

= Illinois ( Sufjan Stevens album ) =

Illinois ( styled Sufjan Stevens Invites You To : Come On Feel the Illinoise on the cover ; sometimes written as Illinoise ) is a 2005 concept album by American indie folk songwriter Sufjan Stevens . It is his fifth studio album , and features songs referencing places , events , and persons related to the U.S. state of Illinois . Illinois is Stevens ' second based on a U.S. state ? part of a planned series of fifty that began with the 2003 album Michigan that Stevens has since acknowledged was a gag .

Stevens recorded and produced the album at multiple venues in New York City using low @-@ fidelity studio equipment and a variety of instruments between late 2004 and early 2005 . The artwork and lyrics explore the history , culture , art , and geography of the state ? Stevens developed them after analyzing criminal , literary , and historical documents . Following a July 4 , 2005 release date , Stevens promoted Illinois with a world tour .

Critics praised the album for its well @-@ written lyrics and complex orchestrations ; in particular , reviewers noted Stevens ' progress as a songwriter since the release of Michigan . Illinois was named the best @-@ reviewed album of 2005 by review aggregator Metacritic , and was included on several reviewers ' " best of the decade " lists ? including those of Paste , NPR , and Rolling Stone . The album amounted to Stevens ' greatest public success to date : it was his first to place on the Billboard 200 , and it topped the Billboard list of " Heatseekers Albums " . The varied instrumentation and experimental songwriting on the album invoked comparisons to work by Steve Reich , Neil Young , and The Cure . Besides numerous references to Illinois history , geography , and attractions , Stevens continued a theme of his songwriting career by including multiple references to his Christian faith .

= = Background , recording , and tour = =

Stevens launched his 50 @-@ state project in 2003 with the album Michigan and chose to focus on Illinois with this recording because " it wasn 't a great leap " , and he liked the state because he considered it the " center of gravity " for the American Midwest . Before creating the album , Stevens read literature by Illinois authors Saul Bellow and Carl Sandburg , and studied immigration records and history books for the state ? he made the deliberate decision to avoid current events and focused on historical themes . He also took trips through several locations in Illinois and asked friends and members of Internet chat rooms for anecdotes about their experiences in the state . Although he began work in 2004 on Oregon @-@ themed songs and briefly considered releasing a Rhode Island 7 " , Stevens has since not released another album focused on a state , saying in a November 2009 interview with Paste that " the whole premise was such a joke , " and telling Andrew Purcell of The Guardian in October 2009 " I have no qualms about admitting [ the fifty states project ] was a promotional gimmick . " An Arkansas @-@ related song was released through NPR as " The Lord God Bird " and material intended for New Jersey and New York became The BQE .

All of the songs on Illinois were written , recorded , engineered , and produced by Stevens , with most of the material being recorded at The Buddy Project studio in Astoria , Queens , and in Stevens ' Brooklyn apartment . As with his previous albums , Stevens recorded in various locations , with additional piano recorded in St. Paul 's Church in Brooklyn ; strings and vocals performed in collaborators ' apartments ; electronic organ recorded in the New Jerusalem Recreational Room in Clarksboro , New Jersey ; and vibraphone played at Carroll Music Studios in New York City . Stevens mostly created the album without collaboration , focusing on the writing , performance , and technical creation of the album by himself : " I was pretty nearsighted in the construction of Illinois . I spent a lot of time alone , a few months in isolation working on my own and in the studio . I let things germinate and cultivate independently , without thinking about an audience or a live show at all . "

Stevens employed low @-@ fidelity recording equipment , which allowed him to retain creative control and keep costs low on recording Illinois . Typically , his process involved recording to 32 kHz 8 @-@ track tape using inexpensive microphones such as the Shure SM57 and AKG C1000 . He then employed Pro Tools for mixing and other production tasks .

