

Interview With Ryan Walsh, Musician and Author of *Astral Weeks: A Secret of 1968*

Alexandra Evans (AE): Provide me with a little bit of background about yourself: Where you grew up, at what age music first started speaking to you.

Ryan Walsh (RW): I grew up in Dedham, Massachusetts, which is the first suburb south of Boston. My first memories of music... I have two older brothers and they were always playing music, and it was good music, too. They kind of indoctrinated me, so it was like The Clash, Springsteen, that kind of thing. They were pretty eclectic, too, so that was an influence. In fact, the first time I ever performed music, I went to this summer camp and they had a lip sync contest, or air band contest. I played tennis racket guitar in my brothers' lip sync band and we did "Clamp Down" by The Clash. Later, I covered that song for real with my band.

AE: That's hilarious! If you have video footage of that, I think you should definitely release it.

RW: I would love it, I mean, it doesn't exist though. But yeah, so I really have always loved music, I was into it from early on. I didn't have much inclination that I could create it for a while. No one tells you "anyone can write a song," you have to search for that message. It wasn't until the end of high school that I got a guitar from a teacher, or a girlfriend, actually. And then I slowly just started trying to make up my own songs.

AE: That was actually my next question--when did you pick up your first instrument? So, high school?

RW: Yeah, it was late. You know, people had a real leg up on me. I'm mostly a rhythm guitarist, I'm good at picking up chord structures and stuff. I'm definitely not flashy, I "just get the job done." I put a nice musical bed down to sing all my words on top of. It's just about repetition. I would learn to play songs I liked and then just do that for hours and hours. You know, it was that "10,000 hours" thing, and I definitely put it in. The activity I just gravitate towards--learning other songs, or playing guitar, or starting to write my own.

AE: There you go. Have you always played in bands or were you ever on your own? Did you start as a solo act?

RW: Pretty much always some version of a band, because I didn't think I sounded good alone. I was like, "I'll surround myself with people who are better than me." But it was an interesting story. The first real band I had [in college] was called The Stairs, and this very unusual thing happened to us. I would say I'm from Dedham, and Dedham had this lawsuit with the cable company that provides cable for the town. Because the cable company in Massachusetts is supposed to give back to the community every year in some way, and Dedham's cable company had never, so there was a lawsuit. And something that was this recurring rolling grants for Dedham artists. I asked for \$1,000 to make a series of short films. I guess I was the first person to actually do what I said I was going to do with the money, because they were blown away. They had a showing of it in the cinema of downtown Dedham, and they were like, "Anything you want to do next!" So, I boldly asked for \$10,000 to make an album of original songs in collaboration with the town of Dedham. And it was like, kids would make the artwork, anyone who played an instrument, we'd find a way to get them on the album, just all these things that would include the town. Amazingly, they said yes and gave us \$10,000, and that's how The

Stairs started. It took us about two years to do it, but it's a really unique debut. We did all of that way before we started playing live—we did it backwards.

AE: How many bands have you been in since your debut with The Stairs?

RW: Basically [just] The Stairs and Hallelujah the Hills, the band I'm in now. Everything else was pretty short or minor.

AE: Which musicians and artists served as your primary musical influences as your career developed? Any of the ones you mention in *Astral Weeks*?

RW: Sure! Well, definitely “Astral Weeks” for sure. That's an album I have an emotional connection to. It's not the kind of music I aspire to make, so I put it in a different category. My favorite band is Guided by Voices from Ohio. [The frontman] was a school teacher who just did music part time until he broke through. They didn't care what it sounded like audio-wise. If the song's good, people will get it. It was a real “you can do this” message in that band that still inspires me to this day. So, that's definitely the biggest [influence].

AE: Wow, the lead singer's transition from school teacher to rockstar definitely sounds like it influenced you.

RW: Yeah, and it was late. He was in his late 30s before anyone even knew or gave a shit [about the band].

