

The background of the cover features a light yellow-to-white gradient with several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across it. These motifs are simple line drawings of leaves on a stem, appearing in various orientations.

# THE WORDS AND MUSIC OF VAN MORRISON

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Erik Hage

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# The Words and Music of Van Morrison

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# The Words and Music of Van Morrison

Erik Hage

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# Series Foreword

Although the term, *singer-songwriter*, might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles are represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named here will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers, whereas others have, but all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, whereas others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the



series differ from book to book. All, however, are organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone  
Series Editor

# Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my acquisitions editor, Dan Harmon, for championing this project and for bringing me into the Praeger Singer-Songwriter series. I would also like to express my gratitude and appreciation to many of my colleagues at the State University of New York at Cobleskill. My department chair, Dr. Susan Zimmermann, has been an unwavering advocate and friend, and she has ensured that faculty members have the time, space, and support for such endeavors. I would also like to thank Margrethe Lauber, whose experiences in Belfast and understanding of Van Morrison have been inspiring, and Joanna Sanchez, my steadfast communications colleague. Christina Trees, despite being an economist, has allowed me to bend her ear too often about this project, and her bright conversation has sustained me during many a long workday. My dean, Thomas Hickey, and the college provost, Anne Myers, have supported this project and offered the release time to make it happen. Mark Braun and Suzanne Fine have offered encouragement and music, and the staff of the Van Wagenen Library has maintained a fine collection of materials, both tangible and electronic, that were essential to this process. Katie Horn-Scarpulla and John Scarpulla have offered wonderful encouragement, and Margaret Hayes, the secretary of Ryder Hall, has been a one-woman support system. *Metroland*, the alternative newsweekly of Albany, New York, has long allowed me a forum for my writing, and my development as a cultural critic is due in large part to that opportunity. Ira Robbins, the founder of *Trouser Press* and my onetime editor-in-chief at MJI Broadcasting and Premiere Radio Networks—and a writer *par excellence*—has provided an example of what a true “hardcore music critic” should be, and music journalist and

former colleague Steve Reynolds has taught me, by example, to never lose my enthusiasm for music and to always be searching out new sounds. My father, Gordon Hage, has encouraged me longer than I can remember, and his encouragement for this particular work—despite being somewhat of a “square cat”—was unflagging. Most significantly, I need to express my gratitude to my inner circle: my kids, Sophie and Owen; two other kids in my life, Juliet and Claire; and most of all my very significant other, Beth, whose love, support, and wisdom make everything a possibility.

# Introduction

If you're looking for me to sum up or define the work of Van Morrison in this introduction, I simply can't do that—for more than anything Van Morrison seems to constitute an entire universe unto himself.

For one, he has so many musical identities. It's hard to imagine that the person who wrote and howled the primitive garage rock of “Gloria” in 1964 is the same person behind the sprightly radio pop of “Brown Eyed Girl” or the jazz vamping of “Moondance.” And how do you rectify *any* of those three personae with the daring singer who growled and improvised his way through the experimental “Listen to the Lion” in 1972 or penned such American love ballad standards as “Have I Told You Lately?” or “Someone Like You” in the late 1980s? There are some listeners who enjoy yet another side of Van Morrison through his work with the Chieftains, where he solely indulged in Irish folk music.

Van Morrison is a world to be discovered, and his canon yields up volumes. What other artist, over the course of four-plus decades, has tackled such diverse forms of music as blues, soul, R&B, folk, country, gospel, rock, pop, jazz, big band, 1950s rock & roll, new age, Christian hymns, Irish folk, spoken word, skiffle, instrumental . . . you get the point. Then there is the music that is hard to pin down, the songs that can't be crammed into a genre—the music that can only be termed “Van Morrison Music.”

Somehow, and despite himself, he has also become a universally recognizable name and part of our mainstream cultural DNA. This is a strange thing for such an unlikely celebrity. Morrison has resisted and struggled against fame for most of his career, and he has decried the trappings that have come

along with being a well-known musician. He has made “difficult” music that counterpointed the immediate appeal of his radio standards, and he has made some of the most infectious music of all time: think “Domino,” “Wild Night,” and “Jackie Wilson Said (I’m in Heaven When You Smile)” —who has made a more appealing triptych of R&B-pop? He has also tried to undermine his own past selves at times, blowing up old identities, resisting the music of the past, and traveling out on the edge of the artistic pale, with ghosts of the former artist nipping at his heels. And those are potent ghosts: The young man who created the otherworldly jazz-folk of the timeless *Astral Weeks*; the soul lion who roared through seismic, earth-shaking concerts in the early 1970s, as if he were a white, Irish spawn of Ray Charles and James Brown; the lead singer of 1960s band Them, a blistering, edgy rock outfit in the mold of the Rolling Stones, the Yardbirds, and the Animals.

