

# PAUL SIMON

## The Evolution Of An Artist

4/97

After the breakup of Simon & Garfunkel in 1970, Paul Simon went to Clive Davis, then president of Columbia Records and told him he was going to make a solo album. According to Simon, Clive's advice was not to do it. He said it'd be a big mistake, that Paul Simon solo would never be as big as Simon & Garfunkel. But go solo he did, with a mission to make simpler, funkier records. Simpler? Not necessarily. Funkier? Absolutely!

In his first post S&G effort, Paul Simon began his journey out on a creative limb and into the world music realm. For *Paul Simon*, he actually traveled to Jamaica to record "Mother And Child Reunion" as a reggae song with members of Toots & The Maytals. The same album contained the Latin-flavored "Me And Julio Down By The Schoolyard," songs that both became hits, topping out at #4 and #22 on *Billboard's* Hot 100 Singles chart, respectively. And that was just the beginning of Simon's love affair with the world's musical textures that would bring him to *Graceland*, via South Africa, and beyond.

Until today (and we'll get there in a moment), Simon's last studio effort was 1990's *The Rhythm Of The Saints*, which incorporated West African, Brazilian and even Zydeco music and musicians. So, it shouldn't surprise anyone that his first new project in seven years has a distinct Puerto Rican and Caribbean flair.

What might surprise you, though, is the form this work takes—it's a Broadway musical—and its unlikely subject matter.

It must have been about a year and a half ago when I first heard about *The Capeman*. Paul Simon was looking for doo-wop singers to audition for his first-ever shot at the Big White Way. "Cool," I thought, "Paul Simon's doing a lighthearted musical about a superhero, set in the 50s." Wrong! Not only wrong, but my hunch couldn't have been any further from the truth.

by nicole sandler



*The Capeman* is based on a true story, one that unfolded in New York's daily papers in August of 1959, the summer following Paul Simon's high school graduation. As *West Side Story*, a musical set in the Hell's Kitchen section of Manhattan (just blocks away from Broadway's theaters), was enjoying great success telling the tale of gang wars between Puerto Ricans and the whites fighting for turf and women, a real life drama played itself out as New York City followed the story in horror. A teenaged Simon, along with the rest of the city, read the daily papers as they told of the manhunt for the leader of the Hell's Kitchen gang The Vampires who, while waiting for members of a rival gang to show for a rumble, turned his attention on two innocent teens and stabbed them to death.

The murderer was caught four days later: 16-year-old Salvador Agron, dubbed "The Capeman" for the black satin cape he wore as he wielded his seven-inch, silver-handled knife. Agron became the youngest person ever sentenced to death in New York and, even then, he showed no remorse—telling the court, "I don't care if I burn. My mother could watch me."

One person who did care, apparently, was Eleanor Roosevelt. It seems the Puerto Rican-born Agron was a near illiterate who could barely even spell his name, and had been living on the streets at the time of the murders. Moved by his story, the first lady took up his cause and, after two years on death row, just eight days before he was set to die in the electric chair, his sentence was commuted to life by then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller.