AE: So, how did you first decide to put together the book *Astral Weeks*?

RW: I loved that album so much, and I love Boston. After I moved into the city for BU, I had never really left. I kept hearing that “Astral Weeks” had something to do with Boston, which made no sense because when you think of Van Morrison, you think Ireland, or maybe New York or San Francisco. But then when you look at the poem on the back cover of the album, it mentions Cambridge, Hyannis, and Cape Cod. I’m bad at geography, and I was like, “Are these cities in Ireland as well?” I realized they weren’t, and so I got real curious. All the books had a page on it that described how between this-and-that, Van was in Boston, and they didn’t give it any detail fleshed out. So, I was real interested in this and I was writing for the Boston Phoenix, which was the free alt weekly newspaper for many, many decades here in Boston. The editor of that newspaper took over for Boston Magazine and he threw a party with all the writers he liked from the Phoenix. I cornered him and told him about this idea of figuring out the full story of Van Morrison in Boston. Eventually, he said “yes” and I was hired. Then, I wasn’t stalking people, I was being paid.

AE: Exactly, there’s a big difference. Journalists sometimes have to engage in a little bit of behavior that would otherwise be considered stalker-like.

RW: Totally, one hundred percent, and that increased as the book went on. So, I talked to Van’s ex-wife Janet, the gangster who smashed the guitar over his head, Peter Wolf, his best friend from the J Geils band, and I put the article together. People really liked it a lot, they shared it and passed it around. The album is so mysterious, everyone hungered to know the deal. An editor at Penguin Books wrote to me and said “I love that album and I love your article. You should talk to me, first.” His name was Ed Park, and together we set out to determine “how could this be a full book?” At first, we thought maybe just the “Astral Weeks” story would expand into a bigger

thing. That wasn't crazy to think, because people I was told were dead while I was researching the magazine article reached out to me after it came out.

AE: Why were these people thought to be dead?

RW: People lose track of people, they have bad memories, or they hear a rumor. You know, it's like "I *think* he's dead." They're all in their seventies, too. So people started reaching out to me and expanding the story. But when I wrote the proposal with just that story for a full book, Ed Park said, "Well, what if there were other things going on in the city that same year [1968], and musical things that would tie into this portrait of the scene of the city in a year?" Being a Boston resident my whole life, I was like "No, nothing interesting was happening." The local music in bars and clubs started with Aerosmith in the mid-70s. I didn't know much happened before that, so I started researching and was kind of blown away by everything I found, including the musical cult, the Mel Lyman family, and that became the "B" story to the "A" story of Van Morrison. Then, we were off to the races. We kind of made all these rules for storytelling, like "Some part of the story has to have a strong anchor in '68 in Boston. It can go to other cities, it can go to other years, but it has to have that firm root." And then, anything about music floats to the top. We just kind of made rules for making a quilt, that kind of thing. That helped, and then it just started to shape together as a story. I had about a year and a half to research and write it. It was crazy, and I kept my full-time job, too, at the time. It was insane.

AE: What was your job at the time?

RW: Well, it's the same job I have now. I work in nonprofit theater, in the marketing department at ArtsEmerson. So, I was like, "I can survive anything for a year and a half. I bet I'll never get another book deal." And so I just put my all into it. It was maddening, but I was pretty psyched.

AE: I'm very impressed with what I've read so far. I like that you go back and forth between the historic events and your interactions with some of the guys.

RW: To put the right amount of that in is tricky, but Ed, the editor, is so good. He was so intuitive and knew exactly what to cut and what to keep in.

AE: How did you get in contact with the figures like Janet, Van's ex-wife, and the Mel Lyman cult?

