
ASTRAL WEEKS

VAN MORRISON (WARNER BROS.—SEVEN ARTS WS 1768)

1968

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Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks* was released ten years, almost to the day, before this was written. It was particularly important to me because the fall of 1968 was such a terrible time: I was a physical and mental wreck, nerves shredded and ghosts and spiders looming and squatting across the mind. My social contacts had dwindled almost to none; the presence of other people made me nervous and paranoid. I spent endless days and nights sunk in an armchair in my bedroom, reading magazines, watching TV, listening to records, staring into space. I had no idea how to improve the situation, and probably wouldn't have done anything about it if I had.

Astral Weeks would be the subject of this piece—i.e., the rock record with the most significance in my life so far—no matter how I'd been feeling when it came out. But in the condition I was in, it assumed at the time the quality of a beacon, a light on the far shores of the murk; what's more, it was proof that there was something left to express artistically besides nihilism and destruction. (My other big record of the day was *White Light/White Heat*.) It sounded like the man who made *Astral Weeks* was in terrible pain, pain most of Van Morrison's previous work had only suggested; but like the later albums by the Velvet Underground, there was a redemptive element in the blackness, ultimate compassion for the suffering of

others, and a swath of pure beauty and mystical awe that cut right through the heart of the work.

I don't really know how significant it might be that many others have reported variants on my initial encounter with *Astral Weeks*. I don't think there's anything guiding it to people enduring dark periods. It did come out at a time when a lot of things that a lot of people cared about passionately were beginning to disintegrate, and when the self-destructive undertow that always accompanied the great sixties party had an awful lot of ankles firmly in its maw and was pulling straight down. So, as timeless as it finally is, perhaps *Astral Weeks* was also the product of an era. Better think that than ask just what sort of Irish churchwebbed haints Van Morrison might be product of.

Three television shows:

A 1970 NET broadcast of a big all-star multiple bill at the Fillmore East. The Byrds, Sha Na Na, and Elvin Bishop have all done their respective things. Now we get to see three or four songs from a set by Van Morrison. He climaxes, as he always did in those days, with "Cyprus Avenue" from *Astral Weeks*. After going through all the verses, he drives the song, the band, and himself to a finish which has since become one of his trademarks and one of the all-time classic rock 'n' roll set-closers. With consummate dynamics that allow him to snap from indescribably eccentric throwaway phrasing to sheer passion in the very next breath, he brings the music surging up through crescendo after crescendo, stopping and starting and stopping and starting the song again and again, imposing long maniacal silences like giant question marks between the stops and starts and ruling the room through sheer tension, building to a shout of "It's too late to stop now!" and just when you think it's all going to surge over the top, he cuts it off stone cold dead, the hollow of a murdered explosion, throws the microphone down and stalks off the stage. It is truly one of the most perverse things I have ever seen a performer do in my life. And, of course, it's sensational: our guts are knotted up, we're crazed and clawing for more, but we damn well know we've seen and felt something final.

1974, a late night network TV rock concert: Van and his band

come out, strike a few shimmering chords, and for about ten minutes he lingers over the words "Way over yonder in the clear blue sky/Where flamingos fly." No other lyrics. I don't think any instrumental solos. Just those words, repeated slowly again and again, distended, permuted, turned into scat, suspended in space and then scattered to the winds, muttered like a mantra till they turn into nonsense syllables, then back into the same soaring image as time seems to stop entirely. He stands there with eyes closed, singing, transported, while the band poises quivering over great open-tuned deep blue gulfs of their own.

1977, spring-summer, same kind of show: he sings "Cold Wind in August," a song off his recently released album *A Period of Transition*, which also contains a considerably altered version of the flamingos song. "Cold Wind in August" is a ballad, and Van gives it a fine, standard reading. The only trouble is that the whole time he's singing it he paces back and forth in a line on the stage, his eyes tightly shut, his little fireplug body kicking its way upstream against what must be a purgatorial nervousness that perhaps is being transferred to the cameraman.

What this is about is a whole set of verbal tics—although many are bodily as well—which are there for reason enough to go a long way toward defining his style. They're all over *Astral Weeks*: four rushed repeats of the phrases "you breathe in, you breathe out" and "you turn around" in "Beside You;" in "Cyprus Avenue," twelve "way up on" s, "baby" sung out thirteen times in a row sounding like someone running ecstatically downhill toward one's love, and the heartbreaking way he stretches "one by one" in the third verse; most of all in "Madame George," where he sings the word "dry" and then "your eye" twenty times in a twirling melodic arc so beautiful it steals your own breath, and then this occurs: "And the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves the love that loves to love the love that loves to love the love that loves."

