

Fans' Questions, Al's Answers

Submitted by Carol Vermilyea

One day in August 2009 while Al and Dave were on tour, Al needed a driver for a short trip from central NJ to New York City. I was lucky enough to be that driver. During the ride, Al graciously answered a number of questions I had written down from his on-line fan groups. (Thank you, Al.)

Al was giving his answers as I was driving, so I had no opportunity to make notes. What follows are my best recollections of what Al had to say.

About "Café Society"

Q. What is the song "Cafe Society" about?

Author's Note: I had asked Al this question once before, a few years back. He had said at that time that he didn't remember the song, but if he had the lyrics he might be able to answer the question. So this time I brought the lyrics, and he did read them.

A. Well, I'm not absolutely sure, since after all this song is 25 years old. But I can tell you what I think it's about. This is what it would have been about if I were writing it today. It's about a club in Los Angeles, the Rainbow Bar and Grill. When I say in the song "I come to you" or "I think of you," the "you" is this club. It was a place where one could go and have respite from the problems of the everyday world, "sinking deep into the river of oblivion you make." Twice in my life I had one of those rare moments where all is well, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." Both times, I was at the Rainbow Bar and Grill.

Q. The fans hadn't anticipated that this club would be in the USA because at the end a man with a British Accent says "excuse me sir, are you a member?" Many of us thought that the club was in England or in Continental Europe because of that last line.

A. We put that line in just as an embellishment and it had no particular meaning or significance about the whereabouts of the club.

About "Carol"

Q. This question is about the following lines in "Carol":

'Reach down, silvery ship from the stars
I know you're there
I know you'll understand me
You could take me anywhere
I know you must be there'

What does the "Silvery Ship" refer to? Are these lines a more elegant way of saying "Beam Me Up Scotty?" Who is singing these lines—Carol, or the person speaking to

Carol? Why will the silvery ship understand the singer?

Author's Note: [Al laughed at the part about "Beam Me Up Scotty."]

A. Carol is singing these lines. She feels trapped in an impossible situation and is desperate for a way out. She hopes that someone or something, somewhere, will see her plight, understand it, and get her out of it since she is not able to get herself out of it. She doesn't see anyone or anything in the real world that can help her, so she's hoping that something from the world of her imagination or dreams will come to the rescue. It might actually be a starship, but the lines could also refer to anything that would come and take her out of the trap.

About "Hanno The Navigator"

Q. Regarding the line "Our ancient ships go sailing still" in "Hanno the Navigator." What ancient ships are we talking about here? Ships that were ancient even at the time of Hanno? Or ships that people today consider ancient? Do we have triremes sailing our oceans today?

A. Actually there is a trireme in existence today. It was built quite recently by the Greek Navy. The picture on the front of "Sparks of Ancient Light" is based upon that actual ship. I don't know if that ship has sailed an ocean or not. So...I guess the line could refer to either of the options in your question.

About "Here in Angola"

Author's note: Al mentioned that he doesn't sing this song much because he's embarrassed about mis-pronouncing "Coppola." He rhymed "Coppola" with "Angola," but actually the accent in "Coppola" should be on the first syllable.

Q. This seems to be about a person who has converted to a new faith of some kind, right?

A. Yes. I've experienced people who have converted to a new faith and then that's all they can talk about, which I find annoying.

Q. Were you referring to any particular new faith? Were you talking about Bob Dylan's conversion to born-again Christianity, or to a person who had become a communist, for example?

A. No, no particular person or faith or political view. Just the general phenomenon.

Q. The mentions of the "colonel of the cavalry" and Francis Ford Coppola made us think that this song had something to do with the movie "Apocalypse Now." Does it?

A. No. Around that time I had heard a rumor that Francis Ford Coppola was trying to reach me because he was working on a movie and wanted to talk to me about doing some music for it. So I had him on my mind and that's why I put him in the song. Then "Cola" and "Angola" went in because I thought they rhymed with "Coppola." By the way,

Coppola never did get in touch with me.

Q. Does the reference to "Angola" have anything to do with the Congo River, the way to the Heart of Darkness? Is the song saying that the person's conversion is actually leading him to the Heart of Darkness?

A. There's no connection between this song and the Congo River in Angola. The word "Angola," as I mentioned before, was chosen because I thought it rhymed with "Coppola." [Pause while AI considered the question about the conversion leading to the Heart of Darkness.] Yes, it's possible that a conversion of this type could lead to a Heart of Darkness. Think of the conflict in Northern Ireland or the Spanish Inquisition, for example. But I don't recall that I had that in my mind while writing the song.

Also, you need to realize that not every line of every song I write will make sense on its own. Each line is like a color in a painting. The painting overall will mean something, but to ask for a meaning for every line in one of my songs is like asking "what does the yellow in this painting mean?" The color yellow in a painting doesn't mean anything without the context of all the rest of the colors and the shapes.

