

INTRODUCTION

On Becoming a Household Name or “One Amp Short...”

“We chatted about how many times Stewart came close to becoming a household name. Dave Batti said, ‘I’ll never forget this young girl coming up after a show and says to John, ‘You know, you’re just about one amp short of being Don Henley.’

“We all laughed about that one.”

— Leland Rucker
“Jukebox in My Head”
Web Log Posting
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No. *Relatively* speaking, “John Stewart” never became a household name.

I learned, in a third-year Greek class in my junior year of college (1965-1966), taught by Dr. Eric Malte (we called him “Chocolate”; he died just a few years later) at Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that the English word “economy” derives from the Greek *οικος* (*oikos*) (“house”) and *νομος* (*nomos*) (“order”). I also remember several of my fellow students in that class expressing some surprise and doubt about this derivation. I guess they could not wrap their minds around — they could not *relate* to — the notion that the economy of the entire nation, the whole Gross National Product and all its multifaceted indicators, starts, ultimately, *at home*.

But this is exactly what former Speaker of the United States House of Representatives Thomas “Tip” O’Neill meant when he said that “All politics is local.” It’s all *relative*, he seemed to be saying. Everything starts at the grassroots level, and there is an unseen, unbroken chain of connection all the way up the political hierarchy. The President, the Congress, and the Ambassador to the United Nations serve basically the same function as the ward-heeler, the alderman, the precinct captain — they serve a constituency. If there *seem* to be differences among the different levels, they are only differences of *degree*, not of *kind*.

That’s the thing about ideas such as this: They *seem* highly *unlikely* to be true — but, just the same, they *are*. I guess that’s what the definition of *relativity* boils down to: Something *is* real, something *is* true — *despite* its appearance as unreal or untrue.

In the smaller universe of Leland’s and my creative beings, in our own personal musical economies, John Stewart *was* a household word. There is no more succinct summation of it than Leland’s — that, with the sole exception of Bob Dylan, no musical figure influenced our appreciation of music or our development as performers and songwriters more than John Stewart (see **Interlude #6: John Stewart’s Influence on Leland Rucker and Me**, in a subsequent installment in this series). This will be very difficult, I imagine, for most people reading Leland’s web log, “Jukebox in My Head,” to understand, because so few people seem ever to have heard of John Stewart or been exposed to his music and career.

How the two of us (Leland and I) ever got so lucky, I'll never know. Hell, even *asking this question* is tantamount to pondering about how the Earth, by virtue *only* of its position in the solar system (third closest to the Sun), is the *only* planet in the solar system able to sustain life. How were we all lucky enough to be born here?

No, my friends, when we walk this ground, when we traverse this territory, this whole conceptual framework, this paradigm, we tread in *terra incognita*. We are in the Land of Highly *Mystical* Relativity (it's difficult to put an accurately descriptive title to as elusive a concept as this).

But, much in the same spirit as Tip O'Neill's pithy summation, John Stewart once wrote a song that expounds this most ethereal of ideas. In his spoken introduction to a live performance of "California Bloodlines,"¹ Stewart says,

"This next song is not so much a song about California as it is about the 'phenomenon' [Stewart exaggerates the pronunciation of this word — "fee-NOM-uh-nun"] — that's a real Don King word, isn't it? — the 'phenomenon' that the person we marry usually lives within 10 miles of our house. Isn't it amazing, that, in the whole world, the one person we've been looking for lives so close to us? I think so. Think about it...."

This core sentiment makes up the heart of this extraordinary song, which can be said to have introduced John Stewart, the solo singer/songwriter, to the world.

