

Johnny, They Hardly Knew Ye ...

John Stewart, an American Musical Original
Fame, Six Degrees of Relativity, and the Economics of Being a Household Name

Volume I:

1967–1987

The First 20 Years / The Best 50 Songs

by Frank W. Kresen

Inspired by Leland Rucker's "Jukebox in My Head"

Web Log Postings

Sunday, January 20 to Saturday, January 26, 2008

www.lelandrucker.com

PREFACE

Johnny, I hardly knew ye...

— From an old Irish folk song
(see “Afterwords” — the backmatter
section of this essay)

FOREWORD

I have made my living as a professional proofreader/copy editor since 1981, and I have operated a freelance/outsourced proofreading and copy-editing service — called *proof positive* — since 1985.

Among my freelance clients is The *Stained Glass Quarterly*, the official voice, the publishing organ, of The Stained Glass Association of America. This periodical has been published four times per year — continuously — since 1906.

I consider it a distinct privilege to number this high-quality, venerable publication among my *proof positive* clients. It was not the *first* client that *proof positive* attracted after I began my freelance venture in 1985, but it is the one which has remained a client for a longer time than any other — 19 years and counting.

Following is the opening paragraph of an article that appeared in a recent issue of the magazine:

“Those who are *larger than life possess a passion and fire within that makes them seem immortal. Their passing rocks us to the core, leaving behind a profound sense of loss and a deep emotional wound.* Such was the case on February 26, 2011, when Richard Millard passed away peacefully in his sleep at his home in Antrim, New Hampshire, his wife Victoria by his side. *It seems unfathomable that we now have to say farewell to our friend Dick. Millard’s life reads like a great American novel, and all of his exotic, artistic, beautiful, painful, soul-searching, truth-finding experiences found their way onto his glass canvas.*”

— Shawn Waggoner
“Richard Millard, 1935 – 2011:
Remembering a Master Glass Painter”
The *Stained Glass Quarterly*
Volume 105, Number 4
Winter 2011
[*Emphases mine.* — FWK]

Call me a lazy writer. Call me a plagiarist. Call me Ishmael.

Whatever.

If I had gone through 60 drafts of this essay, I could never have expressed so succinctly, profoundly, or eloquently the effect that John Stewart’s death has had on me as Mr. Waggoner has done here in reference to Mr. Millard.¹

¹See CNN’s website piece “The Success of Failure: Pulitzer Winner’s Surprise Road to the Top” (January 23, 2012; http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/20/living/jennifer-egan-creativity-failure/index.html?hpt=hp_c1). It is a remarkable article (part of a series about creativity in general) about the benefits of and the lessons to

Here is some background on the circumstances in which I received the news of John Stewart's death.

I will divide it into two parts and call it:

A Short Tale of Two "JS's"

Part I: A Clash of Perspectives and Circumstances

December 11, 2002:

Ring, ring, telephone ring.

Frank: "Hello?"

Leland Rucker: "It's Leland. JS died today."

Frank: (*In a really depressed and monotonic tone of voice*) "Really.... So did my brother Corky — yesterday."

It wasn't that I was oblivious to or blasé about the news of the death of this musical figure, this "JS" — Joe Strummer — whose vitality and energy drove his group, The Clash, and who brought us so many memorable musical moments at the apex of the Punk-Rock phenomenon of the mid-to-late 1970s.

It was just that I had already lost my father in 1977. I lost both my mother and my stepfather in 2001, and my wife, Kim, had lost her father that same year. Then I lost my younger brother Ernest ("Corky") the day before Leland called.

I just simply could not work up any interest in his announcement of the death of The Clash's frontman at age 50 to a heart attack — even as shocking as it was.

One expects their parents to predecease them, but not their younger siblings.

But, of course, there was no way for Leland to have known about Corky's death before he called.

It was all so strange.

be learned from *failure*. Jennifer Egan is Chicago-born, San Francisco-bred, and now living and writing out of Brooklyn, New York. She won the Pulitzer last year for her novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Her short stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*. She's a regular contributor to *The New York Times Magazine* and the author of several other highly esteemed works, including *Look at Me* and *The Keep*.

Ms. Egan goes through 60 drafts as a matter of routine.

For me, it had always been my other younger brother, Kevin, who would call me on the phone to tell me someone close to me had died.

It was Kevin who had called me in 1981, when, during my second marriage, I was living in Prairie Village, Kansas, a western suburb of metropolitan Kansas City, Missouri. First, he asked me if I were sitting down — implying that it might be a smart thing to do. Then he told me that Corky's wife, Nancy, had shot and killed herself — some six weeks after she had given birth to their only child, Eric.

It was Kevin who called me in Kansas City in March 2001 to tell me that the hospital had sent our Mom home to die. While we were discussing her very poor prognosis, he suddenly asked if I could hold on for a minute, because he had another incoming call. He put me on hold for a few minutes and then came back to tell me that the call was from our sister Mandy, at whose Chicago-suburban house my Mother was spending her final days. Kevin was crying as he told me that Mom had just died. It was eerie. I almost felt as if I had been there when my Mom died — in a vicarious sense — because of this uncanny timing and coincidence.

