

UNSUNG HEROES: JON STEVENS

Interview by James Gaden

From Noiseworks to INXS to the Dead Daisies and a solo career, the singer has a story to tell.

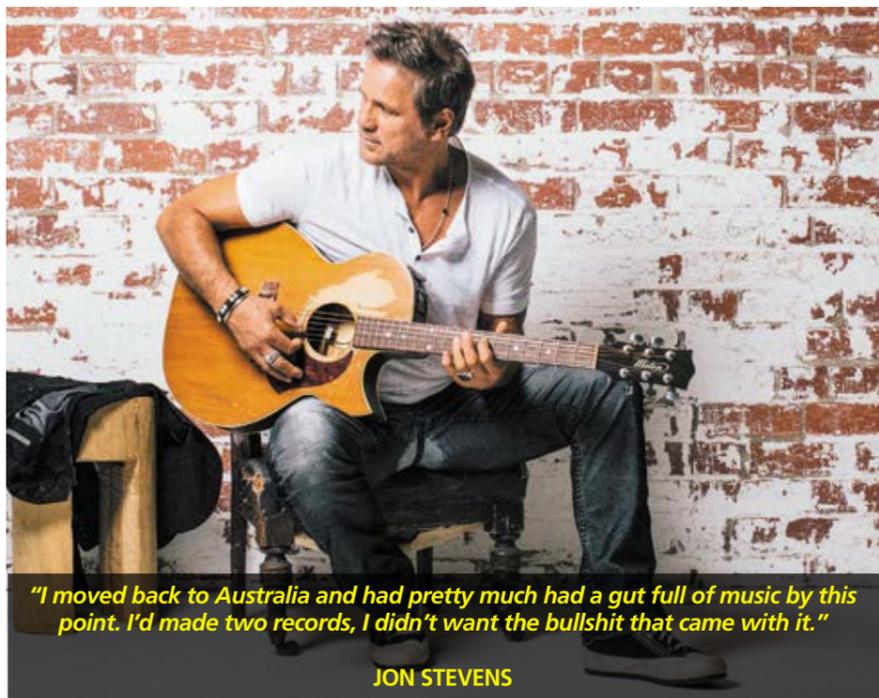
In his homeland of New Zealand, Jon Stevens topped the charts twice as a teen. In Australia he fronted the band Noiseworks who released three platinum selling albums. He took part in a sell-out arena tour of a smash hit musical and filled the shoes the late, great Michael Hutchence in INXS. Yet despite all the success down under, Jon Stevens is not particularly well known in the UK. Originally, he was more of a Pop star, starting his career back in 1980.

"It was one of those things that I never set out to do at all. I was sixteen years old and my eldest sister knew a guy who owned a studio, he'd found out from her I could sing and he was looking for some new singers. She took me in there, we're talking about New Zealand back in the 70s, we didn't have a phone, didn't have a car... so my sister says that her friend wants me to go and sing in the studio, I procrastinated and eventually she just dragged me down there. I sang four songs, one of which was a song called 'Jezebel' which was written by a guy from London called Eddie Howe. It was an original song and I didn't know anything about studios or recording or anything. The guy literally just played me the song and said 'Can you sing that?' and I said 'Er, okay'. I sang what I heard, did two or three takes and left. A few months go by and he asked my sister if it would be okay to send the demos he had made using my voice to CBS in Auckland. I wasn't interested, I said 'whatever' and he sent them off. Then CBS decide they wanted to sign me. I wasn't interested in that either, so CBS just went ahead and released 'Jezebel' anyway, even though I wasn't signed! This was New Zealand, it was a backwater back then.

"They put out 'Jezebel' and within three weeks it was number one. I've just turned seventeen, was still playing football with my mates and I had actually been working at EMI pressing albums, funnily enough! I'd been fired from that so when 'Jezebel' came out I was making rubber carpet underlay. All of a sudden, I was famous in New Zealand and it had nothing to do with me. I was fucking horrified. I come from a musical family but it's a big family, we were always singing, dancing, drinking... my dad was from Glasgow and my mum was Maori so it's a really tribal family, always singing. So while I enjoyed it for fun, now I had a number one record without even being signed!

