

= So Beautiful or So What =

So Beautiful or So What is the twelfth studio album by American folk rock singer @-@ songwriter Paul Simon . For the album , he reunited with former collaborator and record producer Phil Ramone . Having experimented with rhythm @-@ based textures for much of the previous two decades , Simon returned to composing songs rather traditionally using only his acoustic guitar . These songs were further augmented by experimental recording practices in the studio . The album was largely recorded in a small cottage at Simon 's home in New Canaan , Connecticut .

The music of So Beautiful or So What features West African blues @-@ inspired guitar playing , Indian @-@ style percussion , and experimentation with samples , which ranged from an excerpt from a 1941 sermon to nighttime ambience in Kenya . The songs were recorded with little bass but with a very large presence of bells . Much of Simon 's lyrics touch on themes of spirituality and mortality , which Simon said was unintentional and resulted naturally in his songwriting process for the album .

When So Beautiful or So What was released by Hear Music on April 8 , 2011 , it received widespread acclaim from critics , many of whom considered it Simon 's best work in two decades . It appeared on many year @-@ end critics ' lists as one of the year 's best records . The album also became his highest US chart debut , reaching number four on the Billboard 200 , and charted within the top ten in nine other countries .

= = Recording and production = =

For So Beautiful or So What , Simon reunited with record producer and former collaborator Phil Ramone , who previously worked with him on Simon & Garfunkel 's 1982 live album The Concert in Central Park . According to Simon , the reunion came casually ; he told Ramone when they met each other that he was beginning to work on a new album and , as Ramone lived in the next town , they decided it would be easy to work together again . Simon recorded the album at his small cottage in New Canaan , Connecticut . The recording sessions often consisted solely of Simon , Ramone , and engineer Andy Smith . Throughout the production of the record , the album 's engineers would gradually make upgrades to the space during months off . As it was not acoustically designed or soundproofed , Smith often employed iZotope RX software to rid the recordings of extra noise , such as an oak tree above the home from which acorns fell , interrupting recordings . Keeping in line with his experimental attitude , Simon decided to record the acorns , remarking , " All sounds are musical once you start to listen . " Occasionally , Simon would record in the control room instead . Like all of Simon 's output from his 1997 effort Songs from The Capeman onward , the album was recorded digitally using Pro Tools .

Much time was spent on getting guitars to sound as Simon preferred . A bit of experimentation among the additional session players occurred , from which Simon would edit himself , compiling them together or often deleting them altogether . Many songs were recorded with a hand @-@ built cigar @-@ box guitar , which Simon bought from Mississippi blues musician Super Chikan . Analogue effects were applied before recording digitally to keep mixes simple ; this method also inspired Simon while arranging the songs . Smith would burn Simon a compact disc each evening of the day 's session , and he would return the next day with notes on the recordings . This resulted in mixes being created as the album developed , rather than at the end of the process . Simon and Ramone often listened to their recordings while driving around , noting what would need changes .

The process lasted over a year . Additional recording took place at Simon 's summer home in Montauk , New York on Long Island , but less so than his previous efforts . Home recording , as Ramone told Sound on Sound shortly after the album 's release , required a certain discipline . Simon would often arrive in the morning and recording until nightfall . Percussion and vocals were overdubbed at Germano Studios . The Indian ensemble on " Dazzling Blue " was recorded at Clinton Studios in New York City , while a bluegrass ensemble was cut at Tony Bennett 's New Jersey studio . Simon 's wife , Edie Brickell , and his teenage daughter Lulu contributed harmonies , while Chris Bear of indie rock band Grizzly Bear contributed electronic drum parts to the album .

Simon financed the recording of *So Beautiful or So What* himself after being released from his 30 @-@ year record contract with Warner Bros. Records . After the recording sessions were finished , he signed a deal with Concord Music Group to distribute the album . Simon said , " It 's the best work I 've done in 20 years . " The cover art , titled " DNA Mutation " , was designed by visual artist and NASA systems engineer Sven Geier .

= = Music and lyrics = =

So Beautiful or So What finds Simon returning to more harmonic @-@ based compositions than rhythm @-@ based . This was spurred from when he realized his favorite song on his 2006 effort *Surprise* , " Everything About It Is a Love Song " , contained a chord progression he found particularly interesting . After coming to this realization , he focused on the album ' s three ballads , " Questions for the Angels " , " Amulet " , and " Love and Hard Times " . Unlike his previous rhythm @-@ based albums , in which he would gain inspiration for his guitar parts from pre @-@ recorded backing tracks , Simon took a more traditional approach to building the songs on *So Beautiful or So What* . He wrote songs at home before developing them further in the studio with the help of a natural click track , such as " a percussion instrument , or even just tapping out a rhythm on his guitar . " He overdubbed additional elements afterwards , including additional guitar parts and percussion . Simon began envisioning the album ' s sequencing when he only had a few songs written , letting it inform his songwriting .

