

Introduction

Crystal Visions

It's November 5, 1979, at the Checkerdome in St. Louis. Stevie Nicks, on tour with Fleetwood Mac promoting their album *Tusk*, performs a new song, "Angel." She sports a claret-colored beret that can hardly contain her mass of blond curls, and a layered party dress reminiscent of the Roaring Twenties. The tune evokes a giddy dance hall ditty, made giddier when Nicks's bandmate and former romantic partner playfully throws his arm around her shoulders during the chorus. She lights up, he bathes in her glow, then she breaks free and the band shifts—maybe even struggles, just a bit—to keep up with her, to match the might of her voice. She imbues the song with such possibilities of form, meaning, and purpose as will only be revealed after listening again and again to different versions captured on tape and film. That night, on stage, she grabs the mic and quickly looks to the left, smiling in delight; then, before the final shout-out, she treats the audience to something unexpected: buck-and-wing dancing, blending steps from the Mashed Potato and the Charleston, channeling the Follies. A real show. The steps seem hard to pull off in her platform heels, but she delivers, rotating her hips and pumping her fist, immersed in the power of her presence.¹

A thousand moments like this define the career of Stevie Nicks, who sings of divination, moon goddesses, the stars of the silver screen, her grandmother Alice and *Alice in Wonderland*, Joan of Arc, sibyls and sylphs—channeling all their energies into her songwriting. Her music reflects and refracts desire, need, and regret; the most beloved tracks attest

to an artist of profound knowing, unapologetic instinct, and much hard-won wisdom. In her ballads, she's often the truth-teller capable of transgressing boundaries, honoring that part of herself that hurts the most and forming from that acute act an intense bond with her audiences. Today, Nicks remains loyal to the heroines who lit the way for her and the audiences who have cheered her on for some fifty years. The artist and her career are generous and optimistic and fierce. Her music matters.

Steeped from childhood in her grandfather's country songs, Nicks formed her first group, a Mamas & Papas-style quartet called Changing Times, while still in high school. After college in the San Francisco Bay Area and four years with a group called Fritz, she and her partner, Lindsey Buckingham, relocated to Los Angeles. Their album *Buckingham Nicks* (1973) did not sell especially well but caught the attention of drummer Mick Fleetwood, who invited Buckingham and Nicks to join Fleetwood Mac.

Nicks wrote hit after hit with Fleetwood Mac, as did Buckingham, a singer, virtuoso guitarist, and innovative producer. Their arrival marked a change in geographic location as well as style. The group had been based in England, soaking up American vernacular and producing occasional singles like the ballad "Need Your Love So Bad." Guitarist Peter Green founded the original Fleetwood Mac, joining drummer Mick Fleetwood and bassist John McVie in 1967 for a debut at Great Britain's National Blues and Jazz Festival at Windsor. Christine Perfect, "voted one of Britain's top girl singers" (along with Petula Clark) in the late sixties, sang with a rival blues band called Chicken Shack before marrying John McVie and, after a brief solo turn, becoming part of his band.² She had perfect pitch, conservatory piano training, and a clear singing voice. She produced singles for Fleetwood Mac after Nicks and Buckingham joined—not before.³

As a California band, Fleetwood Mac occupied the same commercial space as acts like the Eagles, but with richer syntax. The rebelliousness of rock and the angst of the blues were tempered by harmonic Novocain, pulsed ambience, and melodies that rose and fell like the orbs in a lava lamp. Nicks added a playful diablerie to the mix, and the listener feels the strength of her will even as part of a languorous vibe. *Rumours*, her second record with Fleetwood Mac, is remarkably still on the charts, thanks to the enduring appeal of her song "Dreams," Buckingham's "Go Your Own Way," Christine McVie's "Don't Stop," and the magical effect on all the tracks of the layers and layers of overdubs. Not all the great music made the final cut. The song Nicks cared about the most

at the time, the love-hate anthem “Silver Springs,” was excised for logistical reasons. (In addition, Buckingham was embarrassed by the intimate circumstances that inspired it.)

In remarks for the 2013 deluxe edition of *Rumours*, Buckingham called the process of making the album “organic.”⁴ It is a synthesis, perhaps, but not a product of effortless growth, given that most of the songs went through multiple late-night drafts. Nothing just grew; the album was meticulously cultivated, and the process proved personally as well as professionally fractious. As Jessica Hopper of *Pitchfork* puts it in her review of the rerelease, the production is as close to perfect as twenty-four tracks can get. *Rumours* is “so flawless it feels far from nature,” she writes. “It is more like a peak human feat of Olympic-level studio craft. It was made better by its myopia and brutal circumstances: the wounded pride of a recently dumped Buckingham, the new hit of ‘Rhiannon,’ goading Nicks to fight for inclusion of her own songs, Christine McVie attempting to salve her heart with ‘Songbird.’”⁵ The success of *Rumours* was breathtaking, topping the billboard charts for thirty-one weeks and selling ten million copies in its first year. Warner put the album on the cover of its 1977 annual report.

The popularity complicated the making of a sequel to the point of creative paralysis. It could not be topped, but the band was under pressure to at least equal it. *Tusk*, the double album follow-up to *Rumours*, takes experimentally anti-*Rumours* license. Dissonant pitch clusters and suggestive noises recall what modernists of earlier times called *flaques sonores* (sound puddles). The title track, referencing male genitalia, involves a marching band—excess for excess’s sake, given the remixing required to wrestle the trumpets and trombones playing the stinger chords into tune. The result was a commercial flop that has been extensively analyzed, with Nicks often bearing the brunt of critical censure.⁶ “All the weakest songs on *Tusk* came from her pen,” music critic Geoffrey Himes declares, condemning “Angel” along with the rest.⁷ His claim becomes accurate when negated; the strongest songs are hers.

