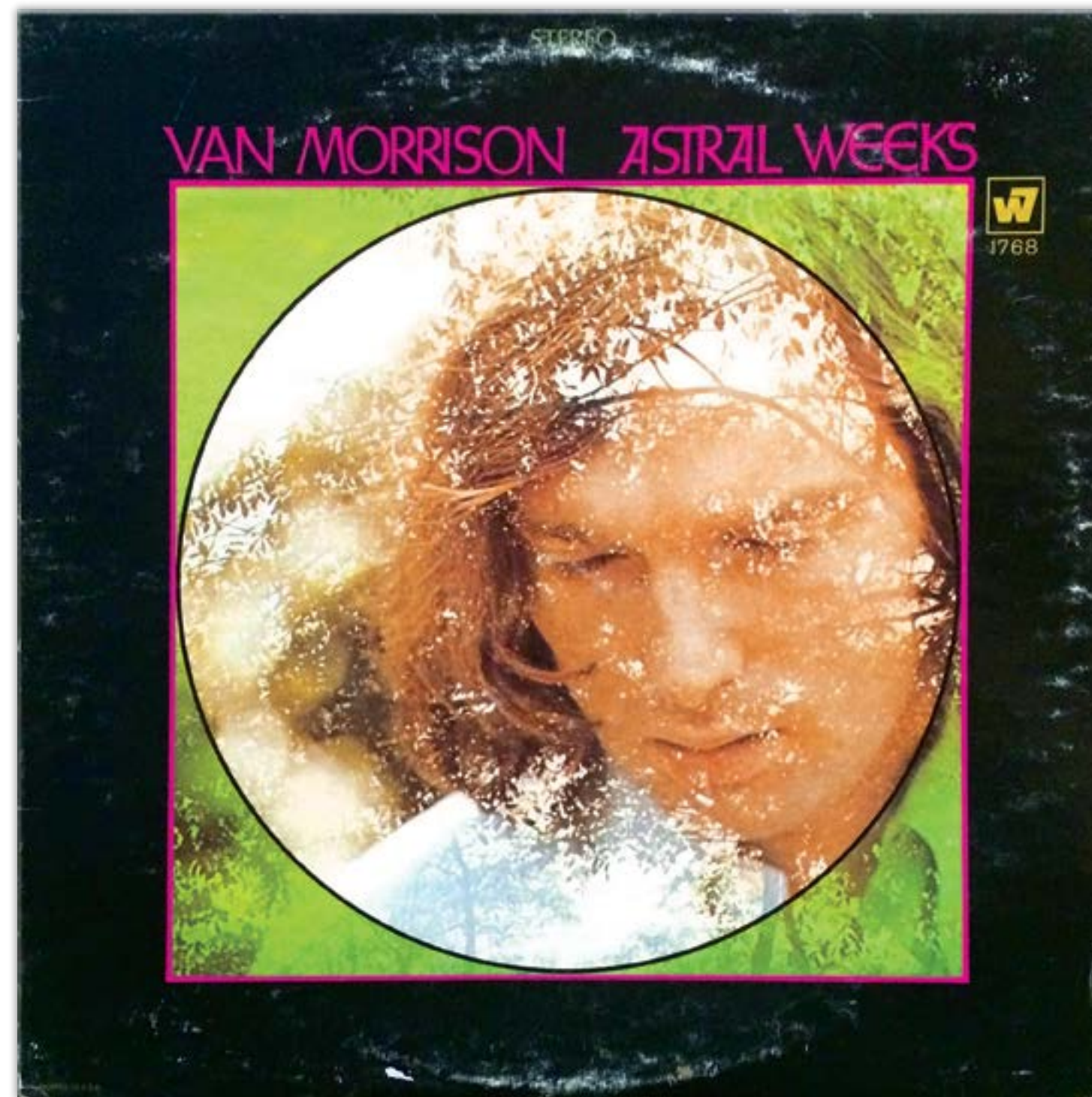


# Classic Album

## VAN MORRISON

### ASTRAL WEEKS

After the feisty garage rock of *Them* and pop success of *Brown Eyed Girl*, Van Morrison's quantum leap with his second studio album *Astral Weeks* would leave critics and fans grasping at its meaning for the next half-century. **Steve Harnell** charts the sound of an artist in the grip of radical creative upheaval





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phrasing, stretching vowels and consonants to breaking point, allied with an obsession with repeating words until they almost lose their meaning, is groundbreakingly audacious.

