Carrie & Lowell Analytical Research Paper

Grief is a universal theme in the lives of many, especially concerning the loss of a loved one. It can be all-consuming, crushing, and seemingly impossible to escape. Coping with grief through art, specifically music, can allow us to tap into our emotions and constructively deal with them to provide closure, which is what Sufjan Stevens does in his 2015 album, Carrie & Lowell. Sufjan Stevens, born July 1st, 1975, is an American singer-songwriter and instrumentalist who has released nine solo albums as well as numerous collaborative albums throughout his career. Alongside co-founding his record label, Asthmatic Kitty, with his stepfather, Stevens has received numerous nominations for awards, including a Grammy and Academy Award nomination for his song *Mystery of Love* from the 2017 film *Call Me by Your Name.* Though his musical style is consistently experimental and varies with each album he produces, ranging from electronic to indie-folk, Stevens frequently tackles themes of family, religion, and mythology as he discusses his personal life through his music.

Carrie & Lowell is a deep dive into Stevens’s relationship with his absent mother, or lack thereof. She suffered from substance abuse, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia throughout her life, which caused to her abandon Stevens and his siblings when he was one. He rarely saw her throughout his life except for a few summers spent with Carrie and Stevens’s stepfather, Lowell, at their house in Eugene, Oregon when he was young. She died from stomach cancer in 2012, which inspired Stevens to create this album in an attempt to cope with his conflicted emotions after his mother’s death and try to get closer to her even after her passing. Through his poetic lyricism in Carrie & Lowell, Sufjan Stevens discusses the impact that the time spent with his mother in Oregon during his youth had on their relationship, how he dealt with his grief through unhealthy outlets, and learned to appreciate his mother while also being able to criticize her actions. Written in an indie-folk style, the album, with its scarce instrumentation and emotion-wrought vocals that depart from Stevens’s previously grand, climactic orchestration, allows for an intimate, acoustic view into how Stevens processes his grief and comes to term with his mother’s impact on his life, during and after her own.

The album itself consists of 11 songs, each contributing to one of the three main themes explored in the music: dealing with Carrie’s absence and reconnecting during their summers together, his unhealthy coping, and getting closer to Carrie, or at least the idea of her, after her death. Losing one of the supposed main figures of stability in his life at such a young age created uncertainty for Stevens at a time in development when consistent and unwavering support was highly necessary. The only time that he felt this stability was when he and his siblings were able to visit and spend time with their mother and stepfather over the span of a few summers, a period that Stevens called his “season of hope” (Stosuy 2015). He was able to connect with his mother for the first time in a way he hadn’t been able to in the past, and with the added support and stability provided by his stepfather Lowell, was able to have a sense of normalcy. Lowell Brams, who Carrie married shortly after having Sufjan, said in an interview, “A lot of the best times we had while we were married were when the kids were with us,” (Dombal 2015). Often understated by Carrie’s impact, both positive and negative, on Stevens, those summers in Oregon were only as impactful as they were because of Lowell, who continued his support of Stevens even after his eventual divorce from Carrie.

In the album’s 5th track, *Eugene*, which summarizes the value of the summer spent in Oregon, Stevens repeatedly closes each verse with the lyrics, “I just want to be near you,” emphasizing the need of this young child for a relationship with his mother. Despite the pain she caused him time and time again, Stevens repeatedly affirms throughout the album his desire to be close to her. She was an unattainable figure, one he so desperately craved to connect with yet wasn’t able to through no fault of his own. These three Eugene summers impacted Stevens in a way that can be visualized throughout the entirety of the album, with references and allusions to Oregon-specific places and events dotted throughout the lyrics. He recalls revelations had on top of Spencer’s Butte, the tallest point in Oregon, in the song *All of Me Wants All of You,* whereStevens can’t help but desire his mother despite the resentment he holds for her. His resentment manifests in the lyrics, “Now all of me thinks less of you,” but the echoing statement that follows, “All of me wants all of you,” pokes holes in the previous declaration, exposing the love he has for her. References to the Tillamook burn, a highly destructive forest fire, in *4th of July* as a metaphor for the quickness that Carrie’s cancer spread and comparing his mother to the Lost Blue Bucket Mine, a gold-rush era mine supposedly so rich in minerals that you could fill buckets with gold, in *Blue Bucket of Gold* continue this idea that the summers he spent with Carrie were incredibly formative and still shape his view of her.