"California Bloodlines"

*Had I been born in New York City
A New York City girl I'd know
Workin' in the concrete, not the sunlight
Livin' in the New York rain and snow*

¹I heard this live-performance version of "California Bloodlines" on a mix-tape that Leland compiled for me and for which detailed documentation was lacking. After four-plus years of trying to nail down the provenance of this quote — that is, *which* live performance it comes from — I have finally given up. The candidates are: 1) The *Neon Beach* sessions, at the Trancas Bar in Trancas Canyon, Malibu, California/September 8, 1990 (1990/Line Records/CD); 2) Whatever live performance is featured on *The Secret Tapes '86* (Homecoming Records/Audiocassette); 3) Somewhere else at some other time. Such are the vagaries of Internet research — even with finely tuned musical minds like Leland Rucker's and Peter O'Brien's (assiduous tune detectives, both) on the case. At any rate, the *exact* origin of this live-gig quote has become less important since I have discovered that Stewart expressed the same opinion — in almost the same, exact words — on several other occasions, all of which are very datable. See, for instance, the discussion surrounding "Strange Rivers," a song from Stewart's 1987 release *Punch the Big Guy* in **CHAPTER ELEVEN: John Stewart, Tom Robbins, and What I Learned While Writing This Essay: *The Secret of the Universe: Everything's Connected/Punch the Big Guy***, in a subsequent installment in this series.

*There's California bloodlines in my heart
There's a California woman in my song
There's California bloodlines in my heart
And a California heartbeat in my soul*

*And just to think that I may have never known you
If I had lived my life in Tennessee
But I really could have never let that happen
'Cause you and California are in me...*

*Oh, there's California Bloodlines in my heart
There's a California woman in my song
There's California bloodlines in my heart
And a California heartbeat in my soul*

*Have you wondered where we were before we were born?
Rollin' 'round the heavens like a song
I know it's then I saw the big Sierras
Saw a California sunrise comin' on*

*Oh, there's California Bloodlines in my heart
There's a California woman in my song
There's California bloodlines in my heart
And a California heartbeat in my soul*

*Oh, there's California Bloodlines in my heart
There's a California woman in my song
There's California bloodlines in my heart
And a California heartbeat in my soul*

Other well-known figures of our time have weighed in on the idea of *relativity*. Probably the most well known of them all was the physicist Albert Einstein. It would be an understatement to say that Einstein didn't care much for our traditional ideas about reality — for instance, that entities were *separate* from one another. To him, Time and Space were the same thing, simple *relative* variations on a theme. So, too, were an invisible, insubstantial thing such as energy and a visible, “substantial” thing such as matter one and the same to him — his famous $e = mc^2$. And Einstein would most likely have agreed with perhaps the foremost physicist since him, Stephen Hawking, in thinking that, if there *was* a God who caused the Big Bang to happen and to kickstart the cosmos on its way toward existence, that deity's name was probably *Gravity*.

Speaking of God, probably the most incisive comment other than Einstein's on the idea of *relativity* — even if no one acknowledged or even understood it as such — was uttered by Jesus Christ. There is a scene in the story of The Last Supper in which the gospel writer John quotes Jesus as telling his disciples (after Judas leaves the gathering) that He will soon be going to a place where they cannot follow Him. This puzzles the disciples,

and Peter, especially, quizzes Jesus on this. He says, “Lord, why cannot I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.”

Little did he know it, but Peter had really stepped in it, there. Jesus answers him, saying, “Will you lay down your life for me? Truly, truly, I say to you, the cock will not crow till you have denied me three times.”

And then, in the next two verses of that gospel, John 14:1-2, Jesus says, “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. *In my Father’s house, there are many mansions....*”

I wonder how many readers of The Bible have ever stopped to ponder the implications of that statement. How, exactly, does one fit “...*many mansions* (large houses)...” into one single “...*house*...”? The very idea defies semantics *and* physics — not to mention our conventional notions of reality.

Now this translation, of course, is from what used to be called the *Authorized Version* (*AV*) of the Bible. It was called the *King James Bible*, having been published in 1611 in England, during the reign of King James I (1566–1625). It was not the *first* English translation of the Scriptures, but it was the first to enjoy wide usage and a long-lasting place in the hearts of English-speaking Christians.