"CBS chased me down through my sister and said I needed to make an album. So I recorded an album within about two weeks. They asked me what my favourite song was and I said 'Oh, I love 'Montego Bay', that's a favourite of mine' so we recorded that, they put that out and it knocked 'Jezebel' off the number one spot... and I still wasn't signed!" he laughs. "I was extremely famous in New Zealand because I was the first Maori artist to be in the charts... and I hated every second of it."

Stevens explains his catalyst for moving into



"I moved back to Australia and had pretty much had a gut full of music by this point. I'd made two records, I didn't want the bullshit that came with it."

JON STEVENS

music full time.

"We made the album, they released that and that went right up the charts, got to number two or three I think and I was signed retrospectively. But within about eighteen months, two years, it was all over. I'd quit playing sport because people were all recognising me and smacking the shit out of me, I got a broken nose and stuff so I had to either give up football or music. I figured you got more girls with music, so I quit the football and within two years the music thing was pretty much over. I moved to Australia and met a guy who was going to manage me. He was managing Air Supply who had a lot of big hits and he took me to America, where I made a second album with Trevor Lawrence. By this time I sort of knew what was going on and Trevor, God bless him, he said 'Well, we need to teach you how to write songs, pal'. I had a lot more interest in music by this point and I got to work with all these guys in Los Angeles, like guys from Toto, Michael Jackson's band, Stevie Wonder's band, I was working with all these cats aged eighteen. I lived there for about ten months. Steve Lukather played on the second record, John Robinson was the drummer and he would go on to play on all Michael Jackson's stuff like 'Beat It'. Having these guys around, I started writing and getting into it. I made the record and ended up signing with a company called Big Time Records. It didn't go so well, so I moved back to Australia and had pretty much had a gut full of music by this point. I'd made two records, I didn't want the bullshit that came with it.

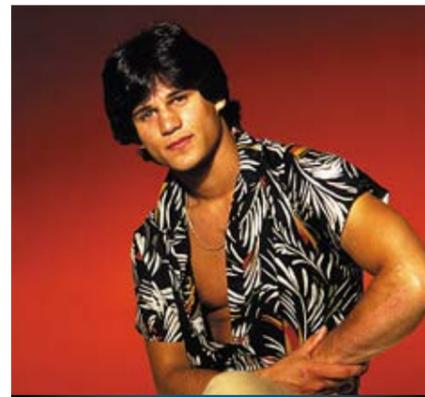
"I met a fella called Michael Browning who had a label called Deluxe Records," the singer continues. "He had just signed INXS and he had managed AC/DC right up to around when Bon Scott died. He had taken them overseas and done

a lot with them, so I met him in November 1982 and he introduced me to Stuart Fraser, who would end up being the guitarist in Noiseworks. Michael called Stuart, he said 'You need to come down here and meet this singer bloke' and Stuart came. Michael's idea was 'Stuart's about your age, he's got black hair, smokes cigarettes and drinks just like you, he can't sing, you can't play guitar!' So he introduced us and I told my story, saying I didn't want to be signed to a label. He got me out of my old deal and didn't ask for anything in return, and he didn't ask for anything from Stuart either. He just put us together and said 'You guys do your thing and give me a call when you get something going.'"

This would be the beginning of even bigger success for Stevens, with his first band.

"By about 1985 we had Noiseworks together as a working band. CBS, which was part of Sony, came knocking because Stuart and I had written a bunch of songs, we were playing gigs and people were losing their minds. So CBS were really keen to sign us and I thought 'We really need a manager'. I didn't really know or trust anybody from Australia so I tracked down Michael again, told him we had a deal on the table and asked when he was coming back. It was weird, he'd just split up with his wife and was on his way home, so it was perfect timing. When he came back, he was a bit of a legend because of his work with AC/DC and various other stuff he had done prior to leaving, so when he returned he already had respect from people in the industry. So he walked straight in to become manager for Noiseworks. It just all clicked."

Noiseworks made three albums from 1987-



Jon's teen Pop star days in New Zealand

1991, all of which went platinum in Australia. Jon explains his transition into the more Rock orientated sound.