Van Morrison is interested, *obsessed* with how much musical or verbal information he can compress into a small space, and, almost conversely, how far he can spread one note, word, sound, or picture. To capture one moment, be it a caress or a twitch. He repeats

certain phrases to extremes that from anybody else would seem ridiculous because he's waiting for a vision to unfold, trying as unobtrusively as possible to nudge it along. Sometimes he gives it to you through silence, by choking off the song in midflight: "It's too late to stop now!"

It's the great search, fueled by the belief that through these musical and mental processes illumination is attainable. Or may at least be glimpsed.

When he tries for this he usually gets it more in the feeling than the Revealed Word—perhaps much of the feeling comes from the reaching—but there is also, always, the sense of WHAT if he DID apprehend that Word; there are times when the Word seems to hover very near. And then there are times when we realize the Word was right next to us, when the most mundane overused phrases are transformed: I give you "love," from "Madame George." Out of relative silence, the Word: "Snow in San Anselmo." "That's where it's at," Van will say, and he means it (aren't his interviews *fascinating*?). What he doesn't say is that he is *inside* the snowflake, isolated by the song: "And it's almost Independence Day."

You're probably wondering when I'm going to get around to telling you about *Astral Weeks*. As a matter of fact, there's a whole lot of *Astral Weeks* I don't even want to tell you about. Both because whether you've heard it or not it wouldn't be fair for me to impose my interpretation of such lapidarily subjective imagery on you, and because in many cases I don't really know what he's talking about. He doesn't either: "I'm not surprised that people get different meanings out of my songs," he told a *Rolling Stone* interviewer. "But I don't wanna give the impression that I know what everything means 'cause I don't. . . . There are times when I'm mystified. I look at some of the stuff that comes out, y'know. And like, there it is and it feels right, but I can't say for sure what it means."

*There you go
Starin' with a look of avarice
Talkin' to Huddie Ledbetter
Showin' pictures on the walls
And whisperin' in the halls
And pointin' a finger at me*

I haven't got the slightest idea what that "means," though on one level I'd like to approach it in a manner as indirect and evocative as the lyrics themselves. Because you're in trouble anyway when you sit yourself down to explicate just exactly what a mystical document, which is exactly what *Astral Weeks* is, means. For one thing, what it means is Richard Davis's bass playing, which complements the songs and singing all the way with a lyricism that's something more than just great musicianship: there is something about it that's more than inspired, something that has been touched, that's in the realm of the miraculous. The whole ensemble—Larry Fallon's string section, Jay Berliner's guitar (he played on Mingus's *Black Saint and the Sinner Lady*), Connie Kay's drumming—is like that: they and Van sound like they're not just reading but *dwelling inside* of each other's minds. The facts may be far different. John Cale was making an album of his own in an adjacent studio at the time, and he has said that "Morrison couldn't work with anybody, so finally they just shut him in the studio by himself. He did all the songs with just an acoustic guitar, and later they overdubbed the rest of it around his tapes."

Cale's story might or might not be true—but facts are not going to be of much use here in any case. Fact: Van Morrison was twenty-two—or twenty-three—years old when he made this record. He sounds ageless. Certainly it is not a young man's record; there are lifetimes behind it. What *Astral Weeks* deals in are not facts but truths. *Astral Weeks*, insofar as it can be pinned down, is a record about people stunned by life, completely overwhelmed, stalled in their skins, their ages, and selves, paralyzed by the enormity of what in one moment of vision they can comprehend. It is a precious and terrible gift, born of a terrible truth, because what they see is both infinitely beautiful and terminally horrifying: the unlimited human ability to create or destroy, according to whim. It's no Eastern mystic or psychedelic vision of the emerald beyond, nor is it some Baudelairean perception of the beauty of sleaze and grotesquerie. Maybe what it boils down to is one moment's knowledge of the miracle of life, with its inevitable concomitant, a vertiginous glimpse of the capacity to be hurt, and the capacity to inflict that hurt.