Van Morrison means different things to different people. And he means so much to so many people. He doesn’t have the singular kind of fame and musical recognition that the Beatles or Bob Dylan have. It’s a different kind of relationship with his audience, somehow more embedded and subtle and part of the daily fabric of life. When I began writing this book, people seemed to come out of the woodwork with different tales about Van Morrison—or, more accurately, tales about his music and what it meant to them. There were marriages that were consecrated to “Into the Mystic” or “Someone Like You.” There were fans who seemed to intensely identify with a particular period or album, even with records that were pretty daring for their time and not as well known as his bigger LPs. When I told people that I was writing a book about Van Morrison, they seemed to straighten up and respond with a certain excitement and seriousness. I took this to mean that I had gotten myself into something deep.

Now, at the end of this process, having intently listened to and deeply experienced and considered all of Van Morrison’s music, I can say a few things confidently. First, we listen to him because he strikes emotional chords in us that are simply inaccessible to most artists. Second, we listen to him because he works in a musical world that is his own, and outside of convention and trends. He is also one of the greatest, most singular vocalists in the history of recorded music, using repetition, improvisation, and batteries of unique sound to drive home the emotion in his music. Mostly, however, we listen to him because his music is interesting and beautiful, and because he is simply one of the great singer-songwriters of all time.

But he is also *difficult*. Van Morrison has many paradoxical qualities, and he seems, at times, to resist any admiration that would be heaped on him and to move against the grain rather than bask in success. Perhaps this is the mark of the true artist. In song, he has railed against the industry that spawned him, he has railed against the press, and he has railed to all that he just wants some privacy and anonymity. He has also lashed out in song at so-called friends who have betrayed him by talking to biographers.

Of course, he has also labored to produce some of the most beautiful music and some of the most gorgeous sentiments of all time. If there is one recurring thesis of this book (there are many), it is that Morrison thrives in a mode of paradox and oppositional tension. He is the least “safe” of artists, and each crest of success seems to be followed by some paradigm shakeup—musical experiments, changing of bands—that tests the endurance of his listeners and finds him new artistic purchase. Van Morrison, you must understand, is an investment for the long term, not the short term. He is a sometimes difficult but enduring pleasure, like classic literature, and his music is the kind that sustains you over the long haul.

This is not a biography; it is a critical study that may pull in biographical elements where they help illuminate forces at work in his music. Nevertheless, a biographical sketch is necessary before we jump in. George Ivan Morrison Junior was born on August 31, 1945, in East Belfast, Northern Ireland, in a terraced row house on Hyndford Street. He was an only child and seems to have carried that solitary orientation around with him all of his life; he is a self-confessed loner. The Belfast that Morrison experienced as a child seemed to exist in an idyllic twilight outside of the burgeoning, violent Troubles of that region, which fully ignited after Van had left his native region to further his career in the United States. In truth, Belfast had a long history of sectarian tension, but Morrison seemed to live in a world apart from it and rarely mentioned the troubled sociopolitical landscape of his native region in interviews. In song, he simply never alluded to it.

The Belfast of his younger years lit his imagination, though, and he would return to it in song over the decades, perhaps most memorably in the 1968 masterpiece *Astral Weeks*, but the sensory images of his youth would provide a rich storehouse that would continually crop up in much of his music over the years. His father, an electrician of Scottish-Presbyterian descent who worked at the docks, was a fan of American music—country, blues, jazz, folk, gospel—and his extensive record collection is the oft-cited cradle of Morrison’s early musical fascination. Here, Van Morrison first heard Leadbelly, Ray Charles, Hank Williams, Mahalia Jackson, the Carter Family, Sonny Boy Williamson, and others who would set his course. George Senior also spent some time in Detroit away from his family, trying to eke out a new existence so that he could bring them to America, but he soon returned home, unsuccessful in that endeavor and settled into a workaday lifestyle, an existence compassionately rendered by his son years later in the song “Choppin’ Wood” (2002).

Van’s mother, Violet, was a lively character, prone to household bouts of singing and dancing, and a onetime Jehovah’s Witness. Morrison would sing about his mother’s religious dalliance in the 1979 song “Kingdom Hall,” and his own dabbling in various spiritual motifs during the 1980s—everything from Scientology to Christianity to the secret society of mystics known as the Rosicrucians—showed that he had inherited this religious curiosity from her.

Morrison picked up music as an adolescent, learning guitar and saxophone. He dabbled in a skiffle band with his street mates, and then, still a teen, took a more serious bent toward music by enlisting in a few showbands in which he was able to use his saxophone and vocal skills and travel to England, Scotland, and most significantly, Germany, entertaining in dance halls and on military bases. The workmanship and professional-entertainer values that he picked up with the showbands were elements that he would draw on throughout his career.