It was Mandy who called me in December 2001 — shortly after I had returned to Kansas City from a trip to Chicago to see my siblings at Christmas without our Mom there for the first time since she had married my Dad in the mid-1940s — to tell me that our stepfather, John Smith, had died. I returned to Chicago for his wake and funeral and wound up staying through New Year's Eve, “celebrating” with my brothers and sisters. At midnight, we were watching the group Cheap Trick — a Chicago-area mainstay — perform on TV in a concert from Navy Pier.

And it was Kevin who called me a year later, on December 10, 2002 — the day before Leland called with his news about Joe Strummer.

In fact, Kevin called me *twice* that day.

His first call came in the mid-morning hours. Our good friend from Chicago, Mike Kiczula, had just called Kevin to tell him that one of *his* brothers — also named Frank — had just died.

Kevin's second call that day came almost exactly 12 hours later, at about 10:30 pm. Again, he asked me if I were sitting down. *No, No, No...*, I thought to myself. I sat down on the edge of the bed.

Kevin told me, in a calm and measured tone, that our brother Corky — four years younger than me but four years older than Kevin — had suffered a massive heart attack at home.

For a moment, the hopeful and wishful part of my brain took over and convinced me that Kevin was leading up to completing his sentence by saying something like, “... and he's now on a ventilator ...” or “... and recovering ...,” and/or “... will have to watch his

weight, diet, and lifestyle/activities over the coming years”

But, no.

Kevin completed his sentence with “... *and died....*”

I just lost it. I sprang up from the bed, ran across the hallway into what used to serve as the kids’ computer/study room, threw the phone across the floor, fell to my hands and knees, and just started wailing. I was yelling — to no one in particular — that *It couldn’t be. That I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to him.* My stepson Drew had to peel me off the floor and, with Kim’s help, get me into bed.

In many ways, I’ve never been the same since that night.

It was Kevin, who called at 11:00 pm on a mid-July night in 2006 to tell me that it was too late for me to make plans to get to Chicago and see our sister Karen before she died. Karen’s daughter, my niece/God-daughter Debbie, had called earlier that day to tell us that Karen had been requesting to “ ... see her brothers ” Now, Kevin was saying that she was already gone.

And, again, it was Kevin who called me in the summer of 2010 to tell me that our nephew Eric — my brother Corky and his wife, Nancy’s, only child, who was orphaned at 21 years of age — had almost lost his life in a high-speed motorcycle accident.

At my Mom’s funeral service, my Uncle Jim, her brother, delivered the eulogy. At Corky’s, one of his fellow Cook County Sheriff’s Officers spoke a few comforting sentiments. (I was in no shape to do so.)

But, for Karen, I knew it had to be me.

It was very, very difficult. I hadn’t done any public speaking for about 40 years, and I was suffering from this horrible sense of *disconnect*. I just couldn’t fathom that the subject of my address was the *death of my sister*, whose open casket lay just a few feet to my left. Karen looked more beautiful in death than she had for the final 15 years of her life. (In death, my mother had barely resembled her real self. She looked, for all the world, uncannily like Anne Evans — a next-door neighbor lady of Leland Rucker’s when he was about 10 years old whom I had met.)

Through all these events, I had come to regard Kevin, Mandy — and now, in a purely “world-of-musical-celebrities” sort of way, Leland — as sort of my unofficial *Messengers of Death and Bearers of Other Bad News*.

Leland’s role in this gruesome capacity had dated back to the late 1970s and early 1980s. At that time, he was working the 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm shift as Rock Music critic/columnist and obituary writer for the venerable *Kansas City Times/Star* — the newspaper where Ernest Hemingway had once been a cub reporter. It was through late-night phone

calls from Leland at his desk there that I learned of the death of 11 people in 1979 who had been trampled in a stampede for the doors at a Who concert in Cincinnati and of the shooting death of John Lennon in New York in December 1980.



A Short Tale of Two “JS’s”

Part II: Tornado in My Head

In January 2008, CNN had not yet changed its bottom-of-the-screen breaking-news device to a kind of virtual cubic rectangle, which “flipped” or “rotated” every 10 seconds or so with a different news item. At that time, CNN was still employing that oldest of electronic journalistic devices, the “crawl.” The item would pass by, from the viewer’s right to left — sometimes at what seemed like agonizingly slow speeds — with the latest, up-to-the-minute, succinct news-headline teasers — and then disappear off the bottom-left edge of the TV screen into the limbo of broadcast space, out of sight.

It always seemed like CNN waited way too long to refresh the stream of breaking news. So, in the space of less than five minutes, you’d notice — if you’d been paying attention — that they were starting over, repeating the same items you’d begun reading just five minutes previously. An item could disappear and not reappear again for another five minutes. By that time, the viewer might have left the room or become otherwise preoccupied.

If I was doing anything else simultaneously with watching CNN, I tended not to lift my head up often enough; thus, I might miss one or two items if I were paying bills, folding laundry, or — as was most often the case in my CNN watching — proofreading, *i.e.*, trying to earn a living, or, in the best-case scenario, actually invoicing a client for work completed.

But, eventually, the stream of breaking news would be refreshed. New items would replace the old. When CNN was including a particular item for the *final* time in the crawl, it was the viewer’s last chance to see it — it was then or never. So, through all these random circumstances, there was an even chance that the viewer could fail to see a particular item altogether.

I say “last chance” because “crawl” items — by the very nature of the device — rarely showed up later in any talking-head CNN coverage, with actual reporters or anchors speaking the words. It was as if these items were considered “News Lite” — not consequential enough to merit actual air time.