After consulting with Michael Kaufmann and Lowell Brams of Asthmatic Kitty about the amount of

material he had recorded , Stevens decided against a double album , saying that would be " arrogant " . In 2006 , several tracks recorded during these sessions were sent to Seattle @-@ based musician and producer James McAllister for additional instrumentation and production , and were released in 2006 on the follow @-@ up album The Avalanche : Outtakes and Extras from the Illinois Album . Among these outtakes are three separate recordings of the song " Chicago " ? including the " Multiple Personality Disorder Version " , which was produced during a subsequent tour . The " Adult Contemporary Easy Listening Version " of the song was supposed to appear on the Illinois album , but was changed at the last minute .

Illinois was released on July 4 , 2005 , through Rough Trade Records in Europe and was distributed domestically by Asthmatic Kitty Records starting July 5 , 2005 . Although he initially had no plans to perform this material live , less than two weeks after the release of Illinois , Stevens embarked on a North American tour to promote the album , performing with a string section of eight to ten members named the Illinoismakers . He deliberately chose to avoid television as a promotional tool and focused on the tour performances themselves . He was supported on some dates by opening acts Liz Janes ( who is also signed to Asthmatic Kitty ) and Laura Veirs as well as Illinois collaborator Shara Nova 's solo project My Brightest Diamond . He toured in support of the album again from September through November 2006 , this time including dates in several European cities . During the 2006 dates , Stevens and his band transitioned from wearing University of Illinois @-@ themed outfits to butterfly suits and bird wings .

= = Musical style and thematic elements = =

Reviewers have noted similarities between this album and those of musicians and composers in several musical genres ? from pop to contemporary classical , even show tunes and jazz @-@ based time signatures . The lyrics and their rich thematic elements have been noted for their literary quality , earning comparisons to Ralph Waldo Emerson , Henry David Thoreau , William Carlos Williams , and Walt Whitman .

= = = Musical style = = =

Reviewers of Illinois have compared Stevens ' style to Steve Reich , Vince Guaraldi , the Danielson Famile , Neil Young , Nick Drake , and Death Cab for Cutie . Stevens ' use of large orchestral arrangements in his music ? much of it played by himself through the use of multi @-@ track recording ? has been noted by several reviewers . Rolling Stone summarized the musical influences of Illinois , saying " the music draws from high school marching bands , show tunes and ambient electronics ; we can suspect Steve Reich 's Music for 18 Musicians is an oft @-@ played record in the Stevens household , since he loves to echo it in his long instrumental passages . " A review in The A.V. Club referred to some of the vocal work as " regressively twee communalism " , but found Stevens ' music overall to be " highly developed " . The song " Come On ! Feel the Illinoise ! " uses a saxophone part from " Close to Me " by The Cure .

The creation of Illinois marked a shift in Stevens ' emphasis on songwriting and studio work toward live performance and more abstract concepts of motion and sound ? subsequent tours and albums emphasized electronic music and modern dance over the indie folk material on Michigan and Illinois . He has ceased writing songs about individual characters with straightforward narratives or concept albums and briefly considered quitting the music business entirely after creating and promoting this album . He also found that the way in which he listened to music had changed after producing Illinois :

I think now I listen more as a technician and a researcher . I 'm always hearing music in terms of what I can take out of it , and I think I 've always listened like that . I have a hard time just listening for pleasure . I 'm much less about instinct , and more of a utilitarian listener . Like , what is the use of this song ? What is the usefulness of this melody for this theme or statement ? What are they doing that 's unusual sounding , and how can I learn from that ?

Stevens is a classically trained oboist and his knowledge of classical and baroque music influenced

many of his arrangements . Stevens himself has noted the influence of composers Igor Stravinsky , Sergei Rachmaninoff , and Edvard Grieg ; along with contemporary composers Terry Riley , Steve Reich , and Philip Glass . The music on this album was written to be grandiose , to match the history of the territory . Stevens used time signature changes in the composition of Illinois for dynamic effect ? for instance , " Come On ! Feel the Illinoise ! " begins with a 5 / 4 time signature and then changes to a standard 4 / 4 later in the song .

= = = Illinois themes = = =

Many of the lyrics in Illinois make references to persons , places , and events related to the state of the same name . " Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland , Illinois " is about a UFO sighting by police officers near Highland , Illinois , where several persons reported seeing a large triangular object with three lights flying at night . " Come on ! Feel the Illinoise ! " makes reference to the World 's Columbian Exposition , which took place in Chicago in 1893 .