*Astral Weeks* is an album that deals in many dualities – loneliness and companionship, heaven and earth, pain and overwhelming joy, a nostalgia for childhood and a yearning to see into the future. It's often been interpreted as a mystical song cycle, beginning with the theme of birth (the opening title track) and concluding with death (the bleak *Slim Slow Slider*), although Van's impressionistic lyrics are at times difficult to pin down. Even the songwriter himself has gone on record to say the meanings of several tracks elude him.

#### MUSICAL DIFFERENCES

Morrison's songs for *Astral Weeks* had been compiled over the preceding five years, but their themes of mystical transcendence seem like a reaction against the political and societal maelstrom of 1968 the album was recorded in. It's as far away from the Stones' *Street Fighting Man* as you can get.

Its creation, though, came at a difficult time for Morrison, one of personal upheaval, professional difficulties and an awareness his muse was taking him in a direction that would elicit vigorous opposition from his paymasters.

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Could *Astral Weeks* be the most enigmatic musical masterpiece of all time? After 50 years of almost continual dissection since its release in November 1968, this most elusive of iconic records remains wonderfully unknowable.

What we can say though, with total assurance, is that this is not a classic rock album by any regular definition of that term. Instead, Van Morrison's second studio LP is a seamless mélange of jazz, folk, blues, country and classical textures. Growing up in Belfast surrounded by his father's extraordinarily large and diverse record collection that included Muddy Waters, Charlie Parker, Woody Guthrie, Hank Williams and Mahalia Jackson, Morrison wove all of these influences into the bigger picture of *Astral Weeks*.

It's jazz, though, that had the greatest impact on the album. This is a solo record in name only – *Astral Weeks* is by no means the singular vision of Morrison. Instead, the crack team of jazz session men who played on the album were absolutely key to its success. *Astral Weeks* is quite simply one of the greatest marriages of convenience of all time – and a creative peak that Van would arguably never reach again.

Like the equally lauded *Kind Of Blue* by Miles Davis, this was instinctive art, recorded in double-quick time by musicians collaborating on an almost telepathic level; a handful of studio hours that have now reverberated down the generations. Morrison's flair for improvisation, honed during his time with Them on the club circuit, was the equal of the assembled team of seasoned session pros. His vocal

Above: Bang label boss Bert Berns and Van Morrison in New York, circa 1967

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After leaving the tough R&B-influenced garage rock of Them behind in 1966, Morrison struck out on his own and signed a solo deal with Bert Berns, the writer and producer of the band's hit *Here Comes The Night*. Berns persuaded Van to travel to New York, putting pen to paper for his new label Bang Records. Shortly afterwards, during a two-day recording session, Morrison laid down eight songs, intended for release as four singles. Instead, Berns cobbled the tracks together and put them out as Van's debut solo album, *Blowin' Your Mind!*, without the singer-songwriter's knowledge. It was to be the start of a rancorous relationship between the two, which would eventually turn vicious. The album's lead track would cause further complications – *Brown Eyed Girl* was a Top 10 hit in the US Billboard charts in the summer of 1967, and Berns was determined Van should be pushed in a pop direction. But with the seeds of *Astral Weeks* already being sown, Morrison had very different ideas.

As their relationship deteriorated, proceedings took a fatal turn on 30 December 1967, when the label boss was found dead following heart failure in a New York hotel room. Berns' heart had been damaged by rheumatic fever as a child, but his widow Ilene thought it was the stress of his fall-outs with Morrison that precipitated his demise.

Them with Van Morrison (second from right), in a portrait from 1965

## The songs

### Side One In The Beginning

#### 1 ASTRAL WEEKS

Morrison first had the idea for the album's title track back in Belfast in 1966 after seeing drawings about astral projection at the home of his painter friend Cecil McCartney.