So it was that on Saturday, January 19, 2008, I was otherwise preoccupied and missed the first part of the sentence in the crawl that ended in “...*has died.*” I caught *that*, but because death notices are as common an occurrence as any other aspect of the news, I lowered my head down again and resumed my primary task. When I looked up again, I caught the last word of what appeared to be the same news item.

It said, "...*Trio*."

For all I knew, it was Ahmad Jamal or Ramsey Lewis whom they were talking about as having passed away. I never gave it a second thought.

So, I existed in a state of something like blissful ignorance for five more days, until Thursday, January 24, 2008.

On that day, I walked the two-block distance over to Doug Breckenridge's house. Doug was my partner in my then-current/now defunct musical duo, The Dinosaurs (two acoustic guitars, two voices, *cum* electronic drum machine, 1996 to 2009). Thursdays were the day for our weekly rehearsal. (Coincidentally, Doug and Leland also were acquaintances. Their tenures at *The Kansas City Times* had overlapped — Doug was the Country Music columnist. They kept in occasional touch via e-mail, which I did not have at that time.)

Upon arriving, I told Doug that I had three small, sports-information-related matters to dispense with before we began our pre-practice listening session, evaluating and compiling our *Best of The Dinosaurs 2005* collection — and then rehearsing and/or recording two sets of 10 songs each.

These three items were:

1. Doug and his son, Hunter, had attended several University of Missouri at Kansas City (UMKC) varsity basketball (Division II) games that year. The nickname/mascot name of the UMKC sports teams is "The (Fighting) Kangaroos." I have no idea how, when, or where this name originated. The current round of TV commercials promoting the team had, as its stock slogan that year, "*Roo Up!*" I told Doug I preferred the cheer that he and Hunter had made up and which they would stand up and shout at games after every made UMKC basket — "*Rah! Roo!*" I kind of liked the flavor of the implied reference to "Scooby Doo."

2. Doug had a habit of saving his *Kansas City Star* newspapers for a period of about a month, after which he would take the accumulated stack and carry it to the street curb to be placed in his recycling bin, along with other paper products, in time for trash pickup that week. I knew that, if I asked for the sports section of any given edition of the *Star* with the past few days, Doug could produce it instantly.

My reason for asking was to see where The University of Kansas men's basketball team had been ranked in the Associated Press and Coaches' Poll that week, which always appeared in the Tuesday edition of the newspaper. I was curious to know if either of these two rankings placed Memphis University in the #1 slot instead of KU. Both of them showed KU as the top-ranked team in the nation. KU deserved it.

The next week, however, when KU lost for the first time since 1983 to archrival Kansas State on Kansas State's home court, they slid to a #4 national ranking, and they deserved

that, too. Then, in the ensuing three weeks, KU lost two more Big 12 Conference games (to Texas and Oklahoma State, respectively, both by very close margins). Their record was 24-3.

But even on this Thursday, January 24, 2008, it was clear that they had a very, very good team that year. When the Madness of March would begin, Kansas, going into the Big 12 Tournament and beating #1 seed Texas by 10 points, were 30-3. All three of their losses had come from within Big 12 play — which says as much about the quality of play in the Big 12 as anything it might say about the University of Kansas Jayhawks. This record was enough to earn them a #1 seed in the Midwest Division in the Big Dance (annual rite-of-spring NCAA Division I National Basketball Tournament). I had high hopes that 2008 could be *the* year — the one in which they could go all the way and win the national championship, for the first time since 1988.

3. I had a 1950s-era sports obituary from the week previous to announce to Doug (a walking baseball encyclopedia/enthusiast) if he hadn't heard about it yet. Johnny Podres, the righty for the old *Brooklyn* Dodgers, who had helped pitch them to two World Series championships, had died at age 75. I allowed as how most American sportscasters, seeing “Pod,” pronounced his Latino last name like the Spanish word for “fathers” (*padres*), when the spelling of it really should have made the Spanish pronunciation “Poh-drays.”

Doug said he remembered the player's name but had not heard of his passing.

But, then, Doug said, suddenly, “I received a communication from Leland, and you'll probably be interested in reading it.”

Because Doug had started moving toward his computer to bring it up while we were still discussing the passing of Johnny Podres, I felt intuitively, instinctively, that Leland's communication concerned someone's death. I was compelled to ask Doug, “Does it deal with an obituary?”

Doug answered, “Yes” and started printing it out, one page at a time. The pages came out face down, and, so, I couldn't tell what the subject matter was.

But then I glanced up at the computer screen and saw the impossible subject line that began Leland's “Jukebox in My Head” Web log posting for Sunday, January 20, 2008:

“JOHN STEWART: 1939 – 2008”

I jumped reflexively, about six feet, laterally, to my right, bumping my shin on Doug's coffee table, and my hands went instinctively to my head. I was stunned, shocked, dumbfounded.

This hurried, dashed-off first posting consisted of little more than Leland's pulling out his review notes from the last live John Stewart appearance he had attended (September 18, 2005, at Daniels Hall in Denver, Colorado) and appending them to a short (two-page)

summary of his experience with Stewart's life and work. You could tell that Leland had been caught completely off-guard and by surprise by Stewart's passing.

This was quite unlike the regular journalistic practice of keeping a kind of running obituary handy as an aging celebrity took turns for the worse — just to avoid having to put together a sketchy, last-minute tribute when he died. Leland was quick to admit his unreadiness to wax more eloquently and at length on the subject of John Stewart's death. Near the conclusion of this first posting, Leland took pains to assure his readers that he would produce more after it had really sunk in and he had had time to compose himself.

