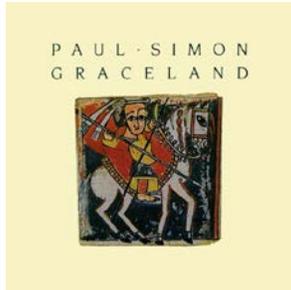


“Graceland”—Paul Simon (1986)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Marc Eliot (guest post)*



Original album



Original label



Paul Simon

“Paul Simon and ‘Graceland’”

Paul Simon’s masterwork, 1986’s “Graceland,” was released in the summer of 1986 by Warner Bros, the label Simon had moved to in 1980 after an incredibly successful 16-year run at Columbia, where he had been since 1964. His great five-album run in the second half of the Sixties as the songwriter, co-singer, with Art Garfunkel, and guitarist for Simon and Garfunkel, played a major role in helping to bring folk music out of the limited confines of the coffeehouse circuit and into the wider world of rock and roll, following in the footsteps of Bob Dylan’s 1965 groundbreaking single “Like A Rolling Stone.” Simon and Garfunkel’s string of hit albums and singles rode the wave of Sixties hippie sensibility with songs of young lovers who smoked pot and had a vague dissatisfaction with the social status quo, held together by the duo’s gorgeous two-part guitar-backed harmonies. Whereas Dylan opted for the grand arenas and stadiums only the biggest stars could fill, Simon and Garfunkel found their audiences on college campuses and their FM radio stations and used both to take them to the top of the charts.

Paul Simon and Arthur Garfunkel, two neighborhood teenagers from Queens, began singing professionally in the ‘50s as Tom and Jerry, a handle tattooed on them by their first manager/producer who thought their real names sounded too Jewish for rock and roll. Tom and Jerry’s first and only hit single, “Hey, Schoolgirl,” brought them instant national exposure and began their ascendant to adolescent fame (without the fortune). When it ended, the one-hit wonders changed their names back to Simon and Garfunkel. Their second glory ride would take nearly a decade to happen, a pathway made possible by Dylan.

In 1970, after their five-year run at the top, sensing perhaps the shifting of the cultural tide with the changing of the decade, *that* decade, after producing their biggest hit single from the album of the same name, “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” Simon, never a big sharer, broke from Garfunkel to pursue a solo career. His first album without Art, 1972’s “Paul Simon,” reached #4 on the American charts and yielded the Jamaican influenced street corner-flavored hit single “Mother and Child Reunion,” and the street rhythmic “Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard” (both of which offer hints of Simon’s coming

world rhythm cultural crescendo). 1973's "There Goes Rhymin' Simon" made it all the way to #2 and gave up several hit singles, including that magnificent pop confection "Kodachrome," the boastful adolescent "Loves Me Like a Rock," the vaguely disaffected "American Tune," and the moody and meditative "Something So Right."

Simon's next album, 1975's "Still Crazy After All These Years" followed on the heels of his bitter divorce, reflected in its more introspective, less jangly songs. It contained two hit singles, both duets, one with Phoebe Snow ("Gone at Last") and another with Garfunkel ("My Little Town"). One has the feeling that the failure in his marriage drove him back, if only for one song, to the more secure arms of his old friend. Far from his best work, the album nonetheless went to #1, Simon's first album to make it all the way to the top spot, and reaffirmed his ability to sell (mostly) solo albums.

By the middle of the Seventies, however, audiences' tastes were shifting, as the Sixties boomers began to lose their industrial grip on popular music. The end of the Vietnam War saw the generation that had lived it turn more introspective. New York City, Simon's own "little town," finally lost its choke-hold on American rock, with California's The Eagles and taking over and lightening everyone's load, followed by the emergence of New Jersey's Bruce Springsteen, rock's next reigning superstar. Prime Seventies Springsteen was lyrically much tougher than prime Sixties Simon and Garfunkel, and as a performer "The Boss" was more energetically theatrical. His explosive I'm-comin'-for-you blast-furnace performances shifted the focus of rock away from Simon's gentle, slightly depressive, melancholic minor-keyed melodies. His once anthemic songs now sounded very Sixties (not necessarily a bad way to sound), and identified Simon as a singer whose extraordinary time might have come and gone.