The most successful commercial band of the seventies created, in the final year of that decade, a brilliant album whose brilliance rested in its absence of commercial appeal, and *Tusk* gained cult status as a decadent Los Angeles response to the punk movement.⁸ The albums that followed, *Mirage* and *Tango in the Night*, are, as the first title suggests, simulacra produced in the mid-eighties to sound like Fleetwood Mac in the mid-seventies. But the moment had largely passed. Production technologies could not replace the beating heart of musicians singing their

songs. Only Nicks's track "When I See You Again" adds some sense of sincerity to an otherwise over-polished recording that makes clear the band members were never in the studio at the same time.

Nicks's later solo career—inspired by country music, synth pop, Tom Petty, and Prince—commands less attention in the mainstream media than the murky prism of half-truth, biography, and reporting that defines the legacy of Fleetwood Mac.⁹ She is twice, however, a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, with her second induction in 2019 a testament to the space she has carved out on her own and with those who believed in her being on her own. The picture of her career, the facets of her success, becomes all the richer when her demos, alternate and extended mixes, and duets with others are taken into account. On her retrospective box set *Enchanted* (1998), the process behind familiar songs is presented for all to hear, and the less familiar songs have their own stories to tell.

Popular music experts are careful to preserve the distinction between the "real person," a "persona," and any given "character" when talking about songwriters and their songs. Nicks consciously blurs these categories.¹⁰ In "Landslide," she expresses her own feelings about aging; she sometimes dedicates her performance to her father. "Gypsy" allegorizes an intense childhood friendship, and "Mabel Normand" forges a parallel between herself and a silent film actress. "Rhiannon" is an example of another sort. The song, Nicks shares with her audiences, is about an "old Welsh witch," obscuring the more immediate inspiration of a 1973 novel of the occult, Mary Bartlet Leader's *Triad*.¹¹ Nicks's "Rhiannon" persona is far removed from the everyday, and yet, according to occult expert Kristen Sollée, "Nicks has done more for the mainstreaming of witchcraft than most out-and-proud witches have."¹² In 2014, for example, Nicks guest-starred in an episode of *American Horror Story: Coven* titled "The Magical Delights of Stevie Nicks." She served as the model for the character Misty Day, an outcast who roams the bayous of Louisiana in communion with nature before her supernatural gifts are discovered and she is taken into Miss Robichaux's Academy for Exceptional Young Ladies, a safe haven for goth femmes. Day meditates, listens to "Rhiannon," and bring souls back from the dead. Nicks, appearing as herself, gives Day a shawl that she has worn on stages around the world. Nicks's attraction to the fantastic has been portrayed as somehow adolescent or guileless. Yet when Led Zeppelin, Blue Öyster Cult, or any number of metal bands delve into the mythic, their fantasies are indulged, even revered.

And while Nicks's creative power can seem inseparable from her sexuality, her femininity dominates her literary imaginings, her musical textures, and her deviations from girl-in-the-band compliance. Femininity has a fraught relationship with rock 'n' roll as chronicled by men. Much writing about the popular music industry exalts male artists, including those at the console adjusting inputs and outputs. Yet nothing can detract from her singular asset: her gold dusk voice and its gothic impurities, described by music critic Amanda Petrusich as a "strange, quivering contralto" denoting "the gloaming—that lambent, transitional moment between night and day."¹³ The voice consoles, Petrusich adds, and offers "shelter" from music's current interest in confrontation. Too often, compromise is misread as capitulation, and acknowledgment of vulnerabilities mistaken for weakness, a willingness to sacrifice agency.

Likewise, women's creative energies are often dismissed as immature, except when they inspire a man who hones his craft, his talent, on her feelings. Nicks's contributions have been reductively portrayed as skeletal, the bare bones of an idea to be fleshed out, then coveted, by others. She has been portrayed as the muse, not the artist. As feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has argued, female imaginings have historically been limited to a "narrow horizon" that prevents them from becoming a threat.¹⁴ Nicks's songs ultimately trouble the tales of women as muse, lover, ingenue, accessory by insisting on the importance of her own imagination.

Stevie Nicks will tell her own story one day with the poems and diaries she has bequeathed to her godchildren.¹⁵ She has talked about sitting down "with some of my girlfriends who have been there for a lot of it, putting on a tape recorder, and speaking from the very beginning."¹⁶ Respecting her long-term intention, my accent falls on her public side, and on demos, songs, styles, and recording techniques, reflecting on my earliest and most recent impressions of her hits. The artist's life is but the scaffold for my discussion of her music.

Technical analysis, historical data, critical theories, first- and second-hand accounts, assertions backed by evidence—all have their limits. I have kept the narrative chronological, detailing how her itinerant childhood forged her art, how she synthesized her influences as she matured, how her attachments and creative impulses shaped Fleetwood Mac, and how that group became greater than the sum of its parts. I trace her solo career through the eighties and nineties to the present.

Part of what follows is aesthetic and analytical, part factually biographical, and part journalistic. I conducted interviews with musicians

and producers and quote from them. I reference books, magazines, academic publications, photo shoots, videos, fan sites, and legends and literature from different cultures to explore Nicks's artistry. Hers is a most American story, and it begins in that most American place: the West.