And, why not? The English language of that period was still very much like the Elizabethan English of *Shakespeare* (1564-1616). Semitic people in the King James Bible — from the highest, most learned teachers, most courtly kings and queens, and the most revered political figures, to the lowest, least-educated shepherds, servants, and lepers — all speak as if they had just stepped out of a production of The Bard’s *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Jesus himself spoke in *Aramaic*, a Semitic language used in southwest Asia between the 7th century BC and the 7th century AD, but the writings that were to eventually wind up in what we call “The Bible” were originally composed in *Hebrew* (Old Testament) and *Greek* (New Testament). And, as the papacy (all the popes throughout history have been, of course, “...*direct spiritual descendants*...” of the above-mentioned Jesus-denying cad, Saint Peter) and the Catholic Church appropriated Jesus as their own native Son, the language of the Scriptures throughout Rome-centered Europe became *Latin*.

And, in the feudal, “...short, nasty, and brutish...” lives of the European Catholic-Church-dominated lower classes of the Late Middle Ages and even into the early Renaissance and Reformation, who had the time or the wherewithal to study Hebrew, Greek, or Latin so that they could get their spiritual edification in the original languages?

Subsequent iterations of The Bible watered down and weakened the force of Jesus’ phrase “*In my Father’s house, there are many mansions...*” in John 14:1-2 to “*In my Father’s house, there are many **rooms**...*” (The *RSV* — The *Revised Standard Version*, first published in the United States in 1952) or “*There are many **homes up there where***

my Father lives...” (*The Living Bible-Paraphrased*, first published in 1962). The former simply negates the *Mystical Relativity* of the King James phrase (What’s so remarkable about a house having many “rooms”?), and the latter reduces Heaven, the Dwelling-Place of Divinity, The Acreage of the Almighty, to nothing more than the Lord’s Leavittown, a supernal subdivision tract in the sky.

But if Jesus’ statement is read in the Elizabethan-vestigial/Shakespearian/King James/Authorized Version mode, as above, you can practically hear Him tacking on a sly addition at the end, saying — probably accompanied by a wink and a nudge — “*In my Father’s house, there are many mansions ... if thou catchest my drifte*”

And, if the King James Version of The Bible had been written on the model of an illustrated dictionary or encyclopedia, one might expect to see a picture of John Stewart’s heart and soul next to Jesus’ remarkable, *impossible* statement that “... *In my Father’s house, there are many mansions.*” (For further examples of Stewart’s connection to the Mysticism tradition, see **INTERLUDE #7: *The Love and the Sorrow at the Heart of Things: John Stewart’s Relationship to the Mysticism Tradition***, in a subsequent installment in this series.)

In this essay, I will, among other things: 1) Discuss the central themes in John Stewart’s songwriting; 2) Place John Stewart’s body of work in a context of the general literary and cultural *Zeitgeist* of his era; 3) Reveal John Stewart’s musical and literary *Influences*; 4) Show that John Stewart was a true multi-media artist — not only that he was a painter as well as a musician but that he understood that all artistic, creative, and spiritual disciplines were related. He understood that the process of integrating these many disciplines makes up the phenomenon we call “creativity.” 5) Illustrate that John Stewart believed that *everything in life was connected*. 6) Illustrate the enormous struggle that John endured over the question of “being famous” vs. “being talented and respected” — the “household name” vs. cult-figure-only status that he achieved. 7) Offer my opinion as to which 50 songs were John Stewart’s best work during the period 1967 to 1987.

Central Themes in the Songwriting of John Stewart: A Summary

For all the dozens of albums that John Stewart produced and the hundreds of songs he wrote and recorded, one can look at about 50 songs from these first 20 years of his solo career to capture the essence of his thinking and his artistic approach and to summarize his main themes.

Without minimizing or reducing, without compartmentalizing the singularly stellar career that John Stewart achieved and the astounding artistry that he breathed, I can briefly summarize his main themes, which I have crystallized into three:

A. Optimism, positivity, perseverance, and empathy are virtues in and of themselves; they are their own rewards and should be pursued, promoted, and promulgated at all costs. Only the *authentic life* — one in which your thoughts, beliefs, and actions come from deep within yourself, after much examination — is worth living.