RW: With Janet, I was trying to find a way to reach out to her and I saw she ran an Etsy shop for her jewelry, and I private-messaged her on there. That's how I got in touch with her. I think the initial interview even took place in the DMs of Etsy, which is pretty unusual. So, it's like, any way you can figure out. And then it was interesting. The cult contacted *me* because I was asking all these questions about their compound, and they still live up in Roxbury. They caught wind that I was snooping around and contacted me, and I talked to them and I was straightforward about what I was doing and then they let me in. They hadn't talked to a journalist in several decades. The early '70s "Rolling Stone" exposé, they felt totally burned by it, even though it was accurate. They're a cult, they think everything is attacking them, but they let me into the house and gave me access to all these people, and so the book had two "Holy Grails." First, could we hear the Catacomb tapes that reveal the only audio of Van and his band of Boston teenagers, the Van Morrison Controversy. That audio, I was hoping, would be the missing link between

“Brown-Eyed Girl” and “Astral Weeks,” because those are very different and they’re right next to each other. It’s like, “how do you make that jump?” So that was “Holy Grail” number one, and number two was to figure out what helped the Mel Lyman family. They had vanished, essentially. We had all these things about how to end the book, and, I don’t want to spoil it, but we found out [what did help them]. I think the book ends in a pretty satisfying way.

AE: Do you find that any of the conversations you had with the people you mention in the book advanced your own career as a musician or a writer? Essentially, did those you interviewed give you any insight for your music or writing careers, intentional or not?

RW: Everything soaked in, but no one was really giving me advice about how to do it. I’ll tell you how it *did* influence me. My lyrics for the band [Hallelujah the Hills] are often pretty abstract and pretty poetic, but writing a book which was a narrative story gave me this confidence about being more clear and being able to tell a discernible story. On the album I wrote right after the book, you can see that. It’s called “I’m You,” and people really liked it, so it was a good influence, working harder not to just paint some kind of abstract word picture, but actually tell some kind of small story in each song.

AE: Those are the best kinds of songs! So, what do you find the most beneficial aspects of being both a musician and a music writer?

RW: It’s a unique perspective, because it’s like you’re an architect who hangs out in buildings, and so you kind of know the lay of the land. When non-musicians write about music, there’s often a trap when they try to describe how music developed, you know, you can tell they’ve never been knee-deep in that process. I at least knew what it was like, so I think it’s just an

experiential advantage. Van's ex-wife Janet would tell me about his process of "letting it all out" and then organizing it later. I was like, "Oh yeah, I know what that's like." That, otherwise, sounds like a pretty strange thing to most people.

AE: Were there any music writers who served as your primary inspiration in particular both before and after writing the book?

RW: The famous rock critic Lester Bangs, not only is he great, but he also wrote this very famous essay about "Astral Weeks." He wrote it in 1978, and it's fantastic, and so that's already setting the bar. You have to at least be in the same playing field as this excellent piece of writing. I like how he's smart and clever, but never pretentious. He never wants to "wow" you with words, he wants you to get what he's talking about, but he's also not going to dumb it down. I appreciate that style. And then David Foster Wallace's nonfiction essays, that was a big thing for me in college and after, and that's kind of the same attributes of Lester apply there, even though Wallace uses 50-dollar words. I read music journalism forever, whatever I got my hands on, so I was pretty immersed in what the trajectory of music writing was like over the decades.

AE: Are there any literary authors you feel influenced you in writing your book, even if they're not music writers?

RW: David Foster Wallace is a good one. Joan Didion is a great nonfiction essayist and also wrote about music. Hunter S. Thompson was pretty interesting, his thing was about "you becoming part of the story," but maybe you don't want to become the whole story. Sometimes you did, and it was good, but eventually would become bad. That, however, was seen as revolutionary when he first started doing it, but it's pretty normalized now. I think everyone kind

of does that. If you opened up *Pitchfork* and picked a random review, the first two paragraphs might be about the writer, they insert their biography into a piece of critical nonfiction.

Sometimes it adds an element of entertainment, sometimes it's awful. Some people rely on shock value or edginess.

AE: I understand that you received immense positive feedback on the book. Were there any compliments in particular that stood out to you?

