



Earth, Wind, & Fire

"September"

*The Best of Earth,
Wind & Fire, Vol. 1*

11/1978

ARC/Columbia Legacy

On "September" by Earth, Wind & Fire

Jon Johnson

My dad croaked two weeks shy of my 26th birthday. It was hard. But it wasn't unexpected.

Robert Harris Johnson was sitting next to his ten year old son in a golf cart, looking out at the 7th tee. "Now remember boy," he said, handing him a new ball and tee. "I know, I know," Jon sighed. "Swing the club and let the ball get in the way."

Bob smiled, knowing full well what would happen next. He watched his son tee up the ball, settle his stance, take a deep, relaxing breath, and then grip the club with all his strength and try to whack the crap out of it. It sailed all of 50 yards. To the right. Hit a tree, and bounced back to settle some 20 yards in front of the tee box. Jon hung his head in defeat. Bob started cracking up.

"Well, you know what they say, forward is forward!" Jon sulked back to the cart and slammed his club into the bag as he watched his father tee up.

I'll never be able to hit the ball like him until I'm older and stronger. He is just stronger than me is all. And has more practice. And his clubs are great; mine stink. While Jon was thinking to himself, he was watching the dance of his father. Bob teed up his ball, took five steps back, and watched the course. The way the tips of the trees moved. The sound of someone putting on the green behind him. The sunlight dancing shadows on each blade of the fairway.

He breathed the same air the ball would breathe on its flight. He watched the grass caress its glistening skin. He felt the cup take him in, longing to accept its destiny.

Bob felt himself settle into the shot. He took a deep breath into the backswing, letting himself vanish as the club head led him towards the light. The sound rippled off the trees lining the fairway, sending a curious hawk up and out of harm's way. The ball disappeared into the sky for a few seconds and reappeared with a gentle thud, some three yards from the hole.

"That'll work," Bob smiled, picking up his tee. "Now, let's see if we can't get you to knock it in the hole this time."

For all his shortcomings, of which there were many, Robert had a few things going for him. First, he remembered Woodstock. That is to say, he remembers a lot of mud and good music. The rest was a bit hazy. Acid will do that to you. As he put it, it was just "better living through chemistry" in those days.

Secondly, Bob may have been one of the luckiest son-of-a-bitches alive. Surviving multiple car crashes, drug overdoses, suicide attempts, and falling from a 30-foot cliff with a motorcycle on top of him make the list.

Diagnosed with a heart condition at six, Bob had multiple open heart surgeries throughout his life, the last of which lasted 8 extra hours. During this time, the man was, for all intents and purposes, dead.

When he miraculously woke back up from the surgery, the doctors worried he would have brain damage or be unable to move. The first thing Bob noticed was that the nurses had chopped off his moustache to fit the anaesthesia mask on. He utilized more than a few four-letter words to tell them how he felt. He was right as rain.

Finally, Bob had a very simple way of looking at life. This simplicity lent itself well to golf, where he was unparalleled.

When he was younger, Robert loved a few things: drugs, alcohol, and his no-good mother. By the time his daughter popped out, Bob had changed a bit. He now loved golf, learning, and her crystal blue eyes. Not in that order.

He gladly gave up his spot on the PGA tour the first time he heard his daughter cry. But his love for the game never went away. Now, some 14 years later, Bob is having the time of his life watching his second child struggle to make a ten-foot putt.

They headed to the clubhouse for lunch before the back nine. "You know why golf is the greatest game in the world son?" He asked through a bite of his tuna sandwich.

"Cuz you are good at it," came the sarcastic reply. Bob laughed a bit of tuna onto the table, which he picked up and popped back in his mouth before continuing. "Golf is the greatest game in the world because there is no one to beat. There is no one to blame. There is nothing else holding you back. It's just you. Golf is the ultimate representation of life. You can walk around the course, complaining about the number of hazards, or how you would do better with nicer clubs, or how slow the group in front of you is, or how the sun was in your eyes. But in the end, your score won't get any better."

"Is that why you play?" Jon was pulling bits of grass from his shoes with a tee.

"Me? Nah, I play so my wife doesn't bitch at me to do something else." He laughed a bit too hard, and went into a coughing fit.

After lunch, Bob lit up a cigarette and watched Jon practice the one thing he was good at—chipping.

There was something in the gracefulness of a wedge that just fit with Jon. He couldn't drive the ball for shit. He could read the green, but executing a putt was another story. But put the kid within 70 yards and he would pop that sucker on the green every time. Jon would think "If I can just get better with the wedge, I'll never have to putt, I can just hole in every time."

So here he sat, chipping shots onto the practice green at the course, each one closer and closer to the hole. His dad watched for a bit and then cut in. "You know boy, if you only practice what you are good at, you'll never get any better. Come on, we're up."

Jon laced up his shoes, preparing for another disaster on the tee. His dad got out of the cart with him, walking him to the tee box.

"Now remember boy,"

"I know dad—" he started, but Bob cut in.

"Yeah, I know you know, but the trees cant take anymore abuse from you 'knowing.' Now stand right here. I want you to look at the course. What are you looking at?"

"The flag."

"Why?"

"Cuz that's the goal."

"When was the last time you hit the green?"

"I can't remember."

"So why is the flag the goal?"