Captured in one take, this seven-minute opening track makes us immediately aware that we are far removed from the taut three-minute poppy R&B of *Brown Eyed Girl*.

The opening lines are astonishing: "If I ventured in the slipstream/ Between the viaducts of your dream/ Where immobile steel rims crack/ And the ditch in the back roads stop/ Could you find me?" Note, too, Van's reference to "talkin' to Huddie Ledbetter" – Morrison often carried a picture of Ledbetter, better known as blues legend Lead Belly, wherever he lived, keeping it with him for comfort.

#### 2 BESIDE YOU

Wonderfully fluid classical guitar fills from Jay Berliner and John Payne's light, breathy understated flute back impressionistic lyrics from Van that defy a definitive explanation. 'Little Jimmy' embarks on a childhood adventure: "Way out of the backstreet/ Out of the window/ Through the fallin' rain". Marshalled by what could be a spirit guide, Brown Arrow, this is a tale of young love and yearning. Morrison has since explained: "*Beside You* is the kind of song you'd sing to a kid or somebody you love. It's basically a love song, just a song about being spiritually beside somebody." It's been suggested Jimmy was inspired by Van's wife Janet Planet, who had a son, Peter, from a previous relationship.

#### 3 SWEET THING

Propelled by a wonderful Richard Davis bassline and Van's briskly strummed guitar, *Sweet Thing* is the only song on *Astral Weeks* that looks backwards rather than forwards. Written in Belfast while parted from his wife-to-be Janet Planet, this is a pastoral-flecked open-hearted ode to his love.

There's also a rare dash of humour from Van: "And I shall drive my chariot down your streets and cry/ 'Hey, it's me, I'm dynamite!' and I don't know why". Typically, Van prosaically describes it as: "A love ballad. Not about anybody in particular, but about a feeling."

#### 4 CYPRESS AVENUE

One of the most beautiful genre mash-ups on the record, its expansive arrangement takes in jazz and baroque styles courtesy of an overdubbed harpsichord alongside more country-tinged flourishes.

An album centrepiece, Van's stream-of-consciousness lyrics revolve around reminiscences of childhood excursions to the well-to-do residential street in Belfast of the song's title. The innocent narrator is aspirational, tongue-tied at a pretty schoolgirl, imagining her in the future with "rainbow ribbons in her hair" being taken down the road in a horse-drawn carriage. The song became a regular set closer for Van's live shows in the 1970s, where the singer and his band would build up to a ferocious, dynamic conclusion.

In the eyes of Ilene, Morrison had to pay the price. After inheriting the Bang Records company from her husband, she slapped a ban on the songwriter recording new material for other labels, or even playing live in his adopted home of New York. She then attempted to have Morrison deported, although the singer swerved the potential crisis by marrying his then-girlfriend, Janet 'Planet' Rigsbee.

The pair moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Morrison worked local clubs with a small electric group playing cuts from *Blowin' Your Mind!* and his Them back catalogue, before moving on to the Boston coffee-house circuit with Tom Kielbania. The duo, with Morrison on guitar and Kielbania on upright bass, began exploring an acoustic folk-based direction and the first ideas for the arrangements on *Astral Weeks* began to evolve. Soon to join them was flautist John Payne, who made the cut for the final recording sessions of the LP.

Although Morrison's stock as a chart-friendly songwriter was still high, it didn't translate to personal financial security – Van has said he was starving and virtually penniless as *Astral Weeks* gestated. Warner Bros began sniffing around Van with a view to signing him, but were shocked when they heard back from envoys sent to see his live show that his new musical direction was diametrically opposed to his biggest hit single. At just 23, he was already done with the pop business.

**“I started crying. Astral Weeks just vibrated in my soul and I knew I wanted to work with that sound”**

LEWIS MERENSTEIN

**Below: Van Morrison recording for a Bang Records session in New York, in March 1967**

Enter Lewis Merenstein. *Astral Weeks*' eventual producer was also asked by Warner Bros to check out what the songwriter was cooking up. When Merenstein heard the singer play the title song from the album for the first time: “I started crying. It just vibrated in my soul and I knew I wanted to work with that sound,” he explained.

