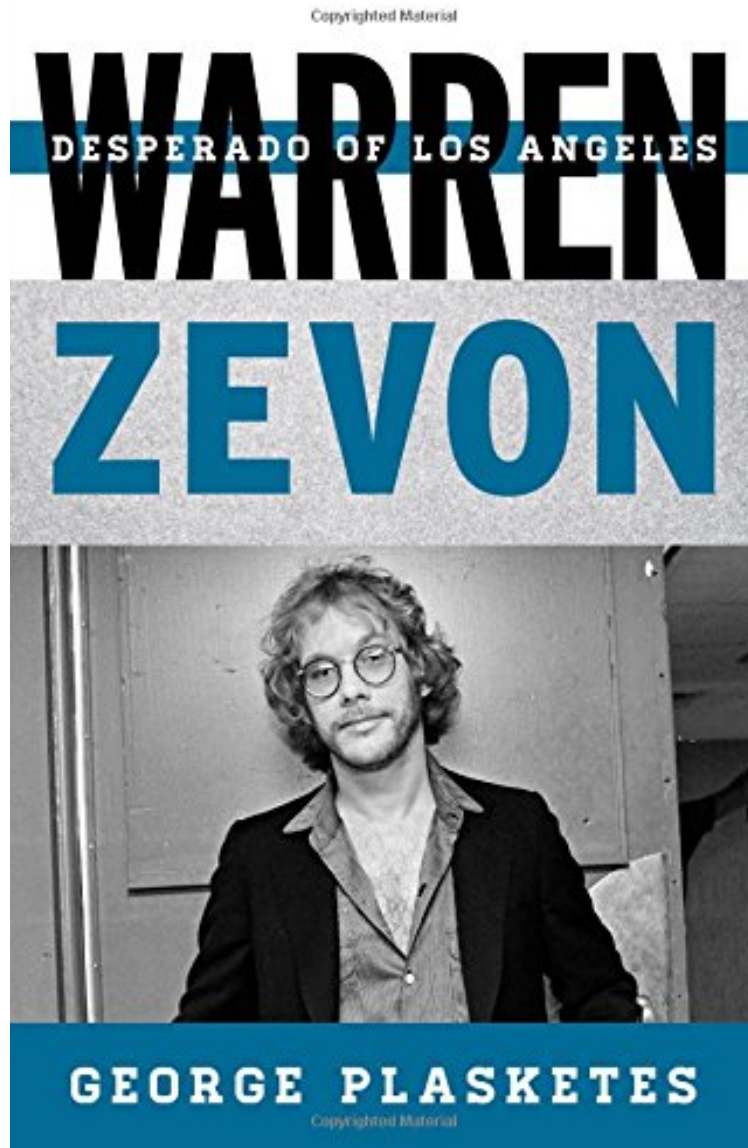


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## Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles (Tempo: A Rowman Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and Culture)

*George Plasketes*

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**George Plasketes : Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles (Tempo: A Rowman Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and Culture)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles (Tempo: A Rowman Littlefield Music Series on Rock, Pop, and

Culture):