The music for *So Beautiful or So What* was inspired by West African blues , which Simon combined with " Indian drumming , Old Hollywood strings and bluegrass harmony singing . " The songs employ a wide variety of samples , including from older blues and gospel recordings . " Love Is Eternal Sacred Light " contains a harmonica sample from Sonny Terry , and " Love and Blessings " lifts from The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet . Simon did not want to record an ordinary studio album and instead , according to Ramone , wanted " lots of space with lots of atmosphere and feeling ... Rather than go for hugely orchestrated ideas he was going , for example , for overtones in bells and gongs . Or if a sax or a kora comes in , they 're there to do something specific , and not to fill in the space . " The album ' s music is also largely devoid of heavy bass (some tracks actually using a baritone guitar instead) , and drums are very quiet and reserved . Smith said percussion instruments , including exotic bells , ancient hand bells , and glockenspiels , were Simon ' s favorite to record with for the album . In using bells to augment the sound , Simon put them behind certain guitar notes to ? highlight ? the sound , as he wanted the recordings to be devoid of echo ; he found that using bells created only a slight echo , with an odd , atmospheric tone that he preferred . Drummer Jim Oblon placed towels over each drums to emphasize the higher @-@ frequency percussive instruments .

The songs on *So Beautiful or So What* touch on subjects such as love , mortality , and faith . In terms of songwriting , Simon did not approach each new song with a theme ; instead , he let them evolve naturally from the first line he would compose . Simon had no plans to pursue religious writing , but it ended up particularly strong in the album ' s lyrics . He noted that " five of the first six " songs he wrote touched on themes of God : " I wondered whether there was a subconscious theme that I was tapping into . I have used Christian symbols and imagery before in songs . It ? s very strongly evocative , so it may just be coincidence ? but it may not be . " The A.V. Club suggested that the album ' s gospel influence inspired the touch of humor when discussing dark subjects such as death .

" Getting Ready for Christmas Day " was one of the album ' s earliest completed songs , and it contains a sample from a 1941 sermon by the Reverend J.M. Gates . The sermon inspired the song ' s creation , with a certain rhythmic tone to his oration that interested him . Simon heard the sermon on a box set titled *Goodbye Babylon* , which consists early 20th century Americana . It came together quicker than other songs , with Simon recording his guitar live . The track also references his nephew , who served multiple tours in the Iraq War . " The Afterlife " concerns a man dying and getting to heaven , where he waits in line to meet with God , where everyone is " filling out forms and waiting in line to catch ' a glimpse of the divine . ' " While in line , he unsuccessfully hits on a

woman . When he finally meets God , he is taken aback , and can only spout gibberish . The point of the song is that having questions for God would cease to be relevant if one were to confront God face @-@ to @-@ face due the enormity of such a theoretical situation .

" Dazzling Blue " is based on his relationship with wife Edie Brickell , and the title references her favorite color . " The CAT scan 's eye sees what the heart 's concealing " , sang Simon over African cadences and Indian tablas , before marvelling at how his wife and he " were born beneath a star of dazzling blue " . He said the song reminded him of his work as a part of Simon & Garfunkel . " Rewrite " features segments of recordings made on a small digital recorder by Brickell on a 2009 family trip together in Kenya . Simon was frustrated over the guitar tone in his song and attached the sound of a wildebeest to a certain guitar note each time it occurred , in an effort to create an interesting sound . The song contains nighttime ambience recorded during the trip . It was written about a burned out Vietnam veteran imagining that he could rewrite his life , in order to give it a happy ending . " Love and Hard Times " is an affirmation of love for Brickell . The beginning of the song references ? God and his only son ? visiting Earth . Simon noted that the song ? s thesis is being thankful at the highest level . The track contains orchestral arrangement from Gil Goldstein , which was recorded at Avatar Studios , as Ramone wanted a larger room to record in .

" Questions for the Angels " includes a reference to American rapper Jay @-@ Z , which was inspired by a billboard featuring him that was present over the Brooklyn Bridge for a time . Simon mentioned that he would pass it on his way to the Brooklyn Academy of Music when they were holding a month @-@ long celebration of his music in April 2008 . Simon included the line to create a sharp transition from angels in Heaven to a downtown Brooklyn street . " So Beautiful or So What " contains what Simon once admitted is " one of [his] favorite Bo Diddley rhythms , " and the song ? s title references Miles Davis 's " So What " . The title is a question Simon envisioned when facing the enormity of the infinite . The song almost became a collaboration with Bob Dylan ; Simon felt two verses might be nice for him and sent him a message through their mutual manager . Although Dylan said that he liked the song , Simon did not hear back in sufficient time , as the album was on a deadline .