These Eugene summers were short-lived, despite their effective nature in repairing the relationship between mother and son. Carrie was absent in Stevens’s life after these summers, only reentering briefly before her passing where she once again left him, this time permanently. The impact of losing a mother, even one that barely contributed to raising their child, is one that devastates deeply. Throughout his life all Sufjan wanted was for his mother to be a part of his life and to give him the care and attention that he had been lacking. The title track, *Carrie & Lowell*, has Stevens singing, “Carrie come home,” expressing his desire for his mother to not just return to him, but also want to play an active role in his life. After her passing, Stevens struggled with coping and grieved the loss of something he wanted so much but was barely able to hold onto during his life. Turning to unhealthy coping mechanisms is never the ideal way to deal with tough circumstances, but for someone wanting to relieve the pain, guilt, and hollowness of loss it can seem like the only viable option.

Following his mother’s passing, Stevens suffered from guilt, self-loathing, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts as he struggled to come to terms with his loss and the fact that he would never have a chance to have a relationship with her. In the 2nd track, *Should Have Known Better*, Stevens sings, “I should have wrote a letter/ Explaining what I feel, that empty feeling,” as he laments everything he could have done to better his relationship with Carrie. In reality, nothing he could have done, from writing letters to talking to her, would have changed the nature of their relationship. In her state, no matter how much she wanted to, she was not able to give him what he needed and was aware of that. In *4th of July*, the lyrics, “And I'm sorry I left, but it was for the best, though it never felt right,” are sung from Carrie’s perspective as she and Sufjan converse in her hospital room before her passing. She thought that in order for him to be able to live a life of value and pursue the talents she knew he had, she couldn’t be there, no matter how much it hurt him. Whether or not this is true is a complicated issue, but Carrie felt that she would cause more damage than good to him and his siblings, which in the end cost them their mother at the expense of what she thought would be them not having her as a burden.

Despite this fact, Stevens was still damaged from the absence of his mother and continued to feel the despair of that lack as he spiraled. Stevens fell into drinking, highlighted in the Eugene lyrics, "Now I'm drunk and afraid/ Wishing the world would go away," and continued his descent into his own darkness, with the lowest points of his life contained in the song, The Only Thing. He discusses driving his car off a cliff and cutting his arms, “Cross hatch, warm bath, Holiday Inn after dark,” even going so far as to question, “Do I care if I survive this.” He did nothing wrong in his life concerning his relationship with his mother, it was a one-sided issue for most of her time alive, yet he can’t help but feel immense guilt and blames himself for the failed prospect of what could have been a healthy relationship between the two. Throughout this period of grief and desperation Stevens repeats, “Everything I feel returns to you somehow”, affirming the fact that his mother, though scarcely in his life, still had an immense impact on him when even after her death. It was her absence more than anything that caused Stevens to feel such grief since he no longer had the chance to make things right and attempt to repair their relationship, even though it wasn’t his responsibility to in the first place.

Grappling with his grief, Stevens eventually concludes through his music that he won’t be able to do anything to fix their relationship now that she has passed, and can only reflect on her involvement throughout his life and appreciate her for the moments that she was there. Though she wasn’t a part of his life for most of it, he holds her in high regard, being “only interested in communicating [his] love for her, unconditionally,” and having, “a reciprocal deep love and care for each other,” (Dombal 2015) as he spent time with her in her hospital room before her passing. *4th of July*, the song that represents the back-and-forth conversation the two had in the hospital before Carrie’s death, has the mother and son trading pet names back and forth, such as Stevens calling Carrie, “My firefly,” and his, “Star in the sky.” Despite her absence, Stevens sees his mother as a figure of illumination in his life, one that burned bright but incredibly fast. Similarly, Carrie calls Stevens, “My little dove,” and her, “Little Versailles.” She not only sees the value he has with his talents, but she treasures him deeply and only wants the best for him, and for that to happen means that she feels she can’t be there to disrupt it. They don’t know how to explain their love for each other with the limited time they have so in trading these pet names back and forth it’s, “as if they are constantly trying and inevitably failing to invent new ways to describe the shape-shifting complexity of their love,” (Zoldaz 2020). It’s only by reflecting on the nature of their relationship that Stevens realizes he can grieve and miss his mother with all his being, yet still recognize the damage she caused throughout his life and gain closure.