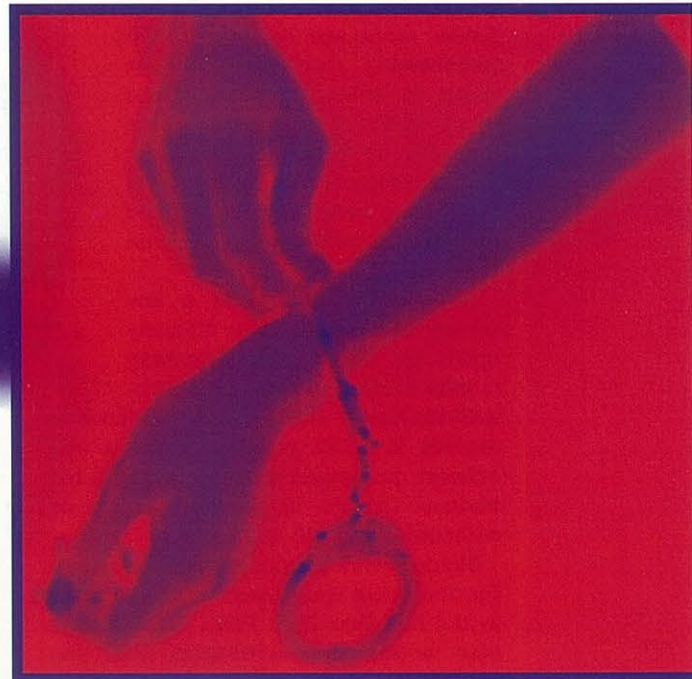
During his 20 years in jail, Agron educated himself, became something of a political activist...and a poet. The story gets stranger, still. Shortly before his parole hearing, Agron escaped, apparently to join a woman in Arizona with whom—via letters—he had fallen in love. Even after he was captured and returned to prison, his reform was acknowledged, and the case was made that the conditions of his incarceration were too harsh, and Agron was ultimately released soon after.

Agron moved to the Bronx where he lived as a poet, writer and youth counselor until his death, seven years later, of pneumonia.

It's an odd premise for a Broadway musical, even if *The Capeman's* producers stress that Salvador Agron's redemption, and not his crime, is the central theme of the show. Still, you've got to wonder why this story struck such a chord with Paul Simon that 38 years later he's bringing it back to life...only blocks from where the killings took place. I had hoped to pose that very question to the 12-time Grammy winner but, unfortunately, the opportunity never presented itself. *The Capeman* is set to open at The

Marquis Theatre on Broadway on January 8, 1998, with previews beginning December 1, so it's no wonder that Simon is somewhat busy these days.

Although an original cast recording of *The Capeman* will be available sometime in 1998, Warner Bros. Records will release *Songs From The Capeman* on November 18—a studio album which will feature Paul Simon on guitar and vocals, plus lead cast members Ruben Blades (who plays the adult Agron), Marc



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Anthony and Ednita Nazario, with the arrangements more Simon-styled than Broadway-type.

A trip to New York and tickets to the show might make for a nice fall promotion, but don't expect to see Paul Simon onstage. Instead, he'll be satisfied to see his name in *Playbill*, as the credits will read: *Book by Derek Walcott; Music by Paul Simon; Lyrics by Paul Simon and Derek Walcott.*

If the name Derek Walcott doesn't ring any bells, you might want to brush up on your poetry; he's a Nobel Prize-winning poet from St. Lucia. Even though Simon began working on *The Capeman* in 1990, Walcott wasn't yet involved. In a 1990 *Songtalk* interview, shortly after the release of *The Rhythm Of The Saints*, Simon was asked who had influenced him lyrically, and he cited poets Wallace Stevens, Seamus Heaney and Walcott. "In fact, I just met Derek Walcott which was very...very pleasant for me," said Paul Simon at the time. His work had a lot to do with

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this album because he writes a lot about that part of the world and the Caribbean. I usually carry his stuff with me."