“I first saw him play a folk club in Kansas City in 1969 and caught him probably 20 times over the decades. I’ll probably have more to write about Stewart, but, today, the best I can do is to include my notes from the last show Billie [Leland’s Significant Other since 1974 — FWK] and I saw.”

— Leland Rucker
“Jukebox in My Head”
Web Log Posting
Sunday, January 20, 2008
www.lelandrucker.com

But even in this “quickie” — Leland's first Web Log posting on John Stewart's passing, now rolling off of Doug Breckenridge's printer — the reader could sense the enormity of the impact that this artist had had upon Leland. It had begun:

“John Stewart, one of the greatest songwriters of the second half of the 20th century and one of my all-time musical heroes, died Friday night after suffering a stroke or aneurysm in San Diego, California. He was 68.”

— Leland Rucker
“Jukebox in My Head”
Web Log Posting
Sunday, January 20, 2008
www.lelandrucker.com

The short, clipped phrasing and succinctness, that clarity of expression, and emotional control in the face of what amounted to a terrible and tragic *personal* loss for Leland reflected his absorption of the Hemingway-esque brevity that all professional-journalist obituary writers learn very quickly on the job. If a death notice for an ordinary citizen came in 15 minutes before the finished copy had to be delivered to the presses to put *The Kansas City Times* to bed at 11:00 pm, Leland was your man.

Just as I had felt after my brother Corky's sudden death six years previously, I again started to feel that I would never be the same, knowing that John Stewart — unquestionably one of the greatest-ever influences on me as a musician — was dead.

However, my inability to absorb the fact that he was gone turned out to be only the *beginning* of my having a really, really hard time coping with his passing — mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.

The Dinosaurs' rehearsal that night was a complete write-off. I went through the motions of playing and singing, but my heart was not in it, and my mind was whirling like a Plains-state tornado.



“Labor in the Shadows...”

In the days that would follow, I couldn't think clearly. I couldn't listen to what other people were saying to me. I couldn't work. I couldn't sleep.

Not since the shocking death of John Lennon 28 years earlier — at the hands of a deranged killer, in front of Lennon's hotel residence on the streets of New York — had I been so deeply affected by the passing of a figure from the American musical/cultural scene. And John Stewart's death was the result of *natural* — not sudden, unexpected, psychotic — causes.

Some days, it felt like I was losing my mind.

I hated that this was happening at a time when Leland Rucker and I — two of the perhaps very few people on the planet who had such a strong connection to Stewart's life and career body of work — had been out of touch for so long. I hated it that I had to find out about this six days after the fact and through a third party. At the time, I wasn't taking *The Kansas City Star* any longer, and no network or cable news outlet (except, perhaps for the aforementioned CNN “crawl”) had given it any coverage that I was aware of.

I was upset that Leland and I had waited for such a great man and artist to die before we thought about finding the time to write the definitive analysis piece on his contribution to the history of American popular music and his importance to us as an influence on our own musical and general creative sensibilities. We should/probably could have done this years before, while he was still alive.

Ever since that night — the first time I read Leland's initial Web Log posting — I have often wondered if most readers wouldn't have considered Leland's appraisal of Stewart's place in the modern-music pantheon to be an exercise in hyperbole: “ ... *one of the greatest songwriters of the second half of the 20th century and one of my all-time musical heroes ...* ”

I wondered about this because Leland and I were acutely aware of the cult-figure-only status that John had achieved over a career that had spanned 50-plus years. Throughout my essay here, the reader will find me using the phrase “ ... *no one East of the Mississippi ...* ” or “ ... *the first person West of the Mississippi I'd come across ...* ” to

describe how many popular-music fans had ever even *heard* of this artist of unfathomable talent.

However, soon after Stewart's death, Web-page tributes started showing up on the Internet, and I was relieved to read several equally hyperbolic statements by other writers. One such tribute, "A Page in Memory of John Stewart," written by someone who did not sign the piece, particularly caught my eye in this respect:

John Stewart wrote *more truly great songs than any other singer-songwriter of the twentieth century. A tall statement, that*, especially given who those other singer-song-writers were — artists like Guthrie and Dylan and Simon and Lightfoot and Taylor and Denver and more. If John Stewart never quite achieved the sustained acclaim and chart success of those others, it wasn't for want of quality original material or mesmerizing performance skills. It was simply a vagary of fate, one that gifted him with extraordinary powers of composition and musicianship but exacted in exchange the cost of labor in the shadows of commercial success.

If that exchange rendered this extraordinarily complex and sensitive artist and man something of a cult figure during his lifetime — well, he was at least *our* cult figure. It has always felt like something of a privilege to know and treasure the music of John Stewart, from his days as a member of the legendary Kingston Trio through his 40-year solo career, when so relatively few others were afforded the same acquaintance with his muse and his genius that we who knew him through the decades have been. His passing in January 2008 seems to have reawakened substantial interest in the music community in his life and work, at least for now. If this be but another fleeting brush with public appreciation — then so be it. As one anonymous poster wrote on a video page shortly after his death: "*Faith, pride and optimism. John, you will always come back to us when we need you.*" Thus has it always been — and will be as long as some lonesome picker finds some healing in his songs.