#### SESSION STARS

After Morrison extricated himself from his Bang Records deal via 36 nonsense recordings to fulfil his outstanding contractual obligation with Berns' publishing company Web IV Music, the way was clear for him to sign with Warners and start work on what would become *Astral Weeks*.

Merenstein's background as a jazz producer would have a profound effect on the sessions, and the personnel invited to collaborate. After working with Van at a Warners-owned publishing studio for two weeks to hone the songs and sketch out basic arrangements, Merenstein assembled a crack set of jazz players at Century Sound Studios on 52nd Street with the experience and imagination to fully put flesh on the bones of Van's new set of songs. Key to the collaborative sessions was bassist Richard Davis – Kielbania was jettisoned at the recording stage, despite helping to shape the original feel of the tracks. But Davis was in a different league as a player, with form working with Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan and Eric Dolphy. Also signed up was guitarist Jay Berliner, who boasted an equally impressive CV, playing on Charles Mingus' *The Black Saint And*

## THE HOLLYWOOD MAKEOVER

A full 40 years after the release of *Astral Weeks*, Morrison revisited his most acclaimed work for two of the most hotly anticipated live shows of 2008 at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles. Each gig was split into two halves. Firstly, an alternating nine-song opening 'greatest hits' selection that included *Moondance*, *Caravan* and *Brown Eyed Girl*, followed by the *Astral Weeks* album played in full.

Guitarist Jay Berliner returned to reprise his role, and his interplay with Morrison despite the intervening years was remarkable. Bassist Richard Davis apparently was involved, but bowed out at the rehearsal stage for the landmark 17,500-capacity show.

The elastic arrangements of the original album played to Morrison's strengths as an improvisational performer. The bleak *Slim Slow Slider* was moved from its place on the album as a desolate closer and was instead played third here, with Morrison at one point aggressively thrashing away at his acoustic guitar while adding a coda of *I Start Breaking Down*, a nod to blues legend Robert Johnson.

Morrison told *Rolling Stone*'s David Wild: “[*Astral Weeks*] received no promotion from Warner Bros – that's why I never got to play those songs live. I had always wanted to play the record live and fully orchestrated.”



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*The Sinner Lady* five years previously. Only flautist John Payne remained from Morrison's previous bands in Massachusetts and Boston.

Davis's intuitive basslines that surround and underpin Morrison's vocals are one of *Astral Weeks*' most striking attributes. Merenstein has talked much about how the bassist drove the sessions, with Morrison an uncommunicative bystander. Speaking to Hank Shteamer in 2009, Lewis said: “Richard was the soul of the album. The heart and beat of it... Van had nothing to say. He just went and sang the song. That's primarily the way the album proceeded.”

After a simple performance of the songs on acoustic guitar for the assembled musicians, Morrison would take his place in the vocal booth and let the sessions run their own course. Drummer Connie Kay explained to *Rolling Stone* magazine that when the band asked Van for directions, he merely replied: “Play whatever you like. We more or less sat there and jammed.”

The session players worked intuitively, improvising throughout as they bounced off Morrison's voice with only basic chord patterns for guidance. Davis was surprised at Morrison's rather surly way of working, even if it was shyness disguised as surliness. He told *The Guardian* in 2008: “There wasn't much communication. As far as I can recall, I don't think I exchanged one word with the guy. We just listened to his songs one time, then we started playing.”

That communication exists solely on a musical level, with Morrison urging the players on with his extraordinarily emotive singing, at times tender and plaintive, at others raging and anger-filled: at some points, he sounds possessed

**Richard Davis, integral to the sound and the recording of *Astral Weeks*, playing in 1984 in The Hague, The Netherlands**

## The songs *continued* Side Two Afterwards

### 5 THE WAY YOUNG LOVERS DO

The one song on the album that divides fans and critics alike. Morrison biographer Clinton Heylin dismisses it as “lounge jazz... that sticks out like Spumante at a champagne buffet”. Likewise, *Rolling Stone*'s Greil Marcus says this is “a poor jazz-flavoured cut that is uncomfortably out of place.”

But the swinging jazz of... *Young Lovers* does at least inject much-needed impetus to get Side Two underway. This is the assembled players at their most invigorated, with a superb horn arrangement by Larry Fallon. Check out a typically radical electrified solo reinvention by Jeff Buckley on his album *Live At Sin-é*.