= = Release and reception = =

Many songs from So Beautiful or So What were made available in various forms before their release on the album . " Rewrite " and " Love and Hard Times " appeared in Simon 's 2008 book Lyrics ; 1964 @-@ 2008 , " Questions for the Angels " was included on the 2009 Starbucks compilation This Better Be Good , and the lead single " Getting Ready for Christmas Day " premiered on National Public Radio on November 16 , 2010 . On April 5 , 2011 , So Beautiful or So What was available for streaming on the album 's website of the same name for the week preceding its official release . It was released on formats including digital download , vinyl LP , and a CD deluxe edition with a DVD featuring footage of Simon 's live performances at Webster Hall . Rolling Stone held a sweepstakes for fans to win a collector 's edition box set , which was released in a limited amount of 1 @, @ 000 copies and included the CD / DVD deluxe edition , a vinyl copy , and a 12 ' x 12 ' lithograph and replica notebook .

When So Beautiful or So What was released in the United States , it debuted at number four on the Billboard 200 and sold 68 @, @ 000 copies in its first week . It was Simon 's highest chart debut on the Billboard 200 , and by October 2011 , it had sold 254 @, @ 000 copies in the US . In the United Kingdom , the album debuted at number six on the British albums chart , selling 21 @, @ 993 copies in its first week . It was Simon 's ninth top @-@ ten solo album in the UK .

So Beautiful or So What received widespread acclaim from critics . At Metacritic , which assigns a normalized rating out of 100 to reviews from mainstream publications , the album received an average score of 85 , based on 27 reviews . Many critics compared its diverse influences to Simon 's style on his 1986 album Graceland . In a review for AllMusic , senior editor Stephen Thomas Erlewine said the music is not only focused but " vivid , vibrant , and current in a way none of [Simon 's] peers have managed to achieve " . Los Angeles Times writer Margaret Wappler praised its " multiethnic landscape " of American folk and Afropop influences on an album that is his best

since 1990 's Rhythm of the Saints . In The New York Times , Jon Pareles took note of Simon 's lyrics : " Sketches of individuals and moments are intertwined with grander pronouncements ; unforced humor tempers gloomier reflections " . Will Hodgkinson from The Times believed his meditations on the afterlife are informed by both youthful enthusiasm and the wisdom of old age , while The Guardian 's Maddy Costa said Simon " finds an answer to the ineffable in song " .

Many reviewers took note of the rather overt religious symbolism in Simon 's lyrics ; one Irish blogger facetiously called So Beautiful or So What the year 's best Christian music album , while American evangelical journalist Cathleen Falsani said it was the most significant record of spiritually reflective music in recent years . Writing for MSN Music , Robert Christgau found Simon 's usual folk rock " graced with global colors that sound as natural " as his guitar and said his lyrics are imbued with gratitude for his wife 's love and God , although he disagreed with Simon 's view of God 's benevolent nature . Andy Gill from The Independent was more critical and found Simon 's ruminations on love , age , and mortality trivial , while Pitchfork Media critic Stephen M. Deusner said the record " can be stodgy in its emotions and a bit too devoted to its motifs " . At the end of 2011 , So Beautiful or So What was voted the 14th best album of the year in The Village Voice 's Pazz & Jop , an annual poll of American critics nationwide . Christgau , the poll 's creator , ranked it 3rd on his year @-@ end list for The Barnes & Noble Review . Rolling Stone also named it the year 's 3rd best record , while Mojo ranked it 15th .

= = Track listing = =

All songs written by Paul Simon .

" Getting Ready for Christmas Day " ? 4 : 06

" The Afterlife " ? 3 : 40

" Dazzling Blue " ? 4 : 32

" Rewrite " ? 3 : 49

" Love and Hard Times " ? 4 : 09

" Love Is Eternal Sacred Light " ? 4 : 02

" Amulet " ? 1 : 36

" Questions for the Angels " ? 3 : 49

" Love and Blessings " ? 4 : 18

" So Beautiful or So What " ? 4 : 07

Sample credits

" Getting Ready for Christmas Day " contains excerpts from the 1941 sermon of the same name by Reverend J. M. Gates with congregation .

" Love Is Eternal Sacred Light " contains excerpts from " Train Whistle Blues " .

" Love and Blessings " contains excerpts from " Golden Gate Gospel Train " , recorded by The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet in 1938 .

= = Personnel = =

Credits are adapted from the album 's liner notes .

= = Charts = =

= = Release history = =