

“Rumours”—Fleetwood Mac (1977)

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Essay by Ken Caillat and Daniel Hoffheins (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



Fleetwood Mac

If you randomly sift through the music collection of most homes, you'll more than likely find a copy of Fleetwood Mac's "Rumours." Like "Sgt. Pepper" before it, "Rumours" captured the mood of a generation, laid it down, and preserved it forever on vinyl. "Rumours" offered an unflinching look at the emotional fallout of free love, the anger of letting it go, and the optimism that comes from its survival. The message of infighting, pain, spectacle, and the excess of a star-crossed, storm-tossed band was delivered with a haunting and infectious mix of folk, pop, funk, blues, and hard rock. That mix was so potent and genuine that "Rumours" was an immediate hit, selling millions of copies and staying at number one in the album charts for over half a year.

"Rumours" became the soundtrack for the charged era that spawned it, a phenomenon of unlikely forces converging to create a unique and addictively confessional work of art. Today, "Rumours" has sold over 40 million copies and continues to attract new listeners with each passing year, representing so completely its time that just its iconic album cover is enough to stand in for the lives, hopes, and heartaches of millions of Baby Boomers.

The seventies were a paradoxical decade. The sexual revolution and the spirit of Woodstock were still the guiding lights of the Boomer revolution, but Vietnam and Watergate had sown massive despair and disillusionment in the country. Still in shock from social upheaval, and still mired in a nationwide recession, the American people longed for an honest reckoning with the spirit of the times. Yet, at the same time, they longed to believe that the dream of the rock and roll revolution wasn't yet dead, that free love and a free spirit could prevail in a darkening world. Enter Fleetwood Mac, filling the columns of the burgeoning music press, wowing the critics with their innovative take on rock-pop, and entrancing their audience with a show drawn from their personal lives.

"Rumours" was recorded and released at the time when rock-and-roll albums were king and blockbuster movies were exploding in theaters across the country, both of them reshaping America's relationship with its popular culture. Record companies were flush with money, and artists were given the resources to create ever-more ambitious works for an ever-growing legion of hungry fans. To accommodate and entertain the demanding throngs, rock music was fast

becoming big business. Bands embarked on year-long tours, playing to stadium-sized crowds like an army on the march. Driving that demand were underground FM channels that challenged the pop-friendly world of AM radio and eventually took over as the dominant medium for new music. The public still liked their pop confections, but as the times changed and the country's mood dimmed, people also wanted honesty served up with an edge. No other band embodied this transformation and its era more than Fleetwood Mac.

Fleetwood Mac began as a British blues band in the late sixties, but had since gone through an array of internal changes that led to its current incarnation. There were two original players, drummer Mick Fleetwood, bassist John McVie, and they were later joined by McVie's wife, keyboardist and singer Christine McVie. Joining them were L.A.-based singer Stevie Nicks and her professional and personal partner, guitarist Lindsey Buckingham. Musically, they were the perfect marriage of British blues and laid-back, easy-going California pop

Fleetwood Mac played to capacity crowds. They rode a wave of interest spurred by their new, radio-friendly sound and by Stevie's witchy stage persona, sex appeal, and smoky voice. Money and success were a welcome change for a band that had fallen on hard times, still harder times would lie ahead. Just when their professional fortunes were beginning to soar, their personal lives started to sour. One of rock and roll's best-known soap operas was about to begin. But different from most backstage dramas, this time the tapes were rolling.

The six-year marriage of Christine and John McVie had finally ended in a wrenching divorce. The relationship between Lindsey and Stevie, a marriage in all but name, was proving impossible to maintain as they could no longer balance their lives as artists and as lovers. Even Mick Fleetwood, the nominal leader who was married with children in a life that existed outside the band, fell victim to heartbreak. Just as the two relationships in Fleetwood Mac were falling apart, he received the news that his wife was leaving him for his friend and former bandmate, Bob Weston.

Starting in January of 1976 at the Record Plant studio in Sausalito, California, in an effort that is unimaginable by today's standards, the band plowed one year of hard labor and hard living into creating the album's 11 songs. From their tempestuous lives, the studio microphones honestly recorded the band's deposition, from the lonely betrayal of "Dreams" and "Go Your Own Way," to the joys of a new relationship in "You Make Loving Fun," to the drugged out nightmare of "Gold Dust Woman," to the band's defiant resolve of "The Chain." The band's emotional journey was slowly captured in great music and timeless art.

"Rumours" was a marvel of both musicianship and engineering, reinventing and revolutionizing the way music is made and recorded through meticulous and painstaking attention to detail to ensure immaculate sound quality. At one point, "Rumours" was almost lost forever because the master tapes had been played so many times that they had begun to disintegrate, such was the time spent on attempting to reach perfection.

Fleetwood Mac's personal catharsis, brilliant artistry, and technical innovation paid off in fairy tale fashion, winning the Grammy for Best Album in 1977. It would come to stand as a defining rock and roll masterpiece of its generation, sounding as fresh now as it did then. "Rumours" is

not just the story of one of the bestselling pop albums in history, but the story of how, in the hands of the right artists, pain and anger and heartbreak can be used to make something truly magical and unforgettable.

Ken Caillat was the producer and engineer for the Fleetwood Mac albums “Rumours,” “Tusk,” “Mirage,” “Live” and “The Chain Box Set.” He has also had the pleasure of producing his daughter Colbie Caillat’s albums “Coco,” “Breakthrough,” “All of You,” and “Christmas in the Sand.”

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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.