B. A connection to the land, the earth, its people, nature, and all its elements is the basis for an authentic life; without it, all creativity just scratches the surface and is empty of any meaningful content. In the universe of John Stewart, Private Time is important — time for plumbing your innermost depths, for listening to the small, still voice within you. Nature, the great outdoors, is probably the most conducive atmosphere if you're trying to get in touch with yourself — who you are, where you came from, and what's important for you to be. A secluded country road is the place to be for exploring your own, private self, for being alone with your thoughts. See especially a subsequent installment in this series, **CHAPTER FIVE: *The Lonesome Picker Sings From His Heart — and Into Mine***, especially the discussion surrounding “A Little Road and a Stone to Roll” from *The Lonesome Picker Rides Again* (November 1971/Warner Bros. Records)

C. Childhood, its innocence and unique worldview, and how you felt during that period of your life should never be forgotten; everything in your power should be done to preserve those feelings. This kind of subject matter, represented in Leland's songs “Childehood Days” and “*Carpe Diem*” and in my own “Merry-Go-Round,” was no doubt made admissible by John Stewart songs like “The Pirates of Stone County Road” and others. Stewart opened the door for us. He served as a role model for the notion that it was okay to write songs based on your own life — especially your childhood. A strong connection to family will hold you in good stead later in your life and will inform your adult value systems. See especially the discussion surrounding “The Pirates of Stone County Road” in two subsequent installments in this series, **CHAPTER THREE: *California Dreadlines*** and **INTERLUDE #1: “Just Imagine ... ” and “On the Importance of Influences.”**

John Stewart's Influences and the General Context in Which He Worked

As I dug deeper and deeper into the research for this essay, it became apparent to me that, when it came to his own influences and kindred-spirit sources upon which to draw to find inspiration for his themes, John Stewart turned to some of the most respected and revered literary figures this country (or any other) has ever produced. Whether this inspiration was *direct* (he was familiar with the sources and consciously employed them) or *indirect* (he picked up the sources' methods and innovations by osmosis and himself became a part of those traditions) is a question that I may never resolve — but it is one that lies at the very heart of a web-of-connectedness notion that I tackle later in this essay.

As a result, the reader will find me spending a good deal of energy devoted to the importance of *Influences* in general — as an integral component of the creative process.

For John Stewart's affinity with these main themes — these great, soaring, eternal virtues — see especially the parts in subsequent installments in this series that synopsise two of Stewart's admitted *Influences*, the American poets Edgar Lee Masters and John Neihardt and the American prose novelist John Updike.

For Edgar Lee Masters: See A) **CHAPTER TWO: *False Start/Mixed Signals: Signals***

Through the Glass and the Edgar Lee Masters Connection; B) INTERLUDE #1: “Just Imagine” and “On the Importance of Influences,” especially the discussion surrounding **“Mother Country/The Old Campaigner”**: John Stewart and Edgar Lee Masters: **Mining Ancient Quarries, Listening to the Dead;** and **CHAPTER FOUR: Willard,** especially the discussion surrounding **“Oldest Living Son”**: John Stewart’s ***Influences Intersect: The Wyeths Meet Edgar Lee Masters.***

For John Neihardt: See **INTERLUDE # 4: “Stark Saga Stuff” — John Stewart, John Neihardt, Wild, Wild Westport, and ... Kim Novak,** especially the discussion surrounding the songs “Spirit,” “Dark Prairie,” and “Cody.”

For John Updike, see **INTERLUDE #5: John Stewart, John Updike, and Little Ludi** and the discussion surrounding the song “Signals to Ludi.”

In this essay, I will endeavor to place John Stewart’s *oeuvre* in a context — one which proceeded from both the American Folk Music tradition and the literary milieu in the United States of the first half of the 20th century. I will illustrate the commonalities that he shared with some well-known American writers who were his forebears and contemporaries, especially their *emphasis on place, their empathy and identification with their subject matter and characters, and their attention to the detail of the natural world.* (Uncannily, these are precisely the most important elements in another of John Stewart’s greatest [non-literary] *Influences*, the three generations of the painting Wyeth family. See #5, below.) In addition to Edgar Lee Masters and John Neihardt, mentioned above, I will place special emphasis on Stewart’s close kinship with the writing of L. Frank Baum.