"Well basically, meeting Stuart, we liked the same sort of things, we just hung out and wrote songs. We booked a rehearsal studio, asked some mates to join in, see who worked and who lasted longest, that was how we decided who got the gig!" he chuckles. "We spent a long time in those rehearsal rooms playing, learning our instruments, drinking, hanging out and just doing what guys should do - it was a garage band really. When it came time to record properly, after we'd made some demos, the label had some producers in mind they wanted us to work with. One of the names on the list was Mark Opitz, who had done the Cold Chisel albums, The Angels, Divinyl, so we were all big fans of his. He was probably the best producer in Australia at that time. We met with him and we talked about how he felt about stuff, how he operates and I'll never forget it, he said 'Boys, the best records I make are the ones where I sit in the back saying fuck all. You guys know what you're doing, you're the songwriters. If I need to say something, I'll say it.' That immediately landed him the job. There was no wonder he had made so many great records. He wasn't a producer who had to put their stamp on something, he wanted to help the artist be the artist. It was a great start for the band and CBS at the time were right behind us."

The band's next record would be shaped thanks to a chance meeting in the UK.

"We played the Town And Country Club in London, just young punks having a great time. This guy comes up to us backstage and says 'Oh man, I'd fucking love to produce your next record!' and I said 'Who are you?' He said 'I'm



Jon as Judas in 'Jesus Christ Superstar'

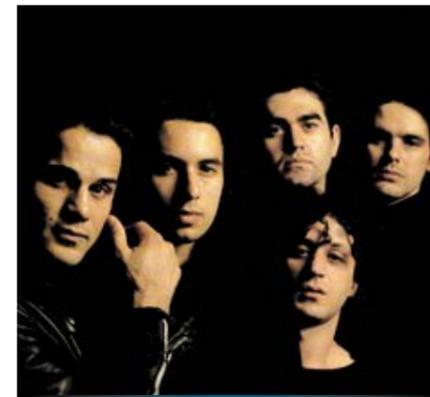
Chris.' That meant nothing to me so I said 'Okay Chris, cool, what have you done?' and he said 'Oh, I'll bring you a tape tomorrow.' So he comes to see me the next day and gives me a tape. I put it in and the first song that comes on is 'Start Me Up' by The Rolling Stones. It turned out he was Chris Kimsey! There was so much great stuff he'd done, and we loved him because he didn't brag at all. So he came down to Australia and we made the 'Touch' album with him. We were recording in one studio and INXS were recording downstairs, making the 'X' album, which was pretty interesting!"

The third Noiseworks album, 'Love Versus Money', saw another famous name at the helm.

"Randy Jackson produced 'Love Versus Money'. We were going to be producing it ourselves, and the record company got very nervous because there was nobody in our camp they could talk to!" Stevens laughs. "So they asked Randy to come in and steer the ship - it was going a bit off-course with various members wanting to bring in orchestras, budgets were being blown out, so Randy came in and got us focused. Prior to him coming in we hadn't written 'Hot Chilli Woman' or 'R.I.P. Millie'... 'Day Will Come' was another one, a lot of those would not have been on the record without Randy. We were fragmented, all over the place making it and Randy was the go-to guy for all the different factions in the band. Randy and I went back to America and we sifted through it all and mixed everything until we had the record. I wasn't into dealing with people doing drugs and having ego problems. I took charge, I'd just become a father so I was super straight, super fit. The other fuckers were all too stoned!"

Noiseworks would split after that and Stevens would find himself sharing a stage with some of the biggest names in Australian music, including none other than John Farnham.

"Noiseworks pretty much quit touring, we'd been doing eights months on the road, three months in a studio then a month off, that was our typical schedule for a few years and one day Steve Balbi and Justin Stanley said they wanted to do some other stuff. Justin wanted to move to America, I was getting kind of over it all, dealing with band politics and bullshit, so we all decided at the end of the tour, when we played the last gig in Sydney, that would be it. We told management, but didn't tell any of the public, we just came out and said goodbye at the end of the gig. We played the last song, which was 'Let It Be', said 'goodbye!' and the next day people realised Noiseworks were finished, there was a lot of shock. We all said 'See ya boys!' and went our separate ways, nobody wanted to kill each other, it was all good. We probably should have just taken a break and then got back together, but anyway, we split and I got a call from Harry Miller who is a famous impresario and promoter down here. He called me into his office and said 'I'm putting on Jesus Christ Superstar and I want you to play Judas.' I said 'What, you want me to audition?' and he said 'No, you don't need to audition' and I said 'Good, because I'm not going to.'" Jon says, laughing at the recollection. "He said 'What do you mean?' and I said 'Harry, I know this thing inside out, back to front, every part, I've been listening to it



Jon (left) with Noiseworks

since I was twelve years old.' I love the movie, Carl Anderson who was a monster, Ted Neely, Yvonne Elliman... it was a brilliant soundtrack, something I grew up listening to and learned, I know it off by heart. It was a perfect thing for me to do, a great role and the arrangements David Hirschfelder did were just incredible. Harry was smart, he got proper Rock singers in to do a proper Rock Musical. That was how it was written and I don't think it's been properly done that way very much. You guys had Ian Gillan do it originally but I think he was the only proper Rock singer to have played the part up until this point.