Transfixed between rapture and anguish. Wondering if they may

not be the same thing, or at least possessed of an intimate relationship. In "T.B. Sheets," his last extended narrative before making this record, Van Morrison watched a girl he loved die of tuberculosis. The song was claustrophobic, suffocating, monstrously powerful: "innuendos, inadequacies, foreign bodies." A lot of people couldn't take it; the editor of this book has said that it's garbage, but I think it made him squeamish. Anyway, the point is that certain parts of *Astral Weeks*—"Madame George," "Cyprus Avenue"—take the pain in "T.B. Sheets" and root the world in it. Because the pain of watching a loved one die of however dread a disease may be awful, but it is at least something known, in a way understood, in a way measurable and even leading somewhere, because there is a process: sickness, decay, death, mourning, some emotional recovery. But the beautiful horror of "Madame George" and "Cyprus Avenue" is precisely that the people in these songs are not dying: we are looking at life, in its fullest, and what these people are suffering from is not disease but nature, unless nature is a disease.

A man sits in a car on a treelined street, watching a 14-year-old girl walking home from school, hopelessly in love with her. I've almost come to blows with friends because of my insistence that much of Van Morrison's early work had an obsessively reiterated theme of pedophilia, but here is something that at once may be taken as that and something far beyond it. He loves her. Because of that, he is helpless. Shaking. Paralyzed. Maddened. Hopeless. Nature mocks him. As only nature can mock nature. Or is love natural in the first place? No matter. By the end of the song he has entered a kind of hallucinatory ecstasy; the music aches and yearns as it rolls on out. This is one supreme pain, that of being imprisoned a spectator. And perhaps not so very far from "T.B. Sheets," except that it must be far more romantically easy to sit and watch someone you love die than to watch them in the bloom of youth and health and know that you can never, ever have them, can never even speak to them.

"Madame George" is the album's whirlpool. Possibly one of the most compassionate pieces of music ever made, it asks us, no, *arranges* that we see the plight of what I'll be brutal and call a love-lorn drag queen with such intense empathy that when the singer

hurts him, we do too. (Morrison has said in at least one interview that the song has nothing to do with any kind of transvestite—at least as far as *he* knows, he is quick to add—but that’s bullshit.) The beauty, sensitivity, *holiness* of the song is that there’s nothing at all sensationalistic, exploitative, or tawdry about it; in a way Van is right when he insists it’s not about a drag queen, as my friends were right and I was wrong about the “pedophilia”—it’s about a *person*, like all the best songs, all the greatest literature.

The setting is the same as that of the previous song—Cyprus Avenue, apparently a place where people drift, impelled by desire, into moments of flesh-wracking, sight-curdling confrontation with their destinies. It’s an elemental place of pitiless judgment—wind and rain figure in both songs—and, interestingly enough, it’s a place of the even crueler judgment of adults by *children*, in both cases love objects absolutely indifferent to their would-be adult lovers. Madame George’s little boys are downright contemptuous—like the street urchins who end up cannibalizing the homosexual cousin in Tennessee Williams’s *Suddenly Last Summer*, they’re only too happy to come around as long as there’s music, party times, free drinks and smokes, and only too gleefully spit on George’s affections when all the other stuff runs out, the entombing winter settling in with not only wind and rain but hail, sleet, and snow.

What might seem strangest of all but really isn’t is that it’s exactly those characteristics which supposedly should make George most pathetic—age, drunkenness, the way the boys take his money and trash his love—that awaken something for George in the heart of the kid whose song this is. Obviously the kid hasn’t simply “fallen in love with love,” or something like that, but rather—what? Why, just exactly that only sunk in the foulest perversions could one human being love another for anything *other* than their humanness: love him for his weakness, his flaws, finally perhaps his decay. Decay is human—that’s one of the ultimate messages here, and I don’t by any stretch of the lexicon mean decadence. I mean that in this song or whatever inspired it Van Morrison saw the absolute possibility of loving human beings at the farthest extreme of wretchedness, and that the implications of that are terrible indeed, far more terrible than the mere sight of bodies made ugly by age or the seeming ab-

surdity of a man devoting his life to the wobbly artifice of trying to look like a woman.