In his travels as a teen, he also noticed a new movement afoot: young Brits were latching onto his beloved American blues and playing youthful rocked-up versions of the music. This was the movement that would launch the Rolling Stones, Yardbirds, Who, Animals, and other groups in the early 1960s. This was also the movement that inspired Van Morrison back in Belfast, where, with his new group, Them, he would set up a residency at the Maritime Hotel and pique the interest of record executives over in London.

With Them, he would cut several memorable singles and begin to embark on a career as a songwriter. Out of this period came one of his most memorable compositions, "Gloria." Despite some chart success, Them suffered financial woes, having signed a predatory contract, and went through numerous lineup changes before imploding. After a brief respite in Belfast, Morrison was beckoned to New York City by onetime Them producer Bert Berns, where he cut several songs, including one of his signature compositions, "Brown Eyed Girl," a song that would send him into the pop stratosphere of 1967.

Morrison's destiny was not to be a simple pop star, however, and he would follow his early solo recordings with a stirring artistic statement on 1968's *Astral Weeks*, a song cycle that pulled in folk, jazz, and impressionistic poetry and that conjured up images from a idealized, childhood Belfast. With *Astral Weeks* not commercially successful enough to sustain him, Morrison hedged his artistic sensibilities with music that had undeniable commercial appeal, without sacrificing quality. He also took more studio control, enforcing his unwavering vision and unfurling his remarkable run of early 1970s albums: *Moondance*, *His Band and the Street Choir*, *Tupelo Honey*, *Saint Dominic's Preview*. He had taken up residence in Woodstock in 1969, and by the early 1970s was living in northern California with soon-to-be-ex-wife Janet Planet, mother of his daughter, Shana.

For many, the albums from 1968 to 1974 (ending with *Veedon Fleece*) would forever constitute his golden period, but there was obviously so much more to come, and music from all of his periods would become the fabric of our lives. He continually challenged expectations, indulging in meditative, new-agey music in the 1980s, despite a dwindling audience. In the 1990s, having pushed so many boundaries, Van Morrison experienced a renaissance as new generations discovered his past work and began to follow the music he was currently consumed with. He never relied on past successes, however, and today, in the autumn of 2008, he has nearly 40 albums to his credit.

(This does not include his work with Them or the numerous compilations of his work.) He has never stopped writing and recording, and in early 2008 he experienced his highest charting album ever, as *Keep It Simple*, a set of songs he released at age 62, reached the Top 10 on *Billboard*. It was a suitable late-life honor for one of the most prolific legends in popular music.

There is so much more to tell—so many colors to paint in and so much remarkable music to discuss and appreciate between the poles of 1964 and 2008—and that is the work of the chapters that follow. I have been fortunate to be able to write about one of the most inexhaustible and enduring singer-songwriter canons of the recording era, and this is first and foremost an appreciation of the words and music of Van Morrison. It is intended to facilitate an interest in the songs themselves and to provide insight into the myriad forces at work on the singer-songwriter. I am sure there is much more to be said beyond these pages, and I defer to the songs themselves as the definitive statements about the work of Van Morrison. He has given us much to appreciate and much to experience and feel. Welcome to the universe of music known as “Van Morrison.”



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# On Hyndford Street: Early Years and Influences

## A SHY BOY FROM EAST BELFAST

There's a story that's been told over and over about great people doing great things by leaving their provincial hometown and going out into the big wide world. That tale applies to Van Morrison, but there is also so much more to it than that. Belfast, Northern Ireland, where Morrison was born on August 31, 1945, was more than just a fledgling beginning for the man who would become one of the most distinctive and famous singer-songwriters of his time; the environs and experiences of his hometown also provided him with a complete foundation on which he would draw for his entire musical career. He would continually return to the boyhood streets of Belfast in lyrics over the years, dredging up the rich sensory details of his formative years in numerous songs. It was an act of recapturing, of sealing in amber, a period of time that was forever gone and casting it in an idyllic glow. He would also learn his musical craft and absorb important early influences in Belfast.

George Ivan Morrison Jr. came of age during a time when the United Kingdom was rebuilding itself after World War II. German airplanes had bombed portions of East Belfast during the war, as the shipyards were a valuable resource for the allies. Here, battle vessels were built and repaired. In fact, Morrison's own parents were married on Christmas Day, 1941 in a church that was still undergoing repairs from the bombing raids by the Luftwaffe. Across the water, America would be fraught with a time of postwar prosperity in the coming years, and its culture was blooming and extending its tentacles across the globe. Its music, its style, its movies reached foreign soils and influenced other cultures. Belfast was a port city and therefore, much like the

Beatles' Liverpool, open to those reverberations coming across the Atlantic. Influenced by American shows at the cinema, Morrison and his street pals would often play cowboys and Indians, just like the American kids. Morrison's dad, George, worked at the shipyards, and Van grew up practically in the shadows of the world's "second- and third-largest cranes" in the Harland & Wolff shipyard.<sup>1</sup> Belfast's provinciality was undercut by the great possibility of the sea; in fact, the doomed Titanic was built from the ground up in that same shipyard.