"Cuz that's how you win."

"There's no winning in golf."

"You know what I mean."

"Sure. Here, stay there."

Bob ran and grabbed the towel from his bag and tied it around Jon's face. Jon started in sarcastically. "Aawh, Yoda. With the blast shield down I can't even see. How am I supposed to fight?"

"Shut up, smartass. Now stay there and hold the club. What are you looking at now?"

"The inside of a towel."

"Got it. What else can you see?"

"Nothing."

"OK, so if you can't see what you think is the goal, what else do you have to go on? What can you hear?"

"Your fake heart valve ticking."

"Good, what else?"

"The grill at the clubhouse."

"Keep going."

Jon sighed. "The cars on Bradley road, the guy on his telephone over there, the wind in the palm tree. The flag is flapping too."

"Great, now what can you feel?"

"The towel on my face."

"Yes, genius, and?"

"The sun is warm I guess. And there is wind on my arm hair. And I feel like I may have to poop soon."

"Good, now what are you aiming at?"

"What do you mean? There is nothing to aim at. I'm just hearing and feeling stuff."

"Exactly. Now hit the ball."

Jon pulled the towel up to uncover one eye and look at his dad in disbelief. "You really are doing some Luke Skywalker stuff here, you know?"

Bob slapped the towel back down and guided his son over to the ball. "Take a quick peak to see where the ball is. See it? Now I'm setting up your stance here, move your hips with your shoulders. Good. Now, just hear and feel everything going on inside and outside of you again. Whenever you feel ready, swing the club..."

"...and let the ball get in the way" Jon answered. He felt the club in his hands. He felt a stiffness in his shoulders. He let them relax. He heard a squirrel in the trash can on 18 eating crumbs. He heard his dad's ticking heart, felt the breath going in his lungs, smelled the pork on the clubhouse grill. He thought about doing all this work and then still failing, but he let that thought go. *It can't get any worse*, he thought.

Jon took a deep breath, and gently lifted the club into the sky. He let himself go as the club dropped, ringing a gong through him as the ball went skyward. He felt himself flying through the air, kissed by the wind, destined for the hole. He followed the ball in his mind, heard it rattle in the cup.

The sound of his dad's laughter shook him from his bliss. He ripped off the towel and looked for his ball. It was buried in the bunker just off the green. Jon threw his hands up in the air, defeated yet again. He let the club fall to the ground as he headed to the cart.

"Boy, get back here." Bob had contained his laughter by now. "What does that card say, how far is the green from here?"

"190 yards."

"So you mean to tell me you just drove a shot 180 yards, and you are moping about it because you landed in the bunker?"

Jon laughed in spite of himself. It was true. It was the first time he had ever hit the ball this far. He started feeling proud of his shot, of how easy it felt. He couldn't stop smiling as he watched his dad knock his tee shot on the far edge of the green. Bob tossed his club in the bag and patted Jon on the back. "Now, grab that magic wedge and see if you can't show me the way to the hole."

As they put their clubs in the trunk of the car that day, Bob was beaming. "I'm so proud of you, boy. You stopped trying to dominate the ball and just let it be, and look what happened." Jon really was happy with himself. He wouldn't stop talking about that shot for a week, at least.

On the ride home, Bob popped in a CD. The first track was "September" by Earth, Wind & Fire. He cranked it up, and sang off key as he bobbed side to side to the beat. Jon shook his head at how silly this guy looked, but joined in for the chorus.

Bob had another coughing fit as they were putting the clubs back into the garage. Jon rubbed his back. He knew 40 years of cigarettes could do that, but he wished it wouldn't be happening to his dad.

"Son, I ain't gonna be around forever. None of us are." This was Bob's favorite message. It was never meant in a foreboding way; he just really liked to remind himself and everyone he loved what a blink this life is compared to the infinity that comes before and after it.

As the years went on, his health got progressively worse. His heart condition took its toll on his body, and Bob's smoking habit added fuel to the fire. The heart attacks scared everyone shitless, but the COPD diagnosis was no surprise to anyone.

The last time Jon saw him alive, they went out for a round of golf. Bob was complaining of a hernia, but still wanted to play. Jon told him he was a fuckin' idiot if he thought he was playing with a hernia, that he needed to see the doctor. He shrugged and said he would drive the cart.

Bob rode along in the cart as Jon, his partner Barbara, and his nephew Tegan went through nine holes in the cold December wind. Tegan was ten now and wanted so bad to hit the ball as far as uncle Jon could. Jon and Bob smiled at each other knowingly.

While Tegan was on the 4th green, Bob took Jon's wedge out and hit a few balls onto the green for Tegan to tap in with his putter.

"You know, pop," Jon started. "If you only practice what you are good at, you'll never get any better."

Bob dropped the club laughing. "Smartass," he said when he finally gained his composure.

They dropped Bob off at his house when the wind got too cold to keep playing. "What you guys doing tomorrow, want to go out for another round?" Jon laughed at his dad's stubbornness.

"Dad, no. Please go get your hernia checked out."

Bob shrugged, tapping his sore hernia. "Maybe I should though."

They hugged.

"I love you, boy."

"I love you, pop."

My dad croaked two weeks shy of my 26th birthday. It was hard. Even if it wasn't unexpected.