" John Wayne Gacy , Jr . " documents the story of the 1970s Chicago @-@ based serial killer of the same name . Several lyrics make explicit references to events in his life : " [ w ] hen the swingset hit his head " refers to an event in Gacy 's childhood , when a swing hit his head and caused a blood clot in his brain ; " He dressed up like a clown for them / with his face paint white and red " alludes to the nickname given to Gacy ? the " Killer Clown " ; and " He put a cloth on their lips / Quiet hands , quiet kiss on the mouth " references Gacy 's use of chloroform to subdue and molest his victims . The song ends with the narrator turning inward with the lyrics : " And in my best behavior , I am really just like him / Look beneath the floorboards for the secrets I have hid . " Stevens stated in a 2009 interview with Paste that " we 're all capable of what [ Gacy ] did . "

" Casimir Pulaski Day " interweaves a personal story with the state holiday Casimir Pulaski Day . " The Man of Metropolis Steals Our Hearts " makes references to Superman , whose fictional hometown of Metropolis was partially modeled after Chicago ( the town of Metropolis , Illinois has also capitalized on this association ) . Jessica Hopper of the Chicago Reader noted that Ray Middleton ? who was the first actor to play the comic book superhero ? was also born in Chicago . " They Are Night Zombies !! They Are Neighbors !! They Have Come Back from the Dead !! Ahhhh ! " makes references to ghost towns of Illinois . Stevens relates experiences from a summer camp he went to as a child in Michigan for " The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us ! " , but moved the locale to Illinois for the sake of the album . The track " Decatur , or , Round of Applause for Your Stepmother ! " includes references to Decatur , Illinois , but Stevens stated the track also acted as " an exercise in rhyme schemes " . Some references to Decatur included in the song were alligator sightings in the area , the equipment manufacturer Caterpillar , and a flood that exhumed a graveyard of soldiers from the Civil War .

Other allusions to the state 's people , places , and events include the Black Hawk War , author Carl Sandburg , Stephen A. Douglas , Abraham Lincoln , the Sangamon River , the Chicago Cubs , the Sears Tower dubbed " Seer 's Tower " ( now called Willis Tower ) , and the localities of Jacksonville , Peoria , Metropolis , Savanna Caledonia , Secor , Magnolia , Kankakee , Evansville , and the several locations named Centerville , Illinois . During the tour following the release of Illinois , Stevens ' band wore cheerleader outfits based on those of the University of Illinois .

= = = Christianity = = =

Although Illinois is a concept album about the U.S. state , Stevens also explored themes related to Christianity and the Bible . As a Christian , he has written and recorded music about spiritual themes throughout his career ? particularly on the 2004 album Seven Swans ? and prefers to talk about religious topics through song rather than directly in interviews or public statements . The song " Decatur , or , Round of Applause for Your Stepmother ! " includes the line " It 's the great I Am " ? taken from the response God gave when Moses asked for his name in the Book of Exodus ( Exodus 3 : 14 ) . " Casimir Pulaski Day " describes the death of a girlfriend due to bone cancer , and the narrator questions God in the process . More abstract allusions appear in " The Man of Metropolis

Steals Our Hearts " , which utilizes Superman as a Christ figure and " The Seer 's Tower " , which references the Book of Revelation and the Second Coming of Christ . Songs which were not written with an explicit theological focus ? such as " John Wayne Gacy , Jr . " ? also feature religious themes such as sin and redemption .

= = Artwork = =

Divya Srinivasan created the album artwork , depicting a variety of Illinois @-@ related themes , including Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln , the Sears Tower , and Black Hawk . The album cover reads , " Sufjan Stevens Invites You To : Come On Feel the Illinoise ! " as a wordplay on the common mispronunciation of the state 's name as " ill @-@ i @-@ NOYZ " and a reference to the Slade song " Cum On Feel the Noize " made famous in the United States by the metal band Quiet Riot . The text on the cover caused some confusion over the actual title of the album ? it is officially titled Illinois , as opposed to Come on Feel the Illinoise or Illinoise . Paste listed Illinois as having the seventh best album art of the decade 2000 ? 2009 . The album also won the PLUG Independent Music Award for Album Art / Packaging of the Year in 2006 .