I will also offer up my opinion on the *sub-rosa* relationship that I perceive the work of John Stewart to have had to two towering figures of *British* literature *before* the 20th century — William Blake and William Butler Yeats. The reader will be left to explore this further, but, to me, this hypothesis is no more difficult to accept than others about the fact that *seemingly disparate entities are actually closely related.*

For example, one program on *The History Channel* says that it was more than irresponsible, shortsighted agricultural practices on the part of human beings that led to the creation of the Dust Bowl phenomenon in the Plains states of North America in the 1930s — the period about which Woody Guthrie would sing in protest, against which writers such as John Steinbeck would rail, and into which John Stewart would be born. *The History Channel* says that *anomalous behavior changes in the Jet Stream and in the conditions which prevail in the great ocean currents in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans* were major contributors to the establishment of conditions for drought and erosion in the middle of the enormous land mass that is the continental United States. Another program, the series called “How the Earth Was Formed,” a recurring series on *The History Channel*, says that geologists have proven that the Catskills, the mountain range in southeastern New York state, was originally formed *in Scotland.*

Get my drift?

John Stewart as Multi-media Artist

3. I hope also to bring to light the perhaps little-known fact about John Stewart that he was also a visual artist. In his youth, *drawing and painting* were his passions — before music. But John’s acute artistic sensibilities enabled him to transfer the values and spirit of one discipline to the other. And this made John Stewart unique as a kind of multimedia artist, before a time that that concept was easily or widely understood. We will trace the connection that John had to one of America’s greatest creative familial dynasties — the three generations of painters represented by N. C. Wyeth, his son Andrew Wyeth, and Andrew’s son Jamie Wyeth. John had not only a personal, palpable connection to them but also shared in their artistic ethos — even if John’s own paintings and drawings did not look like the Wyeths’. The same artistic vision that informed their work — interestingly identical to that which was present in the prose and poetry of many American writers during this time — can be found in John Stewart’s songwriting.

I was *so* struck by the similarities in the artistic milieu — across *all* artistic disciplines — in the United States in the first half of the 20th century that it became easy for me to say that John Stewart was to American music as the Wyeths were to painting; that John Stewart was to American music as Tennessee Williams was to the American theatre; that John Stewart was to American music as Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, Ambrose Bierce, Vachel Lindsay, and others were to American poetry; and that John Stewart was to American music as William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Thornton Wilder, and John Updike were to American prose.

The reader will encounter my arguments for these positions throughout this essay. They can be summarized and previewed here with the following short list of assertions:

1. Tennessee Williams brought elements from poetry, painting, and music into playwriting — as well as technical innovations.
2. The Wyeths brought elements from poetry and emotion into painting — as well as stylistic innovations.
3. William Faulkner brought elements from music and poetry into the narrative novel — as well as psychological innovations.
4. Robert Frost and Edgar Lee Masters brought elements from psychology (emotional content) and music into poetry — as well as formal innovations.
5. John Stewart brought elements from playwriting, poetry, and the narrative novel into music — as well as innovations in form and style.

John Stewart’s 50 Best Songs from 1967 to 1987

For me, the 50 most important songs for a thorough appreciation of the work of John Stewart for the period 1967 to 1987 — the years which comprise this *Volume I* of

Johnny, They Hardly Knew Ye — are:²

From *Signals Through the Glass* (September 1968/Capitol Records):

1. "Mister Lincoln's Train"
2. "Mucky Truckee River"
3. "Signals to Ludi"
4. "Cody"
5. "Nebraska Widow"
6. "Dark Prairie"
7. "Draft Age"

From *California Bloodlines* (May 1969/Capitol Records):

8. "California Bloodlines"
9. "The Pirates of Stone County Road"
10. "Mother Country/The Old Campaigner"
11. "She Believes in Me"
12. "Missouri Birds"
13. "Never Goin' Back (To Nashville Anymore)"

From *Willard*/July 1970/Capitol Records:

14. "Oldest Living Son"
15. "All-American Girl"
16. "Back in Pomona"
17. "Friend of Jesus"

From *The Lonesome Picker Rides Again*/November 1971/Warner Brother Records:

18. "Crazy"
19. "A Little Road and a Stone to Roll"
20. "Daydream Believer"
21. "Wild Horse Road"/"All the Brave Horses"

From *Sunstorm*/April 1972/Warner Brothers Records:

22. "Kansas Rain"
23. "Cheyenne"

From *Cannons in the Rain*/March 1973/RCA Records:

²The songs are listed here in strict chronological order by their release date. In the text of this essay, they will appear in a slightly different order.

