

“Sounds of Silence”--Simon and Garfunkel (1966)

Added to the National Registry: 2012

Essay by Daniel Levitin (guest post)*



Album cover



Label



Simon and Garfunkel

“Sounds of Silence” is the second studio album by Simon and Garfunkel, and it weaves together threads of their earlier studio album “Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.” with Paul Simon's first solo album “The Paul Simon Songbook.” The album was released on January 17, 1966, with recording taking place in 1964 and 1965, years during which the United States was beginning to see growing distrust of government and conventional authority. Young people and members of the counterculture saw in a new breed of singer-songwriter role models, truth-tellers and prophets, and they hung on every word.

In the years following this release, Paul Simon became one of the most inventive and highly regarded songwriters of the last 60 years, with a truly international following. But the inclusion of this record in the Library of Congress' National Registry was not because its author became the Paul Simon we know from “Bridge Over Troubled Water,” “Graceland,” or “Stranger to Stranger,” but because it stands on its own. If Simon and Garfunkel had never made another record, this album would still hold a privileged place in our national hearts and minds. To say that it captured a moment is too pat and too cliché--it captured a generation, it gave voice to the bubbling cauldron of anger, suspicion, loneliness (:in restless dreams I walk alone”) and disconnection (“I am a rock, I am an island”) felt by what would become known as the Woodstock generation.

“Sounds of Silence” set a template for all who followed. The injustices of the world need not be addressed with violence. The counterculture can be poetic and intellectual. Simon neither hides behind nor parades his intellectualism and education--they are just tools he uses to craft the sonic paintings he creates so lushly here, each one a story in itself, wrapped in fine linen, yet with openings here and there where the playful and the sensual can pour in. A hallmark of Simon's writing is the juxtaposition of the heavens above and the dirty streets and people below. Longfellow, Keats, and the Gospel sneak into the lyrics.

*Blessed are the stained glass, windowpane glass
Blessed is the church service, makes, me nervous
Blessed are the penny rookers, cheap hookers, groovy lookers*

*O Lord, Why have you forsaken me?
I have tended my own garden much too long*

“Sounds of Silence” is a dark record. Two suicides. A narrator who has built “a fortress, steep and mighty, that none may penetrate,” and who writes “I have no need of friendship, friendship causes pain. It's laughter and it's loving I disdain.”

But, as with all Simon performances, the singer's own voice provides the hope and optimism to sustain the listener. It's an instrument as familiar as family, as transparent and expansive as the June sky. Within a single word, Simon can evoke an uncannily wide range of emotions, leaving the listener comforted and renewed, tapping into a deep understanding of what it means to be human, of what it means to feel.

Simon, still only 23 years old, already has the sense of experimentation and pure play that has become a hallmark of his work across six decades. “Blessed” has a complex time signature, and a change of time signatures, as it moves from 6/8 to 8/8. “We've Got a Groovy Thing” brings in the Wurlitzer electric piano, which would become a staple of pop music for everyone from Marvin Gaye to Supertramp and Steely Dan. “Leaves That Are Green” features an electric harpsichord. None of these are undertaken as gimmicks; they serve the songs. There's a purity here, a visionary focus on the songs. That purity should not be mistaken for naiveté--Simon knows what he's doing and goes for it with confidence and dedication. His later albums would explore other sonic and musical territories more intensely.

“Somewhere They Can't Find Me” begins with a guitar lick Simon discovered in “Angie,” an instrumental written by English guitarist Davey Graham. Simon has built an entirely new song around it, and just to make sure you didn't miss the hat tip--or Simon's bona fides as a guitarist--the very next song on the record is Simon's version of the ambitious instrumental, “Angie,” adding ornamentation and embellishments and taking up the tempo a couple of notches. Fellow guitarists I've spoken to marvel at Simon's guitar mastery, and consider him one of the finest guitarists in the world for his technique, nuance, voicings, and mastery of an instrument that most people just strum dumbly. I asked Simon why it was that his guitar playing doesn't seem to be appreciated by the public, why he isn't known among the pantheon of guitarists alongside Chet Atkins, Eric Clapton, and Alex DeGrassi. “Well, I don't know, what's that got to do with me?” he asked. “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.”

We hear tightly crafted vocal harmonies. The vocals are infused in the DNA of the Carter Family, the Everly Brothers and the Andrews Sisters. But “Sounds of Silence” is something different. More counterpoint, more elements of Bach. And the two-part harmony, often changing in its intervallic structure, implies more harmonic movement than a simple parallel harmony would, and added gravity to the lyrics. The words themselves are among the very first instances of true poetry being put into contemporary, radio-friendly songs.

“The Sound of Silence” (the song) is now one of the great entries in the American songbook. Simon's poetic approach to songwriting is particularly evident in the structure of this song. The one time that he doesn't complete the musical frame with a call-and-response lyric is after the line “But my words like silent raindrops fell”--he leaves the next line silent, the inspired poetic marriage of music, meaning, and words. Listeners may not consciously note this, but their brains do, and it adds to the vividness and poignancy of the lyric.

The elephant in the room is the unauthorized overdubbing of electric guitar and drums done without Paul Simon's knowledge or permission. As a listener, I always want to hear whatever it is that was the artist's conception. And I support the artist's right to have the final say over their output. So on those grounds, I find the move offensive. But Tom Wilson captured something about the changing musical styles that would become a soundtrack for political and social movements in the defiant electric guitars, the “we won't take no for an answer” drums. The entire overdubbed arrangement added an urgency, a youthfulness, and an edgy hipness to the song that were latent in the composition itself and in Simon and Garfunkel's original recording, finding their ultimate realization in the single. The single reached #1 in the U.S. and was a Top Ten hit in multiple countries worldwide. The song was added to the National Recording Registry in the Library of Congress for being “culturally, historically, or aesthetically important” in 2013, along with the rest of the “Sounds of Silence” album. The immediate consequence of the single's success is that it drew a larger and faithful audience to the group, and to the songs of Paul Simon, who in 2018 is still at the top of his game, writing some of the best songs he's ever written.

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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.