— "A Page in Remembrance of
John Stewart"

<http://jsmem.blogspot.com/2008/07/john-stewart-1939-2008-songwriter.html>

[Emphases mine — FWK]

Eventually, Leland would add three more of his installments of "Jukebox in My Head" dedicated to the topic of John Stewart's death — one on Monday, January 21, 2008, one on Wednesday, January 23, 2008, and one on Saturday, January 26, 2008 — totaling some 16 pages. Whoever put together "A Page in Memory of John Stewart" found it fitting to include all of Leland's Stewart reminiscences as a sidebar link on the page.

The more I read through the ever-increasing number of John Stewart tribute pieces showing up on the Web, the more convinced I became that I had to write one of my own. Some of the tributes I had encountered were well written and insightful, but most were very, very short and seemed to lack the breadth, depth, and scope that would be truly reflective of an artist of the stature that John Stewart represented.

For instance, I spent hundreds of hours slogging through thousands of pages of published copy on John Stewart. Through all of that I found *one* reference (less than one line in length) that made any reference at all to the American playwright Tennessee Williams. It said that the song “Summer Child” (from *Wingless Angels*/April 1975/RCA Records) is “... a sort of Tennessee Williams narrative”²

That’s it. That’s all I found. Now, I was especially attuned to the fact that Tennessee Williams’ approach to stagecraft is mirrored closely by John Stewart’s approach to songcraft, especially in “Mister Lincoln’s Train” (from *Signals Through the Glass*/September 1968/Capitol Records). By contrast to all the research I had plowed through, *Johnny, They Hardly Knew Ye/Volume I* spends many pages discussing the Williams parallels in John’s work.

Other John Stewart commentaries I found either were an ongoing blog-type format (“The Great Northern Plain Archives Project”) or I kept waiting for them to *say something* — other than “(Insert name of song here) was the *perfect* song to be hearing at that point in my life....” (“The Great Northern Plain Archives Project”).

So, on about February 1, 2008, I set about the task.

Little did I know that I would still be writing my essay — in fact *starting over* on it — after four full years.

Needless to say, it turned out to be a much longer, *way* more difficult project than I first imagined it would be.

From day one, I knew that, whatever final form it assumed, it would be based on and take as its point of departure Leland’s series of four “Jukebox in My Head” Web Log postings. I had always wanted to co-write a long-form piece with Leland on some favorite popular-musical topic, and I saw this as the perfect chance. We had started such a project in the years before he moved away from Kansas City in October 1983, (a wildly speculative piece, based on our correspondence from about 1970 to 1980, about how popular music moved in predictable cycles). But, owing to many daunting factors, we never finished that project.

²Peter O’Brien, “O’Bsessions With John Stewart,” *Omaha Rainbow* #5/Winter 1975/Edited and published by Peter O’Brien. [O’Brien had gotten it right, of course. “Summer Child” is a Southern Narrative type of writing, very much in the Williams/Faulkner mode. It mixes spoken-word passages — in Stewart’s theatrical Deep South drawl *recitatif* — with the sweetest Pop/Folk chorus imaginable, which breaks through the narrative without warning and carries with it a gorgeous lead-guitar lick that can make a strong man weep and the acoustic side of Steve Cropper jealous. — FWK]

Nevertheless, for months in 2008, I struggled with translating this vague wish into a workable organizing principle. At one point, I even considered devising a *Frank(Kres)enstein*-type document, where I would have Leland's comments on the left side and my responses on the right, taped or glued together. Needless to say, this approach proved unwieldy and implausible as the scope of my piece expanded.

Then, I hit upon the idea of beginning each new major division of the essay with a quote from Leland's "Jukebox in My Head" series. This led to a type of organization that was more topical, more organic than simply proceeding chronologically through the course of John Stewart's career.

But this turned out to be a better abstraction than a workable *modus operandi*. Although I managed to produce, by the beginning of 2010, about 300 pages by proceeding in this manner, I found myself too often faced with the necessity to refer the reader to another section of the book where other aspects of the topic that I was currently discussing could be found. The overall narrative thus displayed some disjointedness and cried out for a tighter form of organization.

Other factors that slowed my progress were lack of an accurate and full John Stewart discography and lack of opportunity to devote long, protracted periods of time to working on this formidable task — those pesky things known as *life* and *earning a living* and *being a good husband, stepfather, and grandfather* kept getting in the way. (Yardwork, housework, and marketing efforts for ***proof positive*** turned into especially deep black holes for my "spare" time.)

But, by far the biggest obstacle to making progress was the fact that I did not own — and, in many cases, had not even even *heard* — a lot of the John Stewart *oeuvre* that comprised his 40-year solo career. (See "*Lapsus*," below.)

And so, I found myself regularly setting arbitrary deadlines for bringing the project to rough, first-draft stage and sending it to Leland for his input and comments (deadlines, I might add, all of which came and — just as regularly — went, unmet).

Thus, the beginning of the year 2008 was, for me, extremely stressful and frustrating — especially with the American economy in a freefall toward the bottom of the toilet.

Still I thought it was better to try to sludge my way through it all than to complain. But, even with that generally helpful mindset, there were some very challenging days — some that brought me right to the brink of abandoning this difficult project altogether.