"Ours was an arena version too, playing to crowds of ten or fifteen thousand people a night. That had never been done anywhere. Harry had the idea and got it up and running by getting me, John Farnham, Kate Ceberano... when I asked who was doing it and he said John Farnham was interested I said 'Well if Farnham's doing it, I'm doing it!' and John said 'If Stevens is in, I'll definitely do it!' We all know each other and we were calling each other up about it. Angry Anderson joined, it was just great. The arena version still, to this day, holds the box office record in Australia."

Afterward, Jon came full circle and went back to being a solo artist, releasing 'Are U Satisfied' in 1993.

"I was still signed as an artist to CBS/Sony and after the success of Jesus Christ Superstar, they were pretty keen for me to do the solo artist thing. So I made 'Are U Satisfied', which I basically made at home with my mates. I love that record, it's not a great recording, because it was just done on a 16 track, reel to reel. I got my mates round, wrote a bunch of songs and laid it down, I wasn't too perturbed about sound quality, I was interested in the performance."



INXS with Jon circa 2002

His next effort, 'Circle' came in 1996, which was a lighter album than 'Are U Satisfied'.

"That was Randy and I hooking up to work together again and the whole music business was all over the place at that time. I went over to L.A. and hung out with a whole bunch of different people. It was more of an R'n'B thing. I think my blessing, and my curse if you like, is I can really sing anything. So it's a question of finding a direction and just doing it."

After that Stevens ended up fronting INXS after Michael Hutchence died. Unfortunately, despite playing many concerts, INXS only recorded the one song with Jon, 'I Get Up'.

"That's it – in four years! What they did do was play a lot of gigs all around the world, it gave them back their touring licence I suppose. Andrew Farriss, who wrote the vast majority of their songs with Michael Hutchence, if he's not feeling it, what can you say? The buck stopped with him and that was the end of it. It's kinda sad because I always thought two guys wrote all that great stuff and the music guy was still there, still alive, but the magic guy was gone. All the ideas seemed to die with Michael. You have to figure out who the magic was in that partnership and I know who I think it was. I tried to do some stuff with them but it just didn't work out, they weren't interested. Such a shame, they were such a great band, they wrote some fucking great songs. The way I saw it, if you wrote great songs once, you should still be able to write more."

Stevens returned to solo work with 'Aint No Life For The Faint Hearted' in 2004 which was another big change of direction more Urban and Rap influenced.

"A bit ahead of its time I think!" he grins. "Never give them what they expect, that's boring! Some Rock, some Rap, some dance floor grooves... now I think about it, it was way ahead of its time and Australia wasn't attuned to that vibe then."

The catalyst for 2011's 'Changing Times' album was a heart problem discovered where the singer had to have some stents fitted which saved his life.

"Yeah, prior to me going into hospital, we had started recording stuff, the nucleus of it was there. Then I went into surgery and it just took me out completely! I was out of the loop and was thinking about just, basically, living, y'know? Family, friends, all that stuff - life. I spent a month in hospital, had a few complications like infection and stuff, I had a pretty rough time for a bit. Then I had a three month recovery from that, and during that three months I started getting stronger, things started going through my head. I started getting ideas for songs coming to me again, and when I felt good I started working on the album again. Songs like 'No Surrender', the song 'Changing Times', 'Closer To God', those songs were ones that were about taking stock of your life - something a near death experience makes you do."

Steven's would give 'Changing Times' away as a free download, while simultaneously releasing an excellent album of Soul covers called 'Testify'.