RW: All of the blurbs in the beginning of the paperback copy are the ones that me and my editor picked out; those are all of the reviews I was really blown away by. People I've looked up to, like author Nick Hornby, reading it and loving it was something. Having it compared to a Robert Altman film was huge for me. The fact that anyone responded well to this was just icing on the cake, because I finished it and I was happy with it, but I really didn't know if people were going to think it was a mess or not what they wanted. When there were criticisms, it was usually "Oh, I just wanted the 'Astral Weeks' story." It was fun to paint a more complete portrait. It was all lunch leftover on the table because I've been in bands and music clubs in Boston since I was 18 and no one has ever talked about this stuff. The oral tradition had failed.

AE: Any pieces of feedback that were more challenging?

RW: Sure, I mean some people didn't like it. In fact, one of the most important reviews that anyone will get is from the *New York Times*. That review in particular thought it was three or four different books, which was disappointing, but eventually another writer at the *New York Times*, Janet Maslin got behind it and rallied around it. The only criticisms that hurt would be the ones where I was like "Oof, yeah they're right," in a bad way. I agree that if you weren't in the mood

for a big, quilted collage of a story, then this book is not for you. I could find ways to agree with most of the people who didn't like it, because I recognize why. I was glad I stuck by the original vision, too. If I was thinking, "These people won't like it because of this reason" and tailored it to that, it wouldn't have been as good. Sticking to the original vision is the only way to go. You can't worry about what everyone's going to think. At a certain point, your work is not really yours anymore, it's the readers'. There were interesting moments where someone on Twitter would be like, "Well, I wish you really gave Janet, Van's ex-wife, more space in the book." I didn't try to chime in on everyone, but in that case, I literally put almost everything she said to me in the book because I found that point of view so valuable and I had a limited amount of time. People don't necessarily know the constraints that certain content is under.

AE: Janet seems like the next best option if you can't interview Van himself.

RW: Now that's interesting. Starting out, you would think that interviewing him would be a good get. At a certain point, we were trying everything to get a message to him. Nothing was working. We'd find managers and they'd be like, "I don't manage him anymore, he's too much trouble." At a certain point, I had interviewed every living person who had worked on the record "Astral Weeks" except Van.

AE: How many people was that in total?

RW: About eight or nine people—the musicians, the producer, the engineer, the mixer. We had a Twitter campaign to get people to talk to me, and it didn't do anything, but at a certain point, Ed Park and I started to view Van not talking to me as a positive. It's like a ghost story—Van is not the same guy as he was when he wrote that album, so him being an unattainable ghost to me

worked on a different level. In the end, I think it was for the best, interestingly. He's not doing so great these days—he's bitter and a contrarian. If you look up my name and "LA Times," you'll see what I wrote about his new album, and it's a good followup to the book.

AE: If you could write this kind of book about another artist from that time period, who would it be?

RW: That's the thing, I don't want to. I don't want to repeat that book, because I think it only works once. It worked once because I was genuinely obsessed with the album, I loved the city of Boston and I was familiar with it. So, if I picked, like, Detroit in '77 and, say, Iggy Pop, I don't think I would do a good job of that. I like to defy expectations, so I'm searching for something else, but I don't know what it is yet.

AE: Any present-day artists whose work speaks to you in the same manner that "Astral Weeks" did?

RW: Nothing in the same way "Astral Weeks" did, but I love playing different artists live and making music. Joanna Newsom, the harp player, is a genius. Her songwriting is just incredible. She's got a funny voice, you're either going to love it or hate it, but she's totally brilliant. It almost sounds like she's someone from the '20s or a muppet. When you hear it, you'll know what I'm talking about. But as far as her songwriting, she's really doing some stuff that no one else is.

AE: Does your band have any gigs lined up now that the state has reopened?

RW: Yeah, we just announced our first return show. It's going to be Saturday, July 17 outdoors in front of the USS Constitution, a historic ship by the harbor in Boston.