Van Morrison grew up at 125 Hyndford Street, just off larger Beersbridge Road in East Belfast. This was a crowded, gray street of terraced row houses—one long, extended face of bricks and doorways, family homes that were butted right up against each other. It was a place where working people lived in extremely close proximity to each other. Van Morrison was born and raised in the same house in which his mother grew up. He was an only child, and a relatively solitary one at that, until music found him. Street chums recall him as an isolated kid and "never a great communicator."<sup>2</sup> One person who drew him out of his shell early on and became a big sister figure was his cousin, Gloria Wardlow, who was more than 10 years his senior and from his mother's side of the family. Gloria, who became Gloria Gordon, died of cancer at age 29, three years before Van Morrison and his group Them would record the famous 1964 rock song that he named after her.<sup>3</sup>

Van Morrison's street was in a lively, working-class neighborhood, and music was constantly wafting throughout his home. Music also came streaming at him from the windows of the close nearby homes. His parents played and sang music, and it wasn't unusual to hear the twangy, rustic tones of Hank Williams drifting down the street from other windows, through the gray, drizzly air. American culture wasn't just emanating from the grooves of records; for many, including the Morrisons, the States were also a place of real possibility.

Belfast, like much of Ireland, had a heavy tradition of emigration to the United States, and the Morrisons were not immune to that pull. "My family was supposed to move to America when I was five," remembered Van Morrison. "Belfast is not like England. . . . The American influences are stronger than the English influences because of all the Irish who have emigrated to the United States in the last few generations."<sup>4</sup> His family had relatives in the United States in Detroit (and across the border in Toronto), and his father, an electrician by trade, went to Detroit when Van was a young child in the hopes of bringing his family over as well. Needless to say, things didn't work out, and George Sr. returned home.

Van Morrison obviously wasn't raised in America, but he was weaned on American music. George wasn't simply an electrician; he was also an avid collector of records, and unusual for his generation and place in that his tastes delved deeper most, into more obscure regions. His records cut deep into the heartwood of Americana, deep into the Mississippi Delta and the Appalachian

mountains. It's natural for an inward, lonely child with an active intellect and imagination to intensely turn to the solitary pursuit of listening to records, and Morrison's father had provided him with a treasure trove. The boy listened intently to soul-shaking blues, old-timey country music, American folk ballads, dizzying jazz, and knee-trembling gospel. It was a unique and early education. The only Irish folk music that Morrison ever really tapped into as a youth was the McPeake family, whose version of the traditional "Wild Mountain Thyme" would become well known in their native region.

His father also facilitated his interest by buying him a guitar around the age of 11. Van learned some basic chords by thumbing through a songbook based around the old-time country music of the Appalachian-dwelling Carter Family.<sup>5</sup> The country sound of the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers was important early on, as was the blues of John Lee Hooker, Sonny Boy Williamson, and the duo of Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee; the R&B of Ray Charles; and the jazz of Jelly Roll Morton. But the biggest light on the horizon was the ragged, raw folk-blues of Leadbelly (a.k.a. Huddie Ledbetter), a black American convict whom folklorists John and Alan Lomax had discovered languishing in a Louisiana prison with a veritable American history of song in his head.

The Lomaxes first recorded Leadbelly's distinctively rich singing and guitar-playing style for the world to hear in the early 1930s; thus Leadbelly brought such timeless fare as "Rock Island Line," "Goodnight, Irene," "Midnight Special," and "Take This Hammer" into the American lexicon. Leadbelly, with his resonant voice and rudimentary playing, was a conduit through which the Lomaxes, representing the Library of Congress and consumed in the task of resurrecting a cultural history of America's disappearing byways, could tap into traditional, authorless folk ballads, many of which predated the twentieth century. This was ancient stuff that the young Irish boy was dabbling in, and it might have been something that he was genetically predisposed to, as the early immigration of Scots-Irish had their own influence on the early musical landscape of America.

Much has been made over the years of Morrison being a white Irish singer who can convincingly sing blues, soul, and gospel, but it may be less about adaptation and more about natural tendency. Commercial interests of the twentieth century and the need to ghettoize music into genres have done much to distinguish "white" music from "black" music, but anyone with ears can hear how early country music and early blues came from the same primeval source. Ray Charles, the R&B legend who also recorded country music during his career, once put it more bluntly: "You take country music, you take black music, you got the same goddamn thing . . . the same thing, man."<sup>6</sup>

Johnny Cash knew that when he sang "Rock Island Line," and Sun Records producer Sam Phillips knew that when he committed the early recordings of Elvis Presley to tape, most of which were adaptations of songs that blues artists such as Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup and Big Mama Thornton