### 6 MADAME GEORGE

Set once again in Cypress Avenue, this is another Belfast-inspired track that forms the centrepiece of *Astral Weeks*' second side. His hometown is alluded to throughout, including the working-class Sandy Row neighbourhood, a staunch Protestant and Unionist stronghold (“Throwing pennies at the bridges down below” was a practice of Northern Irish Unionists as they travelled on the Dublin to Belfast train and crossed the River Boyne). Fitz could be an allusion to Fitzroy Avenue, a small residential Belfast street between Ormeau Road and Rugby Road.

Morrison suggests Madame George is an amalgam of up to seven different women. So who is she? A drag queen, or as *The Wall Street Journal*'s Tom Nolan suggests, Georgie Hyde-Lees, the muse of W. B. Yeats, who guided the Irish poet through automatic-writing sessions in a trance?

### 7 BALLERINA

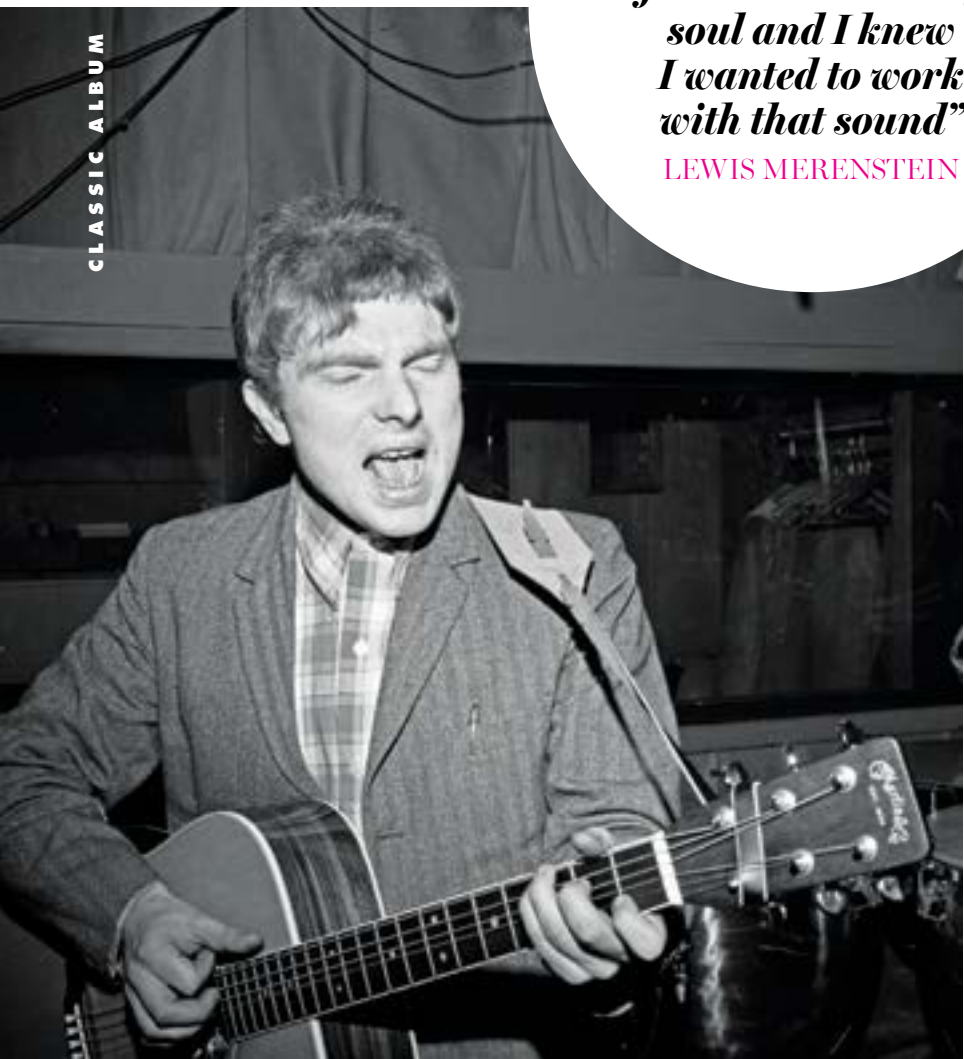
The oldest song on *Astral Weeks*, *Ballerina* dates back to 1966 and was worked on between gigs by Morrison during his tenure with Them. Despite being performed in Hawaii on one occasion by the band, it was never formally recorded until the *Astral Weeks* sessions.