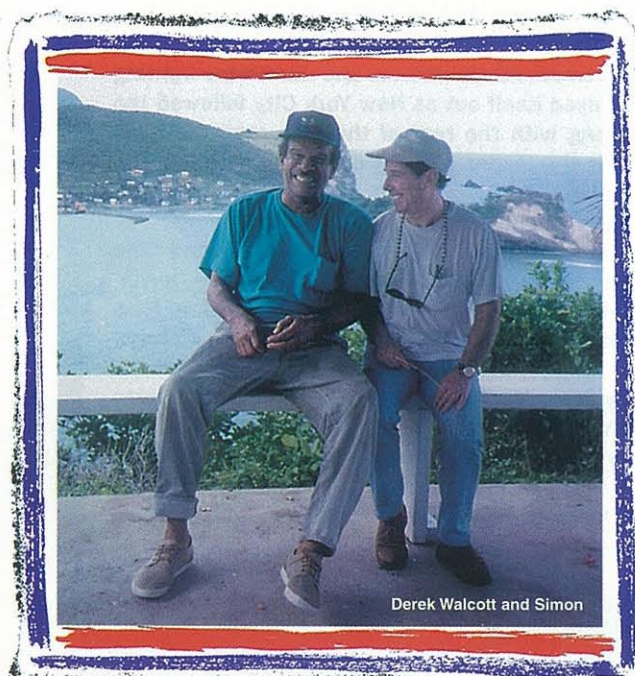
In that same interview, writer Paul Zollo asked about a musical that Simon was rumored to have been working on. He said that he was already about a year and a half into it, but had put it aside to do *The Rhythm Of The Saints*. Seven years ago he said of the forthcoming musical, "I'm not going to write the book. It's a story that's true so I'm doing research on it. I've done a few collaborations with songwriters, but I'm not sure yet where I'll end up." Where he's ending up is on Broadway.

Previews begin in just a few weeks, and *The Capeman* officially opens five weeks later. Broadway is new territory for the man who, with his former partner, broke all kinds of records in 1981 when they did a free concert, just about a mile away from the Marquis Theatre, in Central Park, for an estimated 500,000 fans.

Simon's only previous major foray into the theatrical world was his starring role in the film *One Trick Pony*, for which he also wrote the screenplay and the soundtrack. The film flopped and, even though it did spawn the #6 *Billboard* hit "Late In The Evening," its failure hit Simon hard. In a 1984 *Playboy* interview, he told writer Tony Schwartz, "The movie came out to mixed reviews—and the soundtrack album didn't do nearly as well as I'd hoped. It was a period of great depression for me."

He went on to recount how he developed writer's block when, obviously, he has since overcome. During that time when, as he put it, he was still "feeling a little shaky about *One Trick Pony*," he was approached about the Central Park concert, and Simon decided to ask Art Garfunkel to join him. They had split up 11 years earlier and, according to Simon, things had long been strained between the duo.

Simon began singing in fourth grade, after noticing all the attention his classmate, Artie—"the most famous singer in the neighborhood" (Forest Hills, Queens)—was getting, and decided he wanted some of that action, too. They first recorded together as a duo when they were all of 14, under the Tom And Jerry moniker (Paul was Jerry), and even went on *American Bandstand*. Although Tom And Jerry had a Top 10 hit in New York City with "Hey, Schoolgirl," nothing really came of it. Simon began working for music publishers, earning \$25 for studio sessions singing demos, where he learned how to be a recording artist.



Derek Walcott and Simon

If the name  
Derek Walcott  
doesn't ring  
any bells,  
you might  
want to  
brush up on  
your poetry;  
he's a Nobel  
Prize-winning  
poet from St.  
Lucia.

Soon thereafter, Simon actually recorded his first solo album, at the ripe old age of 15—something that he says upset Garfunkel terribly, and remained a bone of contention throughout their career together. According to Simon, Garfunkel saw it as "something of a

betrayal" and never let it drop. Simon went to Europe, but soon returned home to attend Brooklyn Law school, from which he flunked out. He ran into Garfunkel one day, they rekindled their friendship, and started singing together again. They wound up recording the first Simon & Garfunkel album, *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*... and Simon went back to England.

While he was gone, CBS Records decided to "electrify" the acoustic "Sounds Of Silence," and released it as a single. Simon was in Denmark, picked up a copy of *Cash Box* and saw that the song was #59 with a bullet. He flew home, and three weeks later, "The Sounds Of Silence" was #1.

He told *Playboy* about the exact moment he got the news: "Artie and I were sitting there in my car, parked on a street in Queens, and the announcer said, 'Number one, Simon & Garfunkel.' And Artie said to me, 'That Simon & Garfunkel, they must be having a great time.' Because there we were on a street corner in Queens, smoking a joint. We didn't know what to do with ourselves."

