

In reference to his forthcoming seventh album, *Carrie & Lowell*, forty one year old American singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens stated "This is not my art project; this is my life". With only a single listen to the record, one realizes no other remark could be more truthful. Named after his estranged mother Carrie and her second husband Lowell Brams, Stevens' *Carrie & Lowell* delves into some of the most ingrained and confidential segments of his psyche, exploring themes of bereavement and guilt, and attempting to explain what it means to be profoundly human.

Carrie left when Stevens was one year old, abandoning the family at a video store. Her relationship with Stevens and the rest of her children was then intermittent throughout the rest of her life. She suffered from schizophrenia, alcoholism, and addiction, meaning she spent most of her life in a haze of struggle and distress. "She really suffered, for whatever reason." Stevens recounts in an interview with *Pitchfork*. "But when we were with her she was really loving and caring, and very creative and funny". Stevens and his siblings spent summers with Carrie and Lowell in Eugene, Oregon - a place that provides much of the symbolism and scenery for the album. Carrie died of stomach cancer in December 2012, and after three years of grieving and creative output, Stevens released *Carrie & Lowell* in late March 2015.

In sharp contrast to the crashing, industrial sounds of previous albums like *Age of Adz* and the sweeping orchestral tracks of *Come On! Feel the Illinoise!*, *Carrie & Lowell* is surprisingly bare. Stevens' airy vocals are frequently accompanied by only the delicate piano and banjo backings that pay homage to the folk-like era of his earliest records and EPs, including the ever popular *Seven Swans*.

This sparsity, however, does not lend itself to inadequacy - instead, it draws the listener's attention towards Stevens' poignant descriptions of his own emotional turmoil, his childhood, and the complex relationship he holds with his mother, both her physical person and his idea of her existence. The album is at once both devastatingly sorrowful and gently uplifting, employing a sense of melancholy that seems to run, however mildly, throughout the course of Steven's discography.

The record winds through Stevens' raw emotions with each progressive track, weaving an auditory web of grief and loss. It opens with "Death With Dignity", a reference to the act of the same name passed in Carrie's home state of Oregon in 1994, allowing terminally ill patients to end their lives via medically assisted suicide. Other notable tracks include "The Only Thing", cataloguing Stevens' self-destructive tendencies following his mother's death, and "No Shade In The Shadow Of The Cross", complete with the sound of Stevens' personal air conditioning unit whirring in the background.

This total disclosure and individual touch provides a sense of realness and intimacy that isn't as present in Stevens' previous records. Listening to the album is almost as if overhearing a private conversation between Stevens and his mother, complete with bargaining ("What did I do to deserve this?" he woefully pleads in "Drawn to the Blood"), adoration (referring to his mother as

his “star in the sky” in the heartbreaking “Fourth of July”), and resignation (“Nothing can be changed, the past is still the past” claims Stevens in “Should Have Known Better”). Stevens turns his pain into something beautiful, creating an album that touches its listeners at the heart.

*Carrie & Lowell* is a journey, a story told through Stevens’ characteristically moving and deeply personal lyrical style. The record is a triumph within his oeuvre, documenting and honoring Stevens’ own experiences of loss and abandonment, as well as touching on something more ubiquitous. In his own words, he states: “At worst, these songs probably seem really indulgent. At their best, they should act as a testament to an experience that’s universal: Everyone suffers; life is pain; and death is the final punctuation at the end of that sentence, so deal with it.” And somehow, albums like *Carrie & Lowell* seem to make that pain a little easier to manage.