Van first conceived of the track while staying at a San Francisco hotel during a Them tour of the US. He told journalist Ritchie Yorke: “I was attracted to the city. It was the first time I'd been there, and I was sitting in this hotel. All these things were going through my head, and I had a flash about an actress in an opera house appearing in a ballet.”

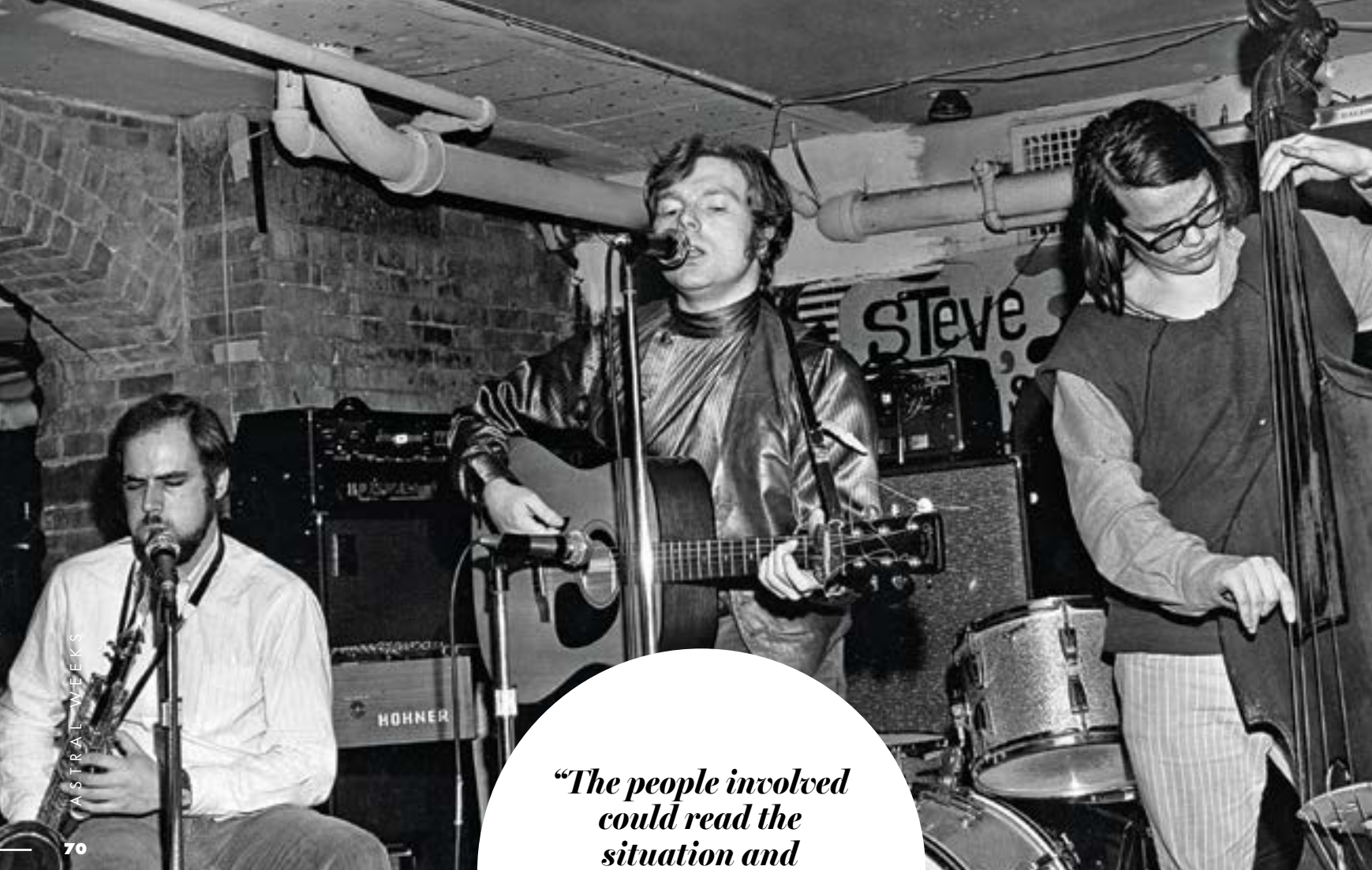
Although melodically simplistic, this is a powerhouse performance of emotive singing from Van along with intuitive and sympathetic contributions from bassist Davis once again.