But life still managed, nevertheless, to produce some good moments in the midst of it all, and one in particular saved the day for me and gave me the strength to push on:

The University of Kansas Jayhawks made it through the NCAA Tournament all the way to the Finals and beat their year-long nemesis Memphis in overtime, winning the national

championship in one of the best college-basketball games I've ever seen. The Jayhawks should probably have won the game outright, in regulation time, and not let Memphis back into the game the way they did. But that game-tying three-pointer in the final three seconds of regulation play by KU's Mario Chalmers will forever remain one of the most thrilling moments I have ever witnessed in college basketball.

Unbelievable. Sometimes, the unpredictable is the most exciting.

Americans have created many such darn-fool ditties out of non-Sequiturs and splintered images — songs which, like surrealist paintings, mirror the swift turbulence of modern life. They recall that mythical bird, the Kansas Jayhawk, “that flies backwards because he doesn't care where he's goin' but wants to know where he's been. When you hear the old Jayhawk squawlin', you know that if somethin' ain't happened, it's goin' to ... ”

— *The Folk Songs of North America
in the English Language*
by Alan Lomax
Page xxiii
(For publishing information, see the
final installment in this series)

But, after *that* brief-but-joyous respite, I still had to deal with the problem of getting my hands on all the John Stewart material that I did not own.

Over his 40 years of solo-career releases, that amounted to *a lot*.

So, of course, I appealed to Leland to help me. Late in 2008, I wrote to him with a list of recorded material I was lacking. I begged and groveled for whatever he could send me on CD or on audiocassette.

That turned out to be a big mistake, an enormous miscalculation.

Leland responded promptly — and in spades.

Sometimes, it's better to be more careful in what you beg for.

There is a scene in Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK* in which Kevin Costner, playing New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, sits down on a park bench for a strictly off-the-record meeting with a character played by Donald Sutherland — a character who is ex-military/Pentagon establishment/Black Ops specialist.

The guy just lays it all out for Garrison — his take on the enormous scope of this assassination conspiracy. He goes on for about five minutes straight, seemingly without taking a breath. During his monologue, the camera cuts away several times to Garrison/Costner, showing his reaction. He looks dumbfounded, dazed and confused, completely overwhelmed, crushed, taking it in fully for the first time what he has taken

on, what he has gotten himself into, realizing how deeply over his head he is in, the enormity of the can of worms he has opened. His body language reflects these realizations; he slumps, his jaw drops, he gazes blankly, stupidly, at the ground. He seems to age several years right before the viewer's eyes.

I experienced many of the same feelings after looking through the contents of Leland's package.

It contained more John Stewart material that was unfamiliar to me than I ever would even have *guessed* that one artist could produce over the course of a career.

And, remember: I'm talking here about John Stewart's *solo career only* — and *not* about anything that came before it (Johnny Stewart and The Furies; The Woodsmen; The Cumberland Three; The Kingston Trio).

My feeling this way was inevitable, and I had seen it coming many times in the year that I'd been working on my remembrance of John Stewart. My "resources" had been very, very scant, very few, and the time to actually sit down and write very, very limited. The pitifully few John Stewart songs I had on tape were all more than 20 years old, at least. So, all through that first year of writing, I had been bothered and plagued by the nagging realization that I was writing about a John Stewart with whom Leland and I had become familiar almost 40 years in the past. There was no way I could pretend to be speaking for the totality of his solo career; I could scarcely claim that I had a good grasp on even the first part of it.



Lapsus

Middle English *lapsen*, "to deviate from the normal," from *laps*, "lapse of time, sin" (from Old French, "lapse of time," from Latin *lapsus*, from past participle of *labi*, "to lapse") and from Latin *lapsare*, frequentative of *labi*, Latin *labi*, *laps-*, "to lapse"

— *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*
Third Edition
(For publishing information, see the final installment in this series)

If John Stewart were the Roman Catholic Church and I a Roman Catholic Christian, that's what I would be called.

A John Stewart *lapsus*.

In English, as an intransitive verb, “lapse” means generally “to fall from a previous level or standard, as of accomplishment, quality, or conduct.”

From medieval Christianity right on up to the present, a “lapsed” Catholic was one who is no longer active or practicing — a “backslider.”

After about the first 10 years of John Stewart’s solo career, I “lapsed.”

In early 1972, I sold the state-of-the-art turntable, amp/tuner, and speakers that I had purchased and brought back with me from Japan two years previous. I used the proceeds to finance a two-month trip to the UK, fulfilling a lifelong dream of mine. Then, in the mid-1970s, when I went off to do some missionary work, the nature of the gig was that you led a very mobile lifestyle. So, I wound up giving Leland my entire vinyl-record collection for safekeeping while I was gone — some 400+ 33 1/3-RPM LPs and a good number of 45-RPM singles.

I was mobile for about two years, returning to Kansas City to live life as a layperson in mid-1975. But, because I no longer had any way to play the records, I was in no hurry to get them back from Leland. Over the ensuing years, they just sort of melded into Leland’s extensive collection; I had no incentive to identify and extract all of them.

As post-Beatles Rock increased in popularity in the 1970s and produced an ever-increasing number of bands, I found it harder to keep up with it all than Leland did. Through his gig as a music critic for *The Kansas City Times*, he would regularly receive free promotional copies of new releases from record companies who were trying to make critics’ access to the product as painless as possible.

Thus, through Leland’s good graces, I could still keep abreast — to a respectable extent — with the current state of popular music. Because we were still good friends living in the same city, we got together quite often to listen to the best of what he had received. We often collaborated on the reviews of them that he would write for the newspaper and other periodicals.

Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as John Stewart himself found it harder and harder to land recording contracts with any major label, it became difficult for either of us to get our hands on new John Stewart material, although Leland had more success at this than I.

However, when, as I mentioned above, Leland moved away from his hometown Kansas City to Boulder, Colorado, in October 1983, even this, my secondhand route to Stewart’s releases, was blocked.

In short, after my early-1970s fascination with and dogged pursuit of this remarkable artist’s work, through this combination of events and forces beyond my control, I fell way behind the curve, way behind the arc, of John’s career.

I was a John Stewart *lapsus*.

But the exact extent to which I was “lapsed” was not evident until I opened Leland’s package in late 2008 and saw just how much I had missed over the years.

I was simply overwhelmed.

Not only had my John Stewart tribute project been difficult to make progress on with even my scant resources, but, now, I had *three times* the amount of resources at my disposal.

So, I was faced with a choice: I could get really depressed about the amount of time it would take to absorb, assimilate, and write about all the new material now in my hands — or, I could scale back the scope of the project to cover a time period that comprised a smaller, more manageable amount of material.

That decision was, of course, a no-brainer.

Since Stewart’s solo career had begun in 1968 with the release of *Signals Through the Glass*, and since he had died in 2008, that added up to exactly 40 years. I could divide those 40 years into quarters, thirds, or halves and call my essays covering each *Volume I*, *Volume II*, etc.

I chose to go with halves, a decision that, in my mind, was slightly less wimpy than the other choices. But it proved to be a decision that still would require an *incredible* amount of time and work to complete, to bring to as full and satisfying a conclusion as I wanted my essay to be.

Most John Stewart discographies that I researched showed a three-or-four-year gap between *Punch the Big Guy* (1987) and the following one, *Deep in the Neon* (1991).

So, I decided that, since most sources list “1967” as the Kingston Trio’s last year together (although the consensus on even that seemingly certain, mundane fact is far from universal), I would make *Volume I* of my essay stretch from that year to the 1987 release of *Punch the Big Guy*. That would allow *Volume II* to encompass the second 20 years of John Stewart’s solo career — 1988 to the year of his death, 2008.

Now I had to address the questions of how I wanted to proceed and where I would get the time to listen to and absorb and assimilate all the new up-to-1987 material Leland had sent me with which I was not familiar. I wound up spending about six months straight on this, utilizing every moment of my “free” time from the end of 2010 into the beginning of 2011 to listen to it all and get the chronology of the discography straight in my head. You might be surprised at all the incomplete — and, in many cases, contradictory — discographical information I found on the Internet.

Becoming a grandparent in 2007 also had an impact on the time available to me to work

on my John Stewart tribute project, as my wife and I became the primary daycare providers for little Michaela for her first six years — helping to enable her professional working parents to carry on with their careers.

In addition to that, *proof positive* realized a huge increase in business starting in the second half of 2011, further limiting the time available to me for creative writing such as this.

Adding up all these time constraints and mixing in the fact that I wasn't satisfied in the first place with the organizing principle I had utilized for the first four years of this project, I decided it was time for a change in that regard.

My first choice was to proceed strictly chronologically, considering each of Stewart's albums separately, in the order that they were released, from 1967 to 1987.

It seemed simple enough — except for one thing: I was more familiar with Stewart's output from the years between 1967 and 1980 than I was with that from the years 1980 to 1987. And I suspected that the quality of his work in those first 13 years was higher than that in the last seven.

Thus, proceeding in a strictly chronologically fashion would have made the book “front-heavy,” if you will — I would have more to say about the first 13 years than the second seven. I needed to strike some sort of compromise.

So, in January 2012, I changed the organization from topical/organic to one that centered on sharing my opinion of what I thought were the best 50 John Stewart songs from the first 20 years of his solo career. This enabled me to proceed in a manner that was still *loosely* true to the chronological verities of that period but did not demand that I hold *strictly* to them.

That is to say, in January 2012, after four years of work, I essentially *started over* on this project.

Don't get me wrong. I am utilizing all of the 300 pages of composition I had accomplished with my topical arrangement — I didn't simply erase all the files and start over *from scratch*. Rather, now, I'm trying to find appropriate places to put all the different ideas contained in those 300 pages, only arranged (for the most part) chronologically instead of topically, with an emphasis on the best of his first 20 years' work.

The one aspect of the original essay that I could not bring myself to change was beginning each new, major division with a quotation from Leland Rucker's “Jukebox in My Head” series of four Web log postings from January 2008. Where it was not feasible to *begin* a new section this way, I made sure to at least incorporate several “Jukebox” postings *within* its limits. Even if Leland never sees a word of this essay before I get it published, in my mind, it will always remain a piece co-written by the two of us.



A Word About Methodology

There will, no doubt, be times — many times — when the reader of this essay *will forget that he or she is reading an essay about John Stewart.*

While that outcome would not be overtly intentional on my part, it is an unavoidable result of the way forward that I chose with the writing style of this essay. It is not necessarily a bad thing. Do not despair over this fact if you reach this state.

I will introduce so many things that don't have "John Stewart" as the subject of the sentence or as their main focus that, at times, it will be hard to remember that this *is* an essay on the influences on, the work of, and the lasting contributions of *John Stewart* to the American Music scene and his legacy upon that tradition.

Leland and I had some exchanges over methodology early on in this project that made me focus on the question and give some thought as to how I should proceed.