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Join Me in L.A. By Born Band Creature George Plasketes Warren Zevon: Desperado of Los Angeles is a worthy addition to Zevonography. Its a part of publisher Rowman and Littlefields Tempo series, which examines artists like Zevon and trends like the British Invasion in their literary and cultural contexts. While there is biographical information in the book by way of background-- it nicely complements previous biographical efforts including Crystal Zevons invaluable *Ill Sleep When Im Dead* and the sections of Anita Gevinsons *You Turn Me On Im A Radio* that deal with her relationship with Zevon this is not a sex, drugs and rock and roll bio. Plasketes technique is to analyze Zevons recorded work track by track, so some familiarity the recordings is helpful. The technique is a reminder of how many excellent songs Zevon composed over several decades. Plasketes also explains, not directly but by implication, why Zevon peaked commercially with *Excitable Boy*. With the 20/20 vision of hindsight, its clear that the only time his odd sensibility and popular rock and roll intersected much was 1978. I had lost track of his record label travails, and was surprised to learn that his later work didnt sell better, especially *Sentimental Hygiene* and *Mr. Bad Example*. The book is literate and insightful. The prose style tends to just the facts, maam briskness, and Plasketes nicely ties together the literature that threads through the lyrics including, among many others, Ross Macdonald and Carl Hiassen. Zevons life and work still cry out for a definitive and disinterested bio along the lines of David Meyers *Twenty Thousand Roads* work on Gram Parsons. For all that Anita Gevinson and especially Crystal Zevons books contribute, both authors have obvious perspective issues. Plasketes book is a good companion volume to either of those books, and will fit with a work of larger perspective when written.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Riding Strong, but I'm Desperado for a Second Draft By Christopher Wagenseller A word of disclosure: Im a Zevon completist, Im ecstatic this book even exists, and Id happily buy and read ten more like it. Like so many books of this type, it is helpful to know a bit about the subject before diving in. As a book product, this item is pretty handsome: built like a small textbook, its hardcover is sturdy, its binding exceptional, and its pages thick and ready for highlights and notations. In addition to the main text, it also includes a timeline with concurrent columns for world/cultural events alongside key moments from Zevons life and boasts further listening and supplemental reading lists that are above reproach. This is to say: its cost is understandable. Though I have little knowledge of publishing trends, I sense the product quality may come at the cost of the extra twenty or thirty pages the text requires to more fully realize its aims. Though the book touches upon Zevons drinking and love life, it doesnt focus on these and never intends to (*Ill Sleep When Im Dead* is where to find that). The text is primarily a song-by-song retrospective of Zevons career, generally traveling album-by-album and giving each song a paragraph or so, focusing largely on lyrics. The connections between tunes of different eras is well-considered, and is fair musicology, but is alarmingly absent of music theory or composition analysis. Melodies are often mentioned without comment, and a song key is mentioned only once, coming from a direction Zevon gives to Stephen King about how to play *Werewolves of London* (Key of G. Howl like you mean it.). Zevon is continually lauded by peers and session players and composers as crafting, for example, sophisticated string sequences, and his unfinished symphony is mentioned several times. Like many Zevon retrospectives, much hay is made about his (brief) childhood tutelage under Igor Stravinsky. These bona fides are mentioned, but theres precious little musical understanding offered: we barely even hear about what instruments he used. The introduction promises to place Zevons work in cultural context: when Plasketes details the success of MTVs *Unplugged* series leading to record release choices like Zevons 1993 gem *Learning to Flinch*, this is controlled and thoughtful. Through other stretches it is largely absent. A half-chapter (or less) devoted to *Transverse City*, a complicated concept record from 1989 Plasketes deems unapproachable, and is nearly ignored here as simply unheralded (and in some cases not thought not even worthy of review) by critics: a book of this type exists to explore the dynamic between artist who was once a critical darling and a rock press now dismissive of one of his more ambitious projects and ought further explore where critics elect not to go, or, more precisely, what they missed. Instead, the book rushes past a record that exists at the midpoint of Zevons output, and ignores the obvious parallel between album and career sequencing: Zevon, like Bartok, placed the most important songs/melodies in the middle. I cant help but imagine a fuller reevaluation of *Transverse City* under those terms. Moreover, the album is more fully loaded with contemporary cultural comment (environmental disasters, new reliance on personal and business technologies, an emergent Russian diaspora, the perils of a consumerist society) than virtually any of his others: a complex concept record offering contemporary criticism scorned by cultural commentators. Ah, the chapter that could have been. Other thoughts: Several times Plasketes references album covers and inserts, tour photos, music videos, television specials, and other promotional visuals as well as the evolution of Zevon's stage stylistics, often using these descriptions to highlight the differences between Zevons approach to his public image and that of his peers (and occasionally using them to single out his OCD tendencies, peccadilloes, and demons). Trading the cost of the cover thickness for four or eight pages of corresponding photos would underline these claims nicely. In a first draft (or edition, I guess), small mistakes like album release dates can be forgiven, but some come across as sloppy and slightly disrespectful proofreading mistakes, like listing George Harrisons death 2001 as occurring in 2011. Similarly, there seems to be an interchangeability here to words like verse and line. Easy fixes. None of this is meant to sound

disdainful: what I'm asking for is more. The book is well-researched and eloquently presented, if occasionally awash in sentiment. Recommended. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Well Researched, Well Written, Well Done! By Andy Rich Read this in one (lengthy) sitting. Had no intention to do so, but the writing of academic/Zevon fan George Plasketes was so fun - and Zevon's life and death so interesting - that I just kept going. Authors of most rock biographies are either too bland (rehashing discographies or well-known anecdotes) or too opinionated (softened by the qualifier, "arguably", as they proceed to make very arguable statements!) Plasketes is upfront about his huge respect for his subject but it doesn't cloud the objectivity when discussing some of Zevon's lesser efforts. His writing style is clever without getting cutesy, his research is solid and his knowledge of music in the '70s and beyond provides interesting context (an example: describing shockrock radio Steve Dahl's Disco Demolition at Comiskey Park - I was in Chicago at the time of the fiasco but had forgotten the details which the author accurately reports.) Plasketes is a professor for Media Studies at Auburn and his knowledge of the subject and times comes through in a style that is anything but academic. Well done, sir!

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.

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' 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 'Lifell Kill Ya' ('a gem, a modest masterpiece'). Plasketes admits his reliance on 'Ill 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 writers genuine love for Zevon and his work. One wonders why there are not more books like this when it comes to Zevons canon, which offers much to take apart and delve into. (Red Paint Hill Publishing Poetry Journal)About the AuthorGeorge 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.