You can say to love the questions you have to love the answers which quicken the end of love that’s loved to love the awful inequality of human experience that loves to say we tower over these the lost that love to love the love that freedom could have been, the train to freedom, but we never get on, we’d rather wave generously walking away from those who are victims of themselves. But who is to say that someone who victimizes him- or herself is not as worthy of total compassion as the most down and out Third World orphan in a *New Yorker* magazine ad? Nah, better to step over the bodies, at least that gives them the respect they might have once deserved. Where I live, in New York (not to make it more than it is, which is hard), everyone I know often steps over bodies which might well be dead or dying as a matter of course, without pain. And I wonder in what scheme it was originally conceived that such action is showing human refuse the ultimate respect it deserves.

There is of course a rationale—what else are you going to do—but it holds no more than our fear of our own helplessness in the face of the plain of life as it truly is: a plain which extends into an infinity beyond the horizons we have only invented. Come on, die it. As I write this, I can read in the *Village Voice* the blurbs of people opening heterosexual S&M clubs in Manhattan, saying things like, “S&M is just another equally valid form of love. Why people can’t accept that we’ll never know.” Makes you want to jump out a fifth floor window rather than even read about it, but it’s hardly the end of the world; it’s not nearly as bad as the hurts that go on everywhere everyday that are taken so casually by all of us as facts of life. Maybe it boils down to how much you actually want to subject yourself to. If you accept for even a moment the idea that each human life is as precious and delicate as a snowflake and then you look at a wino in a doorway, you’ve got to hurt until you feel like a sponge for all those other assholes’ problems, until you feel like an asshole yourself, so you draw all the appropriate lines. You stop feeling. But you know that then you begin to die. So you tussle with yourself. How much of this horror can I actually allow myself to think about? Perhaps the numbest mannikin is wiser than some-

body who only allows their sensitivity to drive them to destroy everything they touch—but then again, to tilt Madame George's hat a hair, just to recognize that that person exists, just to touch his cheek and then probably expire because the realization that you must share the world with him is ultimately unbearable is to go only the first mile. The realization of living is just about that low and that exalted and that unbearable and that sought-after. Please come back and leave me alone. But when we're alone together we can talk all we want about the universality of this abyss: it doesn't make any difference, the highest only meets the lowest for some lying succor, UNICEF to relatives, so you scratch and spit and curse in violent resignation at the strict fact that there is absolutely nothing you can do but finally reject anyone in greater pain than you. At such a moment, another breath is treason. That's why you leave your liberal causes, leave suffering humanity to die in worse squalor than they knew before you happened along. You got their hopes up. Which makes you viler than the most scrofulous carrion. Viler than the ignorant boys who would take Madame George for a couple of cigarettes. Because you have committed the crime of knowledge, and thereby not only walked past or over someone you knew to be suffering, but also violated their privacy, the last possession of the dispossessed.

Such knowledge is possibly the worst thing that can happen to a person (a *lucky* person), so it's no wonder that Morrison's protagonist turned away from Madame George, fled to the train station, trying to run as far away from what he'd seen as a lifetime could get him. And no wonder, too, that Van Morrison never came this close to looking life square in the face again, no wonder he turned to *Tupelo Honey* and even *Hard Nose the Highway* with its entire side of songs about falling leaves. In *Astral Weeks* and "T.B. Sheets" he confronted enough for any man's lifetime. Of course, having been offered this immeasurably stirring and equally frightening gift from Morrison, one can hardly be blamed for not caring terribly much about Old, Old Woodstock and little homilies like "You've Got to Make It Through This World on Your Own" and "Take It Where You Find It."

On the other hand, it might also be pointed out that desolation,

hurt, and anguish are hardly the only things in life, or in *Astral Weeks*. They're just the things, perhaps, that we can most easily grasp and explicate, which I suppose shows about what level our souls have evolved to. I said I wouldn't reduce the other songs on this album by trying to explain them, and I won't. But that doesn't mean that, all things considered, a juxtaposition of poets might not be in order.

*If I ventured in the slipstream
Between the viaducts of your dreams
Where the mobile steel rims crack
And the ditch and the backroads stop
Could you find me
Would you kiss my eyes
And lay me down
In silence easy
To be born again*

—Van Morrison

*My heart of silk
is filled with lights,
with lost bells,
with lilies and bees.
I will go very far,
farther than those hills,
farther than the seas,
close to the stars,
to beg Christ the Lord
to give back the soul I had
of old, when I was a child,
ripened with legends,
with a feathered cap
and a wooden sword.*

—Federico García Lorca