt that I was trying to do the thing that I was best at. I was trying to make the best record I could. If I was bored then it wasn't going to be a good record. I was hoping that people were going to agree with my opinion with what was going on. But if they didn't, I wouldn't know until I tried it and put it out. You know, I didn't try to make hits. There was a period when it was natural - it was just natural - the songs that I wrote were in a form that was popular. And that was the form that I wrote in, and there was always a bunch of hits on every album. But I wasn't trying. You can see that because the hits didn't sound like each other - "Me and Julio" doesn't sound like any other hit, and neither does "Mother And Child Reunion."

DL: Yes - they don't sound like any other record that came before.

PS: Neither does "Loves Me Like A Rock." Or...

DL: "Kodachrome"?

PS: Maybe a little bit with "Kodachrome." Maybe "Kodachrome" wasn't quite as original as the other stuff. I don't know, it has that triplet drum beat (demonstrates by slapping legs: dump-dumpa-dump dumpa-dump dumpa-dump) which is a lot like "Get Back." But, apart from that song, "50 Ways to Leave Your Lover" and "Late In The Evening" didn't sound like anybody else's songs. So I mean, the stuff that turned out to be hits...



DL: They sounded so different from other hits that you couldn't have predicted they'd be hits...

PS: Yes. "Bridge Over Troubled Water" didn't sound like anything else when it came out. There had been piano records and there had been gospel records -

DL: and there weren't records that long -

PS: and there weren't five minute records that began with just a piano and a voice...

DL: That record is so beautiful. That song and "Graceland" I think are as near perfect as they can be.

PS: Well those are certainly two of the best songs I ever wrote. It wouldn't bother me if I was remembered for writing "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "Graceland."

DL: In lyric writing, there's a thing you do that I like a lot. On the one hand you write lyrics that can be literary and educated-sounding. On the other hand you balance that with a playfulness and a willingness to put in words just because they sound good. The same way Little Richard -

PS: it comes from Chuck Berry. That's the big lesson of Chuck Berry. The effortless sound of the words was something that I always loved. I tried to imitate that - I did imitate that. A lot of people know how to make words just fall in the right way. Chuck Berry is the genius of that and he was the first genius of it. He did it in the fifties before anybody was doing it.

DL: What's one of your favorite Berry lyrics?

PS: "Maybelline." You could sing it, all his lyrics are just effortless to sing.

DL: Some of your lyrics don't necessarily mean anything, they just sound just right.

PS: No they all mean something. I never wrote anything that had no meaning. Well, I won't say 'never', I'll say 'probably.' Maybe you'll find something and I'll say I don't know.

DL: So like, 'I can call you Betty, And you can call me Al.' Do the names Betty and Al have some particular significance or do they just...

PS: Yeah, they do but nobody would know it, it's a private joke...

DL: And in "Kodachrome," the line, 'Everything looks worse in black and white.' What does that mean?

PS: Oh yeah, the line I keep changing back and forth?

DL: Yeah.

PS: I can't remember which way I originally wrote it, better or worse, but I always change it. Sometimes I sing it 'it looks better in black and white' sometimes 'it looks worse in black and white.' "Kodachrome" was a song that was originally called "Goin' Home."

DL: So it was your "Scrambled Eggs"! [Paul McCartney's original working lyric and title for "Yesterday" was "Scrambled Eggs."]

PS: Yeah, but not as good; not as good as "Scrambled Eggs." That's a famous one.

DL: Do you see similarities between your lyric approach and Dylan's?

PS: He was a guy I spent most of my time trying to not be anywhere near, you know? He was so dominant. I enjoyed his music, especially in the beginning. I was a fan but I knew I didn't want to be *anything* like him.

DL: "Rhythm of the Saints." I have an idea why this didn't sell as well as "Graceland"...

PS: Uh-huh?

DL: Three decibels.

PS: Oh! Yes, I know.

DL: The vocals are three decibels under the tracks.

PS: We had a very hard time mixing that record.

DL: I can imagine.



PS: We had a very hard time. I delayed it, stopped everything and went and remixed it. I don't know that I improved it either, I might have made it worse. And we resequenced it too but we didn't get it right. That was a hard record to grasp in the end. It was great fun while I made it, one of the most fun things I ever worked on. It was so enjoyable. But it was a hard record. It's hard to record all those drums.

I don't know, I think that the reason that it wasn't as big a hit was because there's no drum kit on the whole record - it's just percussion. It's just not as simple a beat - you've got 9/8 time signatures in there, minor key songs, much less familiar sounds than you heard in "Graceland." Now with "Graceland," the South African rhythm comes from a drum kit; they're in 4-4 and they're heavily influenced by English-speaking music because the English live there. But the West African stuff is much more inclined towards 6/8 or 9/8. It's more complex patterns, and it's harder to hear the patterns that the guitarist plays. But that's what it was about, it was about rhythms - it was about the Rhythm of the Saints, that why it was called that and that's what it was about. I never thought it was going to be as big a hit as "Graceland" which was a very easy-to-grasp record. And, I don't know, "Graceland" was just one of those records that that happens very seldomly in a career. Everything seemed to be right, so right...