Shortly after the release of the album , reports arose that DC Comics had issued a cease and desist letter to Asthmatic Kitty because of the depiction of Superman on the cover . However , on October 4 , 2005 , Asthmatic Kitty announced that there had been no cease and desist letter ; the record company 's own lawyers had warned about the copyright infringement . On June 30 , 2005 , Asthmatic Kitty 's distributor Secretly Canadian asked its retailers not to sell the album ; however , it was not recalled . On July 5 , the distributor told its retailers to go ahead and sell their copies , as DC Comics agreed to allow Asthmatic Kitty to sell the copies of the album that were already manufactured , but the image was removed from subsequent pressings . Soon after it was made public that the cover would be changed , copies of the album featuring Superman were sold for as high as \$ 75 on eBay . On the vinyl edition released on November 22 , 2005 , Superman 's image is covered by a balloon sticker . The image of the balloon sticker was also used on the cover of the Compact Disc and later printings of the double vinyl release . Stevens himself was surprised by the development and also had to pay a fee for referencing lyrics from Woody Guthrie 's folk anthem " This Land Is Your Land " in the track " No Man 's Land " , which was later released on The Avalanche .

The 10th anniversary vinyl reissue of Illinois features the Marvel character Blue Marvel , who hails from Chicago , in place of Superman . Asthmatic Kitty obtained permission from Marvel to use the character 's likeness .

= = Reception = =

Illinois was Sufjan Stevens ' greatest commercial and critical success to date . For the first time , his work charted on the Billboard 200 and received several awards from critics .

= = = Sales figures and chart performance = = =

In its first week of sales , Illinois sold 9 @, @ 000 copies , 20 % coming from online sales . Overall , the album sold more than 100 @, @ 000 copies by November 2005 and over 300 @, @ 000 by the end of 2009 . It was the first Sufjan Stevens release to place on the Billboard 200 , reaching No. 121 within eight weeks on the chart . It also placed number one on Billboard 's " Heatseekers Albums " list and number four on the " Independent Albums " list , remaining on them for 32 and 39 weeks respectively .

= = = Critical reception = = =

Critical reception of Illinois was overwhelmingly positive . Review aggregator Metacritic compiled 40 critic reviews of Illinois and gave the album a 90 out of 100 , indicating " universal acclaim " ,

designating it the best @-@ reviewed album of 2005 . Andy Battaglia of The A.V. Club said that Stevens " has grown into one of the best song @-@ makers in indie rock " with the album . Tim Jonze of NME called Illinois " a brainy little fucker " and described Stevens as " prolific , intelligent and ? most importantly ? brimming with heart @-@ wrenching melodies . " Rob Sheffield of Rolling Stone responded favorably to the album , praising the " over @-@ the @-@ top arrangements " and Stevens ' " breathy , gentle voice " . Sheffield criticized " John Wayne Gacy , Jr . " , stating that it " symbolizes nothing about American life except the existence of creative @-@ writing workshops " , but elsewhere praised the personal nature of songs such as " Chicago " and " Casimir Pulaski Day " . Michael Metivier of PopMatters described " John Wayne Gacy , Jr . " as " horrifying , tragic , and deeply sad without proselytizing . " Amanda Petrusich of Pitchfork Media described Illinois as " strange and lush , as excessive and challenging as its giant , gushing song titles . " Dave Simpson of The Guardian echoed this sentiment by saying that the music sounds like " The Polyphonic Spree produced by Brian Eno . " The diversity in instrumentation also received a positive review from Entertainment Weekly 's Kristina Feliciano .

