

Life during Wartime

by stephen hastings-king

The famous country singer agreed to record a version of Talking Head's "Life during Wartime." The musicians met for the first time at the session and enjoyed themselves tremendously, producing of the implausible main song a performance of great commitment and several others besides. By the time the session was over they had decided not only that they would form a band but that the name of the band was Frank Beldenschlager, which did not sound a bit like the famous country singer's name or anyone else's for that matter, and not only did not include the signature middle initial of the famous country singer, but no middle initial at all. They said: We're a band of equals. It was a moment of inspiration. He thought: Artists can be so exasperating.

Frank Beldenschlager insisted that publicity photos be taken from inside a well: they would ring the edges of it and look down in vaguely menacing ways while wearing cowboy hats. The image, they said, would resonate with previous such poses on previous albums and then they listed examples none of which he knew. Crestfallen over this name business but nonetheless trying to make the best of it, he allowed himself to be lowered into the well. On the way down, he thought that this is exactly the sort of situation his mother should have warned him about with one of those pithy bromides that he would be able to recall at this moment, something on the order of "Nothing good comes from being lowered into a well to take a photograph, boy" but she was not much for pithy bromides, although, he thought as he descended further and further into the well, he stood a greater chance of going back in time to tell his mother about the future implications of falling down on the pithy bromide front than he did of having a country version of "Life during Wartime" by "Frank Beldenschlager" become the musical call to arms he had dreamed of.

Later, he listened to the recording. The pedal steel and soaring harmonies replaced the edginess of the original with an almost plaintive quality. The lyrics were the same, but their meanings were not: The van loaded with weapons seemed to refer to a Winnebago; I've got some groceries to walking a shopping cart across a Whole Foods parking lot; it's gonna be different this time to an estranged parent trying to make up for a relationship missed with a child by offering a skiing trip in the Alps.

After the song ended, he sat a long time thinking how curious it is the way things change when the things you think are about to change don't.