DL: "Something so right."

PS: My favorite track in the "Rhythm of the Saints," is one that nobody ever plays; they never play it and it's so good - "Can't Run But." It has such fabulous percussion, the Uakti. And all these classically trained guys who invented their own instruments. I really love that track. Nobody ever plays that! That album was also the first time I've worked with Vincent Nguini [pronounced "Gweenie"] who turned out to be a perfect guitarist for me. He's playing in the [Broadway] show. I love Vincent Nguini's playing.



DL: In the film "The Making of Graceland," you said 'There is no problem in the recording studio you can't solve, it's not like life.'

PS: Yeah, that's right. That's why people like to go to work.

DL: Yeah, if they enjoy their jobs. You obviously do.

PS: Oh, yeah. I can't say I love my body of work, but I love to do what I do, I like to go into a recording studio.

DL: Isn't that unusual? Many people that have success feel all these pressures from their record companies and the managers and...

PS: Frankly, I never knew anybody like that. Anybody that I knew who had success really enjoyed it and *liked* to make records. I think that some people can become frustrated if they don't know how to make records. If you make a hit but you don't know *why* it's a hit, or how you made it, and then you've got to go and make another one, and you can't make it - that's frustrating. Fortunately that wasn't a problem that I had to deal with.



One of the main things that you have to decide when you make a record is what's the sound you're going to make on that record. And in a larger sense you have to be able to recognize what are the sounds that you like. We were talking earlier about the other self-producers - Stevie Wonder, Paul McCartney, John Fogerty, Richard Carpenter, Prince - we all have access to pools of sounds, clusters of sounds, I don't know what it is exactly...

DL: Your toolkit, your personal toolkit, you mean?

PS: Yeah, what you remember; from your memory...what it is that you loved and collected as sounds that you like and then you go for those sounds all the time.

DL: But in very different stylistic contexts in your case.

PS: Yeah, the context can change, but you're always going to like the same sounds - those are your sounds. Sometimes you don't even like them and those are your sounds and you have to work with them anyway. Like my voice, you know? That's my voice. Sometimes I wish that that wasn't the voice that was singing the song, but that is my voice, you know. I'm not going to cover it up or anything; sometimes it's really appropriate to what I'm singing, sometimes it's inappropriate, and then I wish it could be somebody else's voice.

DL: Can you think of an example where you felt that way?

PS: "Bridge Over Troubled Water."

DL: I've never heard you sing that.

PS: I used to sing it a lot in concerts. But I never had a particular feel for it.

DL: We were talking about certain people who are photogenic and I think that there are some singers who are the equivalent, what I would call phonogenic.

PS: Yeah, that's right.

DL: Chuck Berry had it.

PS: Yeah.

DL: That thing that Edie [Brickell, Paul's wife] had right out of the box with her first record, that familiarity, Stevie Wonder has it too. Their voices sound familiar to you, even the first time you hear them.

PS: That's right. It's wonderful. Those are really great voices, very in tune. Edie sings impeccably in tune. And so does Stevie.

DL: But a number of singers that I like don't have it. You have it...

PS: Well, actually I would put myself in the other category.

DL: When I hear you sing a song like "Saint Judy's Comet..."

PS: Yeah, well, that one sounds right.

DL: The listener feels a connection with the singer of that song...

PS: There are certain songs and tempos that are really right for my voice and then there are others that are less so.

DL: Is that something you work on...

PS: I don't work on it, it was given. What you're good at, you're good at. Now maybe over the years I've come to understand a lot about phrasing because I needed as many skills as I could possibly have for my voice because the instrument has its limitations. So, I had to sing in tune and I had to phrase interestingly. I couldn't afford not to be able to do those things.

DL: Do you like paying live more than recording?

PS: I use a lot of stuff, a lot of information from this I use in my records now. I mean, I haven't made a record since then, so it probably sounds funny, but I've actually recorded, I've actually written like 35 songs for this show that are recorded.

DL: Oh yeah. Do you like playing live more than you like playing in the studio?

PS: I like playing live, but I don't like performing. I like playing with live musicians.

DL: So you may not perform again?

PS: No, I don't think so.

DL: There are some people who really just want to do the studio thing, Becker & Fagen are a great example of that.

PS: I don't find it satisfying just to do the studio thing. What I've found is that after recording something in the studio, if you take the song and you start to play it in a live setting, the music gets better. It becomes real-er, simpler. The studio's about capturing the moment. That live thing is about simplifying; either it's about simplifying everything or it's about really learning what you're supposed to be playing. And the studio is sort of the first time you really learned it. You learned it well enough so that it can say, 'that's a take.'

DL: But it's not under your skin yet.

PS: It's not what you'll do 20 times from then when you're playing the same song when you really understand it. There's another level of understanding that comes after the studio, if you can get to it. Sometimes, you know, you can't recapture what you get in the studio. You just can't. But I like trying, and if you have enough patience you often can. I should say if you have enough patience and time you can.

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