Jesse Jarnow of Paste praised the playful nature of Illinois , commenting that it had " sing @-@ song " melodies and " jaunty " orchestrations . Jarnow also noted ironic lyrics , citing a line from " The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades is Out to Get Us ! " : " I can 't explain the state I 'm in ... " after a section of the song that references many Illinois landmarks . Q called Illinois a " sizeable step forward " from Michigan , and said Stevens ' love for the state of Illinois is infectious . Uncut 's Andy Gill dubbed the album " an extraordinary achievement " . Catherine Lewis of The Washington Post responded favorably to the album , stating that it has well @-@ written lyrics , comparing Stevens ' rhyming to that of Stephin Merritt . Lewis cited " Casimir Pulaski Day " as one of the most memorable songs of the album .

= = = Accolades = = =

Illinois achieved lasting fame with inclusion on numerous reviewers ' " best of the year " and " best of the decade " lists . In particular , the album topped the best of the decade list appearing in the November 2009 issue of Paste and NPR named Illinois on their list of " The Decade 's 50 Most Important Recordings " . Pitchfork Media called Illinois the sixteenth best album of the decade , with Stevens ' previous album ? Michigan ? placing 70 on that same list . The album also won the 2005 New Pantheon Award ? a type of Shortlist Music Prize . The album was also included in the book 1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die . Finally , Paste listed Stevens as one of their " 100 Best Living Songwriters " in 2006 , primarily due to the writing on Michigan and Illinois .

= = Track listing = =

Note that the titles of the songs vary slightly from the Compact Disc , digital , and vinyl releases . Full titles come directly from the vinyl album and have been adapted to the English capitalization standards .

All songs written and composed by Sufjan Stevens and published by New Jerusalem Music , ASCAP .

= = Personnel = =

Sufjan Stevens ? acoustic guitar ; piano ; Wurlitzer ; bass guitar ; drums ; electric guitar ; oboe ; alto saxophone ; flute ; banjo ; glockenspiel ; accordion ; vibraphone ; alto , sopranino , soprano , and tenor recorders ; Casiotone MT @-@ 70 ; sleigh bells ; shaker ; tambourine ; triangle ; electronic organ ; vocals ; arrangement ; engineering ; recording ; production

Julianne Carney ? violin

Alan Douches ? mastering at West West Side Music , Tenafly , New Jersey

Jon Galloway ? remixing on " Chicago " ( To String Remix )

Marla Hansen ? viola

The Illinoismaker Choir ? backing vocals and clapping on " The Black Hawk War , or , How to Demolish an Entire Civilization and Still Feel Good About Yourself in the Morning , or , We Apologize for the Inconvenience but You 're Going to Have to Leave Now , or , ' I Have Fought the Big Knives and Will Continue to Fight Them Until They Are Off Our Lands ! ' " , " Chicago " , " The Man of Metropolis Steals Our Hearts " , " They Are Night Zombies ! ! They Are Neighbors ! ! They Have Come Back from the Dead ! ! Ahhhh ! " , and " The Tallest Man , the Broadest Shoulders "

Tom Eaton

Jennifer Hoover

Katrina Kerns

Beccy Lock

Tara McDonnell

Maria Bella Jeffers ? cello

Katrina Kerns ? backing vocals on " Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland , Illinois " , " Come On ! Feel the Illinoise ! " , " Jacksonville " , " Prairie Fire That Wanders About " , " The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us ! " , " The Seer 's Tower " , " The Tallest Man , the Broadest Shoulders " , and " The Avalanche "

James McAlister ? drums , drum engineering

Craig Montoro ? trumpet , backing vocals on " They Are Night Zombies ! ! They Are Neighbors ! ! They Have Come Back from the Dead ! ! Ahhhh ! "

Rob Moose ? violin

Matt Morgan ? backing vocals on " Decatur , or , Round of Applause for Your Stepmother ! "

Daniel and Elin Smith ? backing vocals and clapping on " Decatur , or , Round of Applause for Your Stepmother ! "

Divya Srinivasan ? artwork

Shara Worden ? backing vocals on " Concerning the UFO Sighting Near Highland , Illinois " , " Come On ! Feel the Illinoise ! " , " John Wayne Gacy , Jr . " , " Casimir Pulaski Day " , " Prairie Fire That Wanders About " , " The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades Is Out to Get Us ! " , " The Seer 's Tower " , " The Tallest Man , the Broadest Shoulders " , and " The Avalanche "