But, according to Simon, the friendship was strained ever since he recorded that first solo album, and there was resentment from Garfunkel because Simon wrote all the songs; Simon seemed to resent the fact that Art was tall, good-looking, and was finding success acting in films like *Catch-22* and *Carnal Knowledge*. In fact, it was during the recording of *Bridge Over Troubled Water* that the inevitable end of Simon & Garfunkel was brewing. Simon admits that the song "So Long, Frank Lloyd Wright" was a direct good-bye to Art Garfunkel, who had once studied architecture. It was also during that recording process that Art had signed on to do *Carnal Knowledge*, though he waited until the album was finished to inform his partner. Following the completion of the album, they did one final concert at the Forest Hills tennis stadium, parted ways, and didn't see each other again until many years later.

Following the success of the Central Park concert 11 years later, the two decided to tour together. But the reunion was strained from the very first rehearsals, since Garfunkel didn't want to play with Simon's band—preferring to play with just Simon's acoustic guitar accompanying their voices—while Simon had lots of his own songs that required a full band (he won that battle). Simon also acknowledges that he had some problems with the idea of the tour: he just wasn't as big a fan of Simon & Garfunkel as the rest of the world was.

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And he and Garfunkel just weren't getting along. "There's something quite powerful between us," as he told *Playboy* in 1984. "This is a friendship that is now 30 years old. And the feeling of understanding and love parallels the feeling of abuse. I think Artie's a very powerful and autonomous person until he comes into contact with me on a professional level. Then he loses a great degree of power. And it makes him very angry—at me. Also, we're in the unfortunate position of being compared all the time...add to that the fact that he felt, even more than I did, the frustration of having people ask, 'Did you write the words or the music?' I used to feel, 'Oh Christ.' But at least I could say, 'I wrote both.' Arthur had to say, 'I wrote neither.' And that's a drag if people keep asking you. Because there's a sense of competition between us that dates from the beginnings of our friendship, at 12."

Unfortunately, it only seems to have escalated in the years since that interview. In a September, 1997, interview in *Grammy* magazine, Simon said of Garfunkel, "I don't feel very much affection toward him these days, I must say. But I used to, of course, I loved Artie—he was one of my best friends, but the friendship is probably irreparably strained now. I certainly had great times with him when we were young, I really liked him. And I had a lot of affection for him then. I don't feel that way now." Also unfortunately, the interviewer didn't follow up, so that's all we know about that situation. Which just makes the idea of the brand-new Simon & Garfunkel box set and the fact that it's called *Old Friends* that much more bittersweet.

Except for the few scattered reunions, as a duo Simon & Garfunkel really only existed from 1965 to 1970. But they recorded a wealth of material, and the three discs that make up *Old Friends* include 15 previously unreleased tracks, including early demos, outtakes and live performances.

Fans who own all the Simon & Garfunkel albums are in for a special treat in terms of fidelity. The master tapes for the first three albums, *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.*, *Sounds Of Silence* and *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary And Thyme* have long been missing, and the quality on all pressings in recent years have been lacking. The original multi-track master tapes (the raw tape of each musician playing their parts), from which the 2-track masters are made, were found—allowing, essentially, new 2-track masters to be made, the mixes identical to the originals, but with far superior sound quality than anything that's been heard on those pressings.

Fans, like me, would like to think that "Old Friends" might refer to Simon & Garfunkel in days gone by. But, when asked by *Playboy* if "Old Friends" referred to anyone in particular, Paul Simon responded, "No. It came to be a good song for a Simon & Garfunkel reunion show...and journalists always began their articles by quoting it. But at the time, I was just writing about the aging cycle, about old friends." 📻

Editors Note: I've known Nicole Sandler over the years, but it wasn't until she joined *The Album Network* for a while did I realize what a natural writer she is. Before she left the building, I made sure she would be writing for *totallyadult*. This wonderful piece on Paul Simon is just one, of what I hope, will be many features she'll do for us.

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