"I never wanted to do a record with all the usual hits - and misses, on it! It has been done to death and I just thought I could do something different. There's a generation of people who maybe aren't familiar with some of these soul things, they hear it and think it's a Jon Stevens record. If I put 'River Deep Mountain High' on there, it's part of mankind's DNA so they immediately think 'covers album'. I had been playing Sam Cooke's 'A Change Is Gonna Come' for a couple of years in my live set. I've actually opened with it quite a lot, because my version of it, the live one, is different to the one on record. I'd start with just the vocal and the chord, and it used to floor people. It got people's attention fast, because I didn't come blazing out, hitting them over the head with some rocking song. That was the catalyst of what direction to take, so then I had to find other songs that hit that sweet spot in my voice."

"Finding John Fields to produce for me was brilliant. I just had to be the singer. And that would lead to the first Dead Daisies album. I wrote and recorded that with him and Vanessa Amorosi."

It was a great album, followed up with the 'Face I Love' EP in 2014. Then all of a sudden Stevens wasn't with the Daisies anymore.

"Because of a couple of billionaires getting in cahoots I think," he shrugs. "In my personal life, the shit hit the fan during that time. I think

it was all intertwined. My fiancée at the time went fucking crazy, I ended up getting arrested and while I'm tied up with that I find out that same day that the band are booked to go to Cuba and they have John Corabi singing. It made me wonder how long that had been going on for. I started that band, it was my name, my songs, my ideas... on the 'Revolucion' album they put out, 'Make The Best Of It', 'Mexico', 'Something I'd Said'... new songs I'd written which I never got to sing, because they did the dirty on me. That's the sort of people you're dealing with. They've replaced members and turned what was basically an Australian band into an American band. What is really funny is we put out a Noiseworks live record called 'Live And Loud' and they put out the Daisies one and called it 'Live And Louder'. Are those guys children? Not Corabi by the way - I've never met him and I have no issue with him, he's landed himself a paying gig, so good luck to him."

Jon returned to his solo career and delivered 'Woman' in 2015, a therapeutic release.

"That's exactly what it was. Those were some dark times and that album was a way of getting it out. With all the crap that was going on and being written about me, music was the saviour."

His latest effort 'Starlight', saw him team up with Dave Stewart, who co-wrote and produced the album.

"I was introduced to him by a mutual friend.



Jon with his co-writer and producer for 'Starlight', Eurythmics legend Dave Stewart

I went over to LA to meet him and we go into a back room with a couple of acoustic guitars, just start talking about life, laughing, playing some riffs and it just started falling out straight away, bam, bam, bam. It was amazing, we just plugged into a stream of consciousness. He writes like me, he has no set form - he just finds the fairy dust, finds the moment and when you find it you don't procrastinate, just go with it. Pluck it out of the air and form it into something. It was pretty amazing. I had all these ideas going in, and I never played him a single one. We basically created the 'Starlight' album just from us meeting, within fifteen minutes of being together we were playing guitar and writing the songs.

Some big name guests helped out too - including a certain Ringo Starr.

"We didn't plan that, Dave had invited me over to dinner at his house, I was over there and there was a knock at the door and it's Ringo and his wife! I was like 'Er, okay mate, how are you doing?' Super nonchalant, you know!" he laughs. "It's normal for them, that sort of thing. It wasn't fucking normal for me! Dave and I had written 'One Way Street' and I commented that Ringo would have been great on that. So Dave said 'Let's ask him!' and called him up. We sent the track over, Ringo loved it and said 'Yeah, of course, I'd love to. Nobody ever asks me to play drums.' What?! I don't know if they're too scared or what, I couldn't believe it, he was so chuffed to be asked!"

ESSENTIAL STEVENS



11 releases which any true fan of the artist's work should experience...

Noiseworks Noiseworks (1987)



Stevens completed the transition from teen Pop star to lead singer in a Rock band with Noiseworks' debut album, which would go three times platinum in Australia thanks to the no less than five singles being pulled from it, including the superb 'No Lies', 'Take Me Back' and 'Love Somebody' which Stevens still regularly plays live. 'Burning Feeling' was another monster and tracks like 'Welcome To The World' make this a formidable debut album.

Noiseworks Touch (1988)



Following up such a successful debut can lead to "the difficult second album" but not in the case of Noiseworks, who garnered a hit single with the title track. The record also contained classics such as 'Simple Man', 'Voice Of Reason', 'Keep Me Running' (which was used in 'Baywatch') and 'In My Youth. Hitting the road to support the record led Noiseworks to become one of Australia's most popular live acts.