In previous albums, Stevens takes the approach of a very fantasized and idealistic approach to the themes and ideas he explores in his music, often glorifying or understating the real-world implications. He struggled with grounding his mother’s death in reality and detailed in an interview that, “I'm prone to making my life, my family, and the world around me complicit in my cosmic fable, and often it's not fair to manipulate the hard facts of life into a vision quest,” (Dombal 2015). The benefit of creating an album in an indie-folk style came in the form of grounding Stevens to realistically process his grief. Traditionally, Indie-Folk music combines the themes and messaging of folk music, particularly ideas concerning real-life issues of family, death, poverty, and addiction, with more contemporary, yet acoustic instrumentation. In this case, the themes and messages he was trying to tackle and explore have very life-impacting results that wouldn’t effectively be displayed with showy electronic beats. Indie-Folk tends to sound more gritty and real than commercialized pop music and connects with audiences wanting to channel their own issues into an outlet that will help them deal with them. The grounded approach that messaging in Indie-Folk lends itself to is exactly what Stevens needed to counter his fantastical and romanticized view of things, as well as create a very intimate setting that allows listeners to understand the lyrics more than focusing on the music itself.

Similarly to other Indie-Folk music produced in the 2010s, such as with bands like The Lumineers, Of Monsters and Men, and Fleet Foxes, the popularity of Indie-Folk dramatically increased in response to the technology-heavy, highly produced, and highly stimulating pop music of the early 2000s. Listeners taste migrated towards the natural sounds and acoustic instruments of Indie-Folk, seeking comfort in the relatability and down-to-earth energy it brings with it. A bare-bones, acoustical approach to producing this album not only served the purpose of helping Stevens focus solely on channeling his pain into the masterfully written lyrics found throughout the album, but created a feeling of authenticity to the art he was producing. It didn’t need a grand production or intensely electronic sounds to garner massive popularity, but the rawness of the grief the album explores is more effective at portraying the message than it would be in any other genre.

The previously mentioned musical aspects of the album, such as its pared back acoustic instrumentation and hollow sound that embody the emptiness associated with grief, along with the delicate vocals from Stevens backed by the whisperings of other vocalists all serve to unify and enhance the messaging and themes of the album. Instrumentally, the absence of his usual intensely orchestrated composition is filled with percussive piano notes and flowing background tones underneath his vocals, allowing for his vocals and especially the lyrics to take precedence and allow the listener to fully absorb the haunting nature of the song. Vocally, the approach Stevens takes to singing the lyrics, with its echoing of the verses and lilting falsetto, create a fragile and hollow sound as he channels all his emotions surrounding his grief into the music. The consistent, yet quiet chorus of singing in the background gives the album a haunting edge and brings it closer to the idea of death that the album is so centered around.

Carrie & Lowell by Sufjan Stevens is a masterfully written, lyrically elaborate, and overall stunning album that dissects Stevens relationship with his late, absent mother in a way that appreciates the time they were able to spend together, highlights the struggle Stevens had with his own grief after her passing, and allows Stevens to gain closure in the idea that he can love her as a mother while also recognizing that her behavior caused him harm. Throughout the album, Stevens makes various references to places and events from his summers spent with his mother and stepfather in Eugene, Oregon and how the time spent with Carrie during this period was formative for him. Stevens discusses how the loss of his mother caused him to turn to unhealthy methods of coping as he spiraled into depression and subsequently used music to help him collect his thoughts and express his feelings. He learns to love her for who she was to him in the moments that she was able to be present in his life, yet can understand that glorifying her and erasing her wrongdoings won’t help him in the end. Stevens also departs from his usual grand compositions, instead choosing to write in the Indie-Folk style that lends itself to tougher subjects not usually talked about in mainstream pop music and utilizes acoustics over heavy electronics that give the album a grounded and authentic feeling. The pared back instrumentals allow for Stevens’s heartfelt and poetic lyrics to take center stage and be fully absorbed by the listener. Each aspect of the composition unifies Stevens’s processing of his own grief into a final, heart wrenching love letter towards his mother that at the same time, allows him to move towards closure after the volatility she presented during her lifetime.

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