Sometimes I just put in words that sound okay and fit the number of syllables I need. I don't necessarily think about whether those several words make sense by themselves.

Author's Note: I still feel that there is some connection between the conversion theme, Apocalypse Now, and Heart of Darkness in this song. I'm not saying that AI put it there, I'm just saying that I perceive it and such a connection seems to make sense to me.

About "Josephine Baker"

Q. Regarding the song 'Josephine Baker,' a fan wants to know if the beautiful female voice he hears at the end of this song is in fact Josephine Baker's voice.

A. AI said he doesn't think there was any female voice dubbed at the end of this song. Of course, this song came out two decades ago and he might have forgotten.

Author's Note: I listened to the song and at first didn't hear any female voice toward the end of the song. Then Bob (the person who asked the question) elaborated that the voice can only be heard very quietly as the music winds down, and louder in the last two notes. I listened with these instructions in mind, and now I do hear it. I think it is more than one female voice, and as Bob says, very beautiful. My guess is that AI would have remembered if they had dubbed in Josephine herself. So I think what we're hearing is just regular female backing vocals. But if I have another chance, I'll bring the CD and ask AI to listen to the very end so he can hear what Bob is talking about.

About Mona Lisa "Talking"

Q. This is about the song "Mona Lisa Talking." During the last repetition of the chorus, the female backing vocalists sing "Don't wait don't hesitate, don't wait don't hesitate," followed by some oooo's. Then there is another

line of words they sing, which we can't make out. What are they saying?

Author's Note: Al answered this question at least twice, and I repeated his answer aloud so as not to forget it. But I forgot it anyway. After listening to the song myself and getting some input from other fans, here's the closest answer I can give:

A. "Time's running out fast," then "it might not last" or "and it may not last."

Al also mentioned that he really liked the chord sequence at the beginning of Mona Lisa Talking. He liked it so much he wanted to use it in another song. But he didn't want the new song to sound just like the old one, so he switched to 3/4 time and created "Like William McKinley." I've now listened to the beginnings of these two songs, and I see what Al is talking about. The songs are in different keys, but the relationship between the opening chords, along with a solo instrument that comes in shortly after the beginning in each song, are very similar. The solo instrument sounds like some kind of woodwind to me but I'm not certain.

About "Sand in Your Shoes"

Q. Regarding the song "Sand in Your Shoes," which islands did "my lady of the Islands" come from?

A. "No particular Islands. In fact, I don't like the line 'goodbye to my lady of the Islands' at all and I put great effort into coming up with an alternate line. I came up with about 30 alternates, but didn't like any of them as well as 'goodbye to my lady of the Islands.' So I gave up and left the line the way it was."

Author's Note: at this point I said that it might have been a good thing that Al did leave it the way it was, because so many of us think of this song by the name "My Lady of the Islands" and some of us have no idea which song "Sand in Your Shoes" refers to. Al agreed that in that case, it was lucky that he left the line as it was.

About Al's Tour Schedule

Q. When are you coming to the UK again? Or even continental Europe?

A. Well, of course I was there quite recently, so probably in about a year—a year or two.

About Al's Work in General

Q: "Do your creative fires burn as brightly as ever?"

A: Yes, I think so. In fact, I think my two last albums are among the best I ever did. I think 'A Beach Full of Shells' was the first album since 'Past Present Future' where I wrote every song completely on my own. All the albums between those two involved

someone else co-writing, or me writing to meet certain specifications, on at least one song. So it makes sense that I'd be very happy with those last two albums.

Q. Are you happy in your work?

A. "I can answer this by saying that I think of my work as being divided into two parts. Five percent of it is being on stage performing, or being in the studio recording. In this five percent, 'it's all good' and I am happy. The other 95% is what I have to do to GET to the stage or to GET to the studio. This means living out of suitcases, waiting in airports or waiting for a driver, driving or riding in cars, being on planes, waiting for planes that are late, hanging out in a hotel room, etc. This is just plain work. It's not awful, but it's not enjoyable. It's the "job" part of the job. Everyone has parts of their job that are boring or have to be done in order to get to the parts of the job that are fun and rewarding, and my work is no different.

Bonus Question and Answer

This question was asked and answered at a separate time, back in February of 2009 after the AI and Dave show at Tarrytown, New York. I was going to ask AI the question myself, but I missed him. Dave very kindly volunteered to ask AI the question, and convey the answer to me. (Thank you so much, Dave.)

Q. In the past you have said that there are several of your own albums that you like, several you dislike, and one or two about which you are neutral. Which are which?

A. I like, overall:

Past Present Future
Modern Times
Year of the Cat
Rhymes in Rooms
Between the Wars
Down in the Cellar
A Beach Full of Shells
Sparks of Ancient Light

I'm on the fence about:

Time Passages
24 P/Carrots

I don't like, overall:

Bedsitter Images
Love Chronicles
Zero She Flies
Orange
Indian Summer
Russians and Americans

Last Days of the Century
Famous Last Words.