He wasn't alone. Very few from that tumultuous decade were able to survive and prosper into the next. Dylan did it sporadically, achieving brilliance only with "Blood on the Tracks"; the Beatles broke up and proved that their magical whole was greater than their very good individual parts; Brian Jones, one of the original R&B-oriented Rolling Stones died and whatever the group then became it wasn't what it was in the Sixties. The Mamas and the Papas disbanded, The Lovin' Spoonful too, The Doors ended with Jim Morrison's death, the Supremes broke up, The Band wouldn't make it through the next decade, Janis Joplin passed, The Beach Boys' Brian Wilson had some kind of breakdown, Crosby, Stills and Nash, Crosby, Stills, Nash, and sometimes Young, for all their songs of peace love and harmony couldn't find enough between them to stay together, Jimi Hendrix passed, Creedence Clearwater Revival split over money. When the ultimate dream-list of a pot party with guitars that was the Sixties ended, it ended.

Like so many of his contemporaries, into the second half of the Seventies, Simon had grown a little older and a lot wiser, and having written and sung more than his share first of teenage love-and-angst songs, and then adult ones, after "Still Crazy," Simon decided to take a break in search of fresh subject matter. Two years passed while Simon vamped with the release of a "Greatest Hits" album that yielded only one new hit single, the previously unreleased "Slip Slidin' Away." He did a self-deprecating cameo in Woody Allen's 1977 "Annie Hall," and then quietly, with the onset of punk rock and disco, each

of which left him speechless (and songless), by mutual consent he left Columbia Records and signed with Warner Bros, a deal that also included the chance for him to star in a motion picture featuring new, original Paul Simon songs.

In 1980 the album and film “One Trick Pony” were simultaneously released. Neither did well. The film, about a struggling former rock singer/songwriter trying to resurrect his marriage, came off lifeless and a little too self-contemplative. It grossed under a swift end to his acting career. The album did produce one terrific hit single, the Latin-influenced, extremely catchy “Late in the Evening.”

Three more years passed before Simon released “Hearts and Bones,” an artistic success but commercial failure, filled with intricate, introspective songs about his favorite subject, himself. Convinced now that nobody cared about his music, Simon left behind his beloved streets of New York City for the loftier confines of Amagansett, Long Island, where he settled into a state of self-imposed semi-isolation, Hello Darkness My Old Friend for real this time.

Until, out of the seeming nowhere, while nobody was looking and even less were caring, Paul Simon pulled off the most spectacular of comebacks, with what would be widely considered the best work of career, the ebullient, inspirational, redemptive innovative, intense, diamond-brilliant, shimmering, simply gorgeous “Graceland.”

It began modestly enough with a homemade cassette tape a friend gave him to listen to while driving; it was “Gumboots: Accordion Jive Hits, Volume II.” He played it once, then again, then over and over. After a few days he began to wonder what the name of the group was. His most favorite music had always been New York City streets “doo-wop” and he was certain this had to be some obscure doo-wop album that had somehow slipped through the cracks. In those pre-Google times, Simon called a friend at Warners and asked him to find out the name of band. His friend called back a day later and told him it was a South African vocal group called Ladysmith Black Mambazo. They specialized in “Mbaqamba,” or “township jive” (“Ladysmith” is the name of Shabalala’s rural hometown; “Black” is a reference to oxen, the strongest of all farm animals; and “Mambazo” is the Zulu word for axe, representing the group’s ability to “chop don” any singing rival who might challenge them).

Lady Black Mambazo was founded in the Sixties by Joseph Shabalala, who was still performing with them in South Africa when Simon made plans to travel to Soweto to meet the members of the group and possibly record with them. He got in touch with South African producer Hilton Rosenthal, who sent him about twenty additional albums by local musicians and, in February of 1985, Simon asked his longtime producer, Roy Halee, who did most of Simon and Garfunkel’s albums and several of Paul’s solo ones, to accompany him on the journey.

Simon called upon good friends Harry Belafonte and Quincy Jones to help smooth the way there, aware that he had to carefully tiptoe around the longstanding United Nations Anti-Apartheid Committee, whose boycott of segregated South Africa had effectively

prevented other performers from playing there. Traveling only with Halee, Paul hoped to slip in and out of the country under the radar and to avoid a Jane-Fonda-in-Hanoi media debacle.