Noiseworks Love Versus Money (1991)



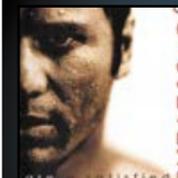
Noiseworks third album reached number one in the Australian charts and spawned another hit with the blistering 'Hot Chili Woman', the band's most rocking moment to date. Other impressive cuts included the deeply personal 'R.I.P. Millie' and a great cover of Sly Stone's 'Take You Higher' as a duet with Michael Hutchence. The band called it a day after touring what is arguably their finest album.

Australian Cast Recording Jesus Christ Superstar (1992)



One of the original Rock Musicals, 'Jesus Christ Superstar' was put on as an arena show in Australia with an all-star cast and the emphasis firmly on 'Rock'. With John Farnham as Jesus and Kate Ceberano as Mary, Jon Stevens portrays Judas, with supporting cast members including Rose Tattoo's Angry Anderson. This studio album offers a great selection of songs from the show, with Stevens in immense form.

Jon Stevens Are You Satisfied (1993)



Stevens returned to his solo career a very different beast, now a confident, experienced Rock star. 'Are You Satisfied' had excellent cuts on including 'Going Down', 'Hard As Stone' and the title track. Stevens also demonstrated how far his songwriting had come with the superb 'Love Makes No Sense', 'Stay' and 'Burn So Bright'. Backed by Noiseworks colleague Stuart Fraser and drummer Virgil Donati, this is one of Stevens' most underrated efforts.

Jon Stevens Circle (1996)



'Circle' sees Stevens move away from Rock to go for a more Pop and R&B vibe, which demonstrates his versatility both as a writer and singer. 'Proud Man', the catchy 'Mess I'm In' and a great cover of Hall And Oates' 'One On One' are all highlights. 'Revolucion' is the album's most rock orientated moment, while 'Carry The Flame' was used as the official song for the Sydney 2000 Olympics Torch Relay.

Jon Stevens Changing Times (2011)



After dabbling with Urban influenced and unplugged albums, Stevens returned to Rock with 'Changing Times', influenced by a life saving operation. 'Closer To God' and 'Living The Life' explores this theme, while 'One Mistake', 'Acid Tongue', 'No Surrender' and the brilliant 'Just A Man' are all worth hearing. The singer was so pleased with the results he gave the album away free on his website for a while and it's well worth obtaining.

Jon Stevens Testify! (2011)



Just two months after 'Changing Times' Stevens put out a Soul album which ranks as one of his finest moments. His duet of 'Private Number' with Vanessa Amorosi is stunning, as is his take on 'A Change Is Gonna Come', but it's not all covers. Stevens adds the tongue in cheek 'Be Like Me', the excellent 'All Or Nothing' and 'You Can't Do Anything To Hurt Me' as well as Soul-infused takes of Jimi Hendrix's 'Fire' and The Faces' 'Open To Ideas'.

The Dead Daisies The Dead Daisies (2013)



Formed by Stevens and David Lowy, The Dead Daisies debut boasted 'Lock 'N' Load' which featured a guest appearance from Slash and an array of other high energy efforts such as 'It's Gonna Take Time', 'Bible Row', 'Talk To Me' and the excellent 'Man Overboard'. Stevens would be ousted after the brilliant 'Face I Love' EP which followed and the band would change personal and their sound, but it all started here.

Jon Stevens Woman (2015)



Coming off the back of a turbulent time in both his professional and private life, 'Woman' sees Stevens come back swinging with this excellent effort. Packed with full throttle cuts like 'Supabad', 'Catch You Falling' 'The Chronic Symphonic' and 'Peaches 'N' Pie', they nestle alongside the brilliant acoustic ballad 'Save What Is Left Of Me'. Contemporary and Classic Rock at the same time, it showed the Dead Daisies what they were missing.

Jon Stevens Starlight (2017)



Teaming up with Eurythmics' Dave Stewart, who co-wrote and produced the album, resulted in the best record of Stevens' solo career. Comfortably segueing from Rock to Pop and staying utterly relevant in the process, the like of the excellent 'Hold On', the powerful 'Oh Lord', the rumbling 'Devil In Her Heart' and ZZ Top vibe of 'What Makes You Happy', highlighted with Stevens' awesome voice, make this a masterpiece.