I lit upon an acronym that summed it all up for me and set forth an approach with which I felt the most comfortable: "TETYCAI" — "*Throw Everything That You Can At It.*"

I decided to err on the side of indiscretion — not caution — when it comes to the question of "How much detail do I want to go into?" "*Deep background*" became my watchword instead of "*Brevity is best. Sum it up and pare down the detail.*"

Early on in my writing of this essay, I realized that doing so would reveal to the reader — and to me — as much about myself as it would about the main subject of this essay.

I struggled with the question of whether this might seem self-indulgent or if it would detract from the main focus — sharing the music of John Stewart with the rest of the world.

I struggled with this for about five minutes.

"Why *shoudn't* writing an essay on a subject so near and dear to my heart reveal a lot about myself?" I asked myself. "How is this undertaking any different from, say, making the decision to try to make your living by writing songs and playing music in front of live audiences?"

Or how is it any different, for that matter, from deciding to give up playing music in public to be closer — and a more significant part of — my family?

There is no difference, I finally decided. I should embrace fully the concept of becoming one with my subject matter and let the chips fall where they may. (See related thoughts in the *Introduction*, in the next installment of this series.)

In fact, if the end product of a creative endeavor does *not* reveal as much about its creator as it does about its subject, what good is it? Why *shouldn't* a tribute to a musician and songwriter who meant the world to you — and the reader — reveal as much about you as it does about the artist you're commemorating?

One part of my methodology, in particular, gave me cause for concern, and that is to quote *extensively* from primary sources — not only from primary sources that discuss Stewart's admitted *Influences*³ but also from John Stewart interviews in *Omaha Rainbow*⁴ and other publications.

My concern stemmed from my perception that extensive use of quotations is frowned upon by the general Literary Establishment — that it is considered *gauche* or otherwise reflective of lazy scholarship. In particular, I was spooked by the *Wikipedia* entry on Townes Van Zandt, another dead musician whom many consider to have had a seminal influence on Americana and Roots Music.⁵ The entry referred to two books that had been written about Van Zandt. One got high marks, and the other, low — precisely because of its “... *excessive use of quotation*”

A biography, titled *To Live's to Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*, by John Kruth, was released in 2007. It received mixed reviews, with *Publishers Weekly* lamenting that Kruth's “efforts are diminished by oddly alternating first- and third-person narratives, awkward transitions and text cluttered with excessive quotes... more insight into why — rather than countless tales of how — would have made this bio a more worthwhile read.”⁶

In April 2008, the University of North Texas Press published Robert Earl Hardy's biography on the songwriter, titled *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt*. The book featured the fruits of more than eight years of research, including interviews with Mickey Newbury, Jack Clement, Guy and Susanna Clark, Mickey White, Rex Bell, Dan Rowland, Richard Dobson, John Lomax III, Van Zandt's brother and sister, cousins, and all three of his ex-wives, and many others. It has been described by *Kirkus Reviews* as a “*poignant, clear and vivid portrait.*”⁷

³See later installments of this series.

⁴See later installments of this series.

⁵I am, of course, doing *anything but* trying to draw any comparisons between Van Zandt — a borderline psychotic, hopeless alcoholic, Robitussin-DM-swilling, self-destructive, wasted-life walking bag of chemicals — and John Stewart. “Pancho and Lefty” — although it *is* one great song — cannot improve Van Zandt's legacy any more than polishing a turd can improve its appearance or its usefulness.

⁶*Amazon.com*. Retrieved 2011-05-08. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Townes_Van_Zandt - cite_ref-85 Citing John Kruth. *To Live's to Fly: The Ballad of the Late, Great Townes Van Zandt*. Da Capo Press, 2007. ISBN 0-306-81533-2. Accessed August 31, 2012.

⁷*Amazon.com*. Retrieved 2011-05-08. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Townes_Van_Zandt#cite_ref-85 Citing *A Deeper Blue: The Life and Music of Townes Van Zandt* (North Texas Lives of Musician Series) (9781574412475): Robert Earl Hardy: Books. Accessed August 31, 2012. [*Emphases mine — FWK*]

In the end, I decided to take a chance and pursue that avenue anyway, in spite of its inherent dangers. No one, I thought, can speak more clearly about an artist's work than the artist himself. *Why not* take the chance that you might be adding to the readers' understanding and appreciation of John Stewart's work by letting them hear his *own* voice, his *own* phrasing, his *own* unique take on the circumstances that surrounded and comprised his career?

I have no delusions about the possibility that, lurking out there, somewhere, ready to pounce the minute this book gets published, might be a snarky *Publishers Weekly* reviewer who will denounce my methodology as being "... *quote heavy* ..." or some such.

Well, okay. This, then, is all I've got to say to Mister Snarky *Publishers Weekly* reviewer:

Then *you* find an artist who will make you want to make your way up to the front row and dance. *You* work through the complex psychology that allows you to commiserate with an artist who writes, sings, and plays his way into your heart. *You* carry his/her songs in your head and heart everywhere you go, across many decades and through a countless variety of situations. *You* write a 600-page essay on this thoroughly American singer-songwriter who meant so much to so many people.

This is my " ... clear and vivid portrait"

I hope there's at least *one* person out there who considers it to be also "...*poignant*"

NEXT:

INTRODUCTION: *On Becoming a Household Name* or "*One Amp Short*"