It didn't work. From the moment they landed in South Africa, a groundswell of worldwide criticism engulfed Paul and Halee. Despite the uproar, they began working with several of the best of that country's musicians, including, besides Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Tao Ea Matsekha (responsible for the groove that envelopes "Boy in the Bubble"), General M. D. Shirinda and the Gaza Sisters ("I Know What I Know"), and the Boyoyo Boys Band ("Gumboots"). They all worked every day in the studio, for triple the going rate, and it quickly filled up with dozens of local musicians, and their friends and associates, wives, girlfriends, some carrying babies in their arms, all wanting to watch Paul Simon and hear him play. Between sessions, South African musician Sipho Mabuse gave Paul and Halee a tour of the poorest sections of Soweto.

Halee later remembered that each jam would last 10 or 15 minutes to a half-hour, and perhaps part of one usable song would come out of each. The idea, according to Halee, was to get the raw music on tape and then return to New York to try to enhance, edit and polish what they had. (Even before he returned to the States, Paul's name was added to a UN blacklist that had begun in 1980 for disregarding the boycott, despite the fact that he hadn't played a single concert there, even for the huge amounts of money Sun City, the highly segregated, white South African resort, offered him. Simon had never been a socially aware singer-songwriter like early Dylan or middle Springsteen and none of the songs that would result from his visit would be inherently political. Simon's name was removed from the UN blacklist in 1987).

These two weeks in Soweto reenergized Paul, and not only revved up his music, but, as he later put it, finished off his disappointments and sorrows. What he'd heard in the music of South Africa was the sound of his own musical roots that had somehow gotten away from him.

He took the six tracks of rough studio jams he'd made in Soweto and played them over and over again in his house on Long Island, using paper and pencil to write down the lyrics he came up with. When he felt ready to go back into the studio, he brought in other musicians he knew to help record what he had. He laid down a track with the East L.A. Mexican group Los Lobos. He also did one with Good Rockin' Dopsie and the Twisters. He recorded bits and pieces with the Everly Brothers, one of the original inspirations for Tom and Jerry and Simon and Garfunkel, and Linda Ronstadt, who's strong, rough, street-wise yet somehow sweet voice he had always loved.

What made all of this time and travel at all possible was that Warner Bros. had, by now, written Paul Simon off as a bad investment after his first two albums for them had bombed. The label was now focused on Prince, who was very hot at the time, and perennial platinum performing and recording artist Madonna. To the label, Paul was yesterday's news. Many of the Warner's younger executives had only a vague memory of Simon and Garfunkel and no organic connection to the Sixties.

The album took the rest of 1985 to complete, done in pieces in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Louisiana, while Paul continued to refine his lyrics, trying to make all the pieces click as a cohesive whole. As it neared completion, there was still the matter of a title, a single phrase that would tell the world what the album was all about. He had one he liked, that kept floating in his head, borrowed from T.S. Eliot, “Driving through Wasteland.” Close, but not *it*. Then, one day that became “Going to Graceland,” and then, simply, “Graceland.”

And he knew he was home.

“Graceland” was more than a professional comeback; it was Simon’s spiritual and creative rebirth, a redemptive return to his own musical roots. Loosely framed by a father-son journey to see Elvis’ Tennessee mansion, it was at once soulful, rhythmic, celebratory and poetic--suns shining like National Guitars, girls jumping on apartment trampolines in New York City, diamonds on the soles of her shoes.

Warner Bros. released the album September 1, 1986, so as not to clash with the label’s big summer releases. Not long after it hit the stores (the way it was then), to the label’s surprise and delight, and Paul’s, “Graceland” entered “Billboard’s” Top Album chart at number three in America, and number one in England and Australia. It eventually went platinum five times (five million units) and eventually sold over fourteen million additional copies worldwide and counting, making it one of the largest selling albums of all time, up there with music monuments such as Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” The Eagles’ “Their Greatest Hits,” and Springsteen’s “Born in the USA.”

Paul Simon had once again conquered the musical universe, and by doing so, his own demons. He had managed to redeem the musical Eighties by bringing popular music back home, by bringing himself back to the music he loved. He rediscovered his creative inspiration with “Graceland,” a forward journey that took him back to his R&B roots and produced a work that proved once more, as Danny and the Juniors had so presciently proclaimed in 1958, that “rock and roll will never die.”

As long as it never veers too far from the spirit of Elvis, residing now and forever at Graceland.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.