### 8 SLIM SLOW SLIDER

A downbeat way to end the record, *Slim Slow Slider* is the only song on *Astral Weeks* that does not feature additional strings. Even Morrison isn't sure exactly who the central character is. However, the general consensus is that this refers to a heroin addict. Morrison is vaguer, saying it deals with a girl who is “caught up in a big city like London or maybe is on dope. I'm not sure.” The song ends abruptly, with Morrison slapping the side of his acoustic guitar and John Payne wandering off on a free-jazz soprano sax solo.



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*“The people involved could read the situation and knew what to do spontaneously, not belabour it”*

VAN MORRISON

Getty

by the music. Remarkably, the album came together in what was effectively just two eight-hour recording sessions, as an additional early-morning session produced nothing of note and was eventually abandoned.

The first session on 25 September produced four songs that made the final cut – the title track, the ambitious centrepieces of both sides, *Cypress Avenue* and *Madame George*, as well as the yearning *Beside You*. After the abandoned session bore no musical fruit, a third and final eight-hour stint produced a swinging performance of *The Way Young Lovers Do*, *Sweet Thing*, *Ballerina* and stark closing track *Slim Slow Slider*.

### STUDIO ALCHEMY

Apart from string and horn section overdubs arranged by Larry Fallon and overseen by Merenstein at two sessions at Mastertone Recordings on 42nd Street, *Astral Weeks* was by and large a first-take affair, although some tracks were honed at the edit stage.

Two further songs recorded at the sessions were deemed unsuitable for the album and a five-minute avant-garde instrumental coda to *Slim Slow Slider* was deemed superfluous and pruned off entirely by the producer. Merenstein was also behind the idea of labelling Side One ‘In The Beginning’ and its flipside ‘Afterwards’, although the decision wasn’t met with approval by Morrison.

In an interview with Scott Foundas in 2009, Morrison said: “Most of these songs were first or second takes. It was like an alchemical kind of situation, where the people involved

could read the situation and knew what to do spontaneously, not belabour it, not overproduce or overthink it. Everybody on the session was like that, which was uncanny.”

Over the years, Morrison’s own view of the album has fluctuated. He’s at times proud of his achievement and the style of music contained within its 47 minutes, at others grumbling about the addition of strings and horns and puzzled by the overwhelming critical plaudits it has received. When biographer Johnny Rogan commented that the album overshadowed other equally impressive work, Morrison agreed – saying that he should have “changed the arrangements because they are too samey. Four or five other songs should have had a change of mood.”

Upon its release, due partly to a lack of promotion, it promptly sank without trace. It was a cult album on import in the States, but almost ignored in the UK by fans and critics alike. The *NME* was underwhelmed, labelling it a pale imitation of a recent album by José Feliciano; while pop magazine *Beat International* bizarrely criticised the record for being unoriginal. The critical reappraisal of *Astral Weeks* was taken up in earnest by *Rolling Stone* magazine – its lead writer Greil Marcus dubbed the album “unique and timeless”.

Ultimately, though, *Astral Weeks* is the archetypal slow-burner, offering up its gifts slowly to those willing to put in the time. For once, Elvis Costello – no stranger to hyperbole when it comes to music’s great and good – gets it spot on. “It’s still the most adventurous record made in the rock medium. There hasn’t been a record with that amount of daring made since.” ●

Performing at The Scene nightclub in NY in 1969, with bassist Tom Kielbania and multi-instrumentalist Artie Kaplan