24. "All-Time Woman"
25. "(Takin' My) Road Away"
26. "Armstrong"
27. "Spirit"
28. "Lady and the Outlaw"

From *The Phoenix Concerts*/March 1974/RCA Records:

29. "(You Can't Go Back to) Kansas"
30. "Wheatfield Lady"
31. "Runaway Fool of Love"

From *Wingless Angels* /April 1975/RCA Records:

32. "Hung on the Heart (of a Man Back Home)"
33. "Rose Water"
34. Medley: "Wingless Angels"/"Survivors II"
35. "Summer Child"
36. "Josie"

From *Fire in the Wind* /1977/RSO Records:

37. "The Last Hurrah"

From *Bombs Away, Dream Babies!*/May 1979/RSO Records:

38. "Lost Her in the Sun"

From *Revenge of the Budgie* (With Nick Reynolds)/November 1983/Takoma Records:

39. "Dreamers on the Rise"

From *The Last Campaign* /1985/Homecoming Records/Delta Distribution:

40. "The Last Campaign"

From *The Secret Tapes '86* (Originally released on Homecoming Records/Audiocassette; 2002 re-release was on the Neon Dreams label in CD format):

41. "Unchained Beast"
42. "Seven Times the Wind"
43. "Ticket to the Stars"
44. "The River"

45. "Price of the Fire"
46. "Justiceville"

From *Punch the Big Guy*/1987/The Ship/Cypress Records:

47. "Runaway Train"
48. "Botswana"
49. "Strange Rivers"

50: A four-way tie among "All-American Girl," "Freeway Pleasure," "Quarter Moon on the Golden Gate" and "Arkansas Breakout."

Of all these, as you will see, there are three songs — "Mother Country/The Old Campaigner," "The Pirates of Stone County Road," and "Oldest Living Son" — that play an extraordinarily special part in understanding John Stewart's early work and in illuminating his special gifts as a compellingly original American musical artist.

Doctor Johnson's Syllabus

In my sophomore year of college at Concordia College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1964-1965, I had a theology course that was the first real, hardcore, nuts-and-bolts-of-it-all course of study in Old and New Testament principles — and the particular Lutheran spin on them — that was ever required of me. It was rigorous. Believe me, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does not take these things lightly.

Our professor for the course was a Dr. Johnson. Although I cannot remember his first name with certainty, it may have been "John." To us, his students, it was, for all practical purposes, simply "Doctor." He was not a small, squirrely, effeminate man like many of the other men who wind up preaching or teaching in Lutheran churches or institutions of higher learning. He was tall — about six feet three inches or taller — handsome, solidly built, and with a shock of sandy-blond hair that he combed straight back. He cut a striking figure, and he spoke with a strong, stentorian, authoritative voice. He was a very learned man in theology, philosophy, and the classical humanities. He was, most of my classmates concurred, "...one of the most *dignified* men..." they had ever encountered. My roommate in Huston Dormitory that year, David Fechner, used to say that he "could not imagine Dr. Johnson taking a shit. He is just *too dignified*...." Everyone admired him.

Dr. Johnson passed out a syllabus at the beginning of the semester that outlined what the course would entail and what it would, in general, be like. It stressed that "...foreign terms would be kept to a minimum...."

Like the Beatles song that was popular that semester, we "...*should have known better*...." When a professor has to put that in the syllabus, it usually means just the opposite, and this was no exception. Dr. Johnson's lectures and the collateral reading prescribed for the course *dripped* with Latin, Greek, and German terms, phrases, and concepts (in our system, we weren't exposed to Hebrew until our junior year —

otherwise, there would have been lots of Hebrew in there, too).

In *Johnny, They Hardly Knew Ye... Volume I*, I want to emphasize to the reader the necessity of getting your hands on the musical recordings being discussed and to listen repeatedly to them, because I want, at all costs, to avoid the “English Major Syndrome.”

Jon Landau was the Rock-music critic who, in the early 1970s, uttered the now-famous remark that he had “... *seen the future of Rock 'n' Roll, and its name is Bruce Springsteen....*” (Landau went on to be Springsteen’s greatest cheerleader and champion, eventually becoming The Boss’s manager.) Landau, upon reading the first review of the LP that Paul Simon released in October 1975, *Still Crazy After All These Years*, remarked that he was more convinced than ever that Pop Music criticism was “...*being taken over by English majors...*” He noted that the review of that LP had failed to mention — even once — that the collection of songs was *piano*-based, a notable, marked departure from the acoustic-guitar base from which Simon had worked for many, many years. (Strangely, the song that got the most airplay, “Slip Slidin’ Away,” wasn’t even on the LP but was released as a separate single and on the 2004 remaster.)

That being said, be warned that, when I say I want to avoid this syndrome, it’s a little like Dr. Johnson’s preview of his theology course. I want *Johnny... Volume I* to be more than an academic study of the song lyrics of John Stewart. I wouldn’t want you to miss the excitement of the music that wraps itself around the lyrics.

It is true that John Stewart emerged from a Folk Music tradition, in which, arguably, words and stories play a more dominant role than the musical part of the songs. It is equally as true that, in this essay, I will probably often quote lyrics at length from the above-listed John Stewart songs and others. But John Stewart’s facility with words and storytelling inherent in his lyrics — as important and riveting as it is, and as attractive and magnetically powerful his subject matter and themes might be — is, when all is said and done, only half of the equation of what it is that makes John Stewart such a memorable artist.

His lyrics tell you what John Stewart’s thoughts were and where his heart lay, but the music reveals his artistic soul. *You have to listen to the songs* to get a full understanding of why Leland and I reacted to John Stewart the way we did. The music is as compelling, exciting, and as masterfully conceived and flawlessly executed as the lyrics are perceptive.

It is also true that, at the outset of the 1970s, when Leland Rucker and I first encountered John Stewart as an incipient solo-career artist, away from The Kingston Trio, we were well-educated young men who were already beginning to show a penchant for expressing themselves through writing. But we were more, also. We were fans and music enthusiasts/obsessives — but we were also just beginning to be *musicians* ourselves — just *beginning* to improve on guitar and just *beginning* to compose our own songs and work on singing harmonies, just *beginning* to seek out opportunities to perform in public. John Stewart’s song lyrics and musicianship both hit us like a ton of bricks.

But, at the same time, it's not like I'm *ashamed* of Stewart's literary abilities or my capacity for appreciating them. Therefore, you will encounter *much* literary criticism and analysis in this essay, much comparison of John Stewart's songwriting abilities to some giants in English and American literature. It's simply one more measure of the breadth, width, depth, and scope of this great American original artist with whom Leland and I had the privilege of becoming acquainted and by whom we were greatly influenced.

Thus, I want to *encourage* the reader to actually *read* all the quotations from other critics and from the primary sources in the literature. Don't just let your eyes glaze over and allow them to skip down to the next paragraph of original composition. These quotations are as integral a part of this essay as any of the music or lyrics are. So, *please*: Read it all.

(For the record, academically speaking, I was *not* an "English Major." English [composition and literature] was my *minor*. My BA reflected a double major — classical languages and theology.)

So, with that *caveat*, as you read this, try to listen to the songs that are being discussed. If you don't, you will be doing yourself — and this great artist to whom we are saying "farewell" here — a great disservice.

NEXT:

PRELUDE: FLASHBACK AND FORESHADOW:

FOLK MUSIC, WOODY GUTHRIE, AND BOB DYLAN — A CONTEXTUAL PREVIEW OF JOHN STEWART'S SOLO CAREER AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO AMERICAN MUSICAL HISTORY