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Fan with Guitar

Jeremy Tuman
University of New Orleans

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Fan with Guitar

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Nonfiction

by

Jeremy Tuman

B.A. University of Alabama, 1994

May, 2008

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Abstract

Fan with Guitar is a collection of ten personal, nonfiction essays written between 2005 and 2008. The theme that connects them is music. The essays all explore, to some degree, the significance of music in our lives, the value we place on it, and the trials and merits of a life dedicated to music. The majority of the essays deal with the author's experiences traveling and performing with a musical group, thus also functioning as travel essays. Two essays address the role of the fan, and two others concern the idea of community and touch on how music plays a part in that idea.

Preface

Before I entered the writing program at UNO, my goal was simple: to write about music. I had spent the eleven years since earning my bachelor's degree playing guitar, bass and drums in a handful of bands on both coasts. Also in that time I continued to collect records, go to shows and basically be as active a member as I could in the scene, more specifically, the garage-rock scene. Garage rock during the years 1995-2005 was a blend of punk, mid-sixties rock and early rock and roll, a true *mélange* of American sounds, filtered through groups that ranged in ability from charmingly amateurish to menacingly precise. But members of these groups often shared a crazed enthusiasm for old records, old bands, old sounds, which set the scene apart from other rock scenes. I wanted to give voice to my love and enthusiasm for the music, a love nurtured by this vibrant scene, through writing.

This goal included a desire to continue the great tradition of music writing practiced by Peter Guralnick, Nick Tosches and, of course, Lester Bangs. Reading these writers, one needn't wonder about their motivation, or how they felt about the music. They dug it. Plain and simple. And their writing was only an extension of their digging it. They wanted to know more, to get to the essence of the music, to illuminate the power of the songs. They sought to get close to the artists, to uncover their mystery, to see what made them tick. When a heart beats as loud and fast as it does when locked into the spell of a great rock song, one naturally wants to know a little more about what the hell that's all about. What makes rock and roll so damn cool anyway?

Sure, music writing might not deal with the most pressing and consequential issues of our time, the way literature maybe should. Music writing doesn't engage in

questions of the nature of war, poverty, famine or the plight of the underclass in a world increasingly dominated by heartless corporate greed. But what it does deal with is the good stuff, the fun stuff, the stuff that makes all the difficult stuff easier to take. And in doing that, music writing can and often does delve into our search for meaning in our lives. In music lies meaning. Who provides the soundtracks to the moments that make up our favorite memories? Is it enough to acknowledge the music's existence and move on to more important matters? Or is the music worth a deeper look? After all, isn't what's playing in the background during the happiest moments of our lives worth some consideration? Or at least some adulation? My father, who openly disdained the boneheaded simplicity of rock and country, once offered this thought: you might not ever think that somebody had to sit down and write, had to actively create the songs we hear (even the "stupid" ones), but think of the void in the world there would be if a song like "Country Roads" didn't exist. To that I add that while jazz (my father's music) and blues may be among scholars' choices as America's greatest cultural exports, the people tell a different story. Go to any club, bar or restaurant, any place where people, everyday people, congregate to enjoy themselves, in any city on the planet. Chances are you won't hear any blues or jazz. It's the popular music of the second half of the twentieth century, the rhythm and blues, rock and roll, soul, funk, disco, rap, metal, punk and all the derivatives in between, that is truly America's greatest cultural export.

But that seemingly simple plan was what I had in mind *before* I entered the program. Once I got in I quickly realized that I wanted to write about more than music. A lot more. I wanted to examine the communities in which I lived, communities that I consciously placed myself into, originally as an outsider, and of which I eventually came

to feel a part, to a certain degree. I wanted to write about friends, some of whom shared my passion for music, many of whom did not. I wanted to write about my family, that mysterious combination of forces that somehow helped make me what I am. And, of course, I wanted to write about women and love, to examine the “whys” and “hows” of the handful of romantic relationships I’ve had over the years. So I did. And in the process, I came to realize that all of these topics, on some level, at some point, had something to do with music. Not all of these topics wound up in this thesis, but through the process of writing about them, I gained a greater understanding of the role of music in my life: how it came to be so important to me; how love of music shaped my personality, influenced my decisions, altered my life’s course; why I ultimately still believe in the power, the goodness, the necessity of popular music.

As for what did wind up in this thesis, it begins with a look at my original role in music, that of a fan. “Reflections on the Wrayman,” a tribute to Link Wray, recounts the part his music has played in my life and the way, through various stages, my relationship to music always reverts back to that original state of observer/fan. “Soul Connections” offers a similar take on Sam Cooke. In examining what it means to be a fan, I find that certain music (often created well before my birth) has been with me since childhood. While my perception and appreciation of music changes with time, the essential attraction of it does not. My love of the big beat was there early on, and it’s still there.

Next is Part Two. “A Jew in a Nazi Band?” recounts how I came to be involved with The ZKs, my musical project from 1999 to 2005, which provides the subject of the majority of the thesis. As with many things in life, my expectations upon undertaking the project proved much different from what I gained through the experience of it. I wanted

to play music, have fun and travel. And I did. But through these simple goals I learned that, while music would always play a large role in my life, some aspects of music's creation, practice, performance and final product were tiresome, ridiculous, pathetic and ultimately worthless. I consider my time with The ZKs to be the final chapter of my youth, and in that time, many youthful and naive notions of the glory of rock and roll got replaced by more measured, more nuanced concepts of the role of music in my life.

"I Hate Hardcore" documents the origins of the philosophy of the band and begins to show the personality of the band's iconoclastic leader, Grant Loudly. (Although these are works of nonfiction, the names of band members, their former bands, and the record label have been changed.) "Three Nights in the Tight Pants Aquarium" details a punk rock festival in Las Vegas. As some of my musical dreams are realized, others are simultaneously shattered. The piece also attempts to paint a picture of the colorful underground rock scene on the West Coast around 2000. In "Tossers," the band journeys to England where I find that juvenile instincts die hard. I also continue to see that this thing that I'm a part of is not entirely of my own creation, and while I question the value of certain immature, insensitive endeavors, I find myself complicit in them nonetheless. "The Pits" continues this questioning theme, while presenting an exceptionally debauched bunch in Belgium. Summing up the band experience, "Noise . . ." presents a narrator who has been down the road a few times and, while on a third and final trip to Europe, decides to try to enjoy the good and to deal with the bad, with inevitably mixed results.

Moving out of the band experience, Part Three takes a look at how we relate to the places we live. Beginning in San Francisco, high atop Buena Vista Park, "The King

of Haight Street” examines the transient nature of community. The shape of our lives is determined in large part by those immediately around us. Yet in a city such as San Francisco, the faces of those around us constantly change. You may feel a part of something one day, only to find that same thing unfamiliar and foreign the next. Each of us longs to feel connected to our surroundings, but when surroundings continually shift and change, what is it that we connect to? In keeping with the theme of the thesis, the piece touches on the way music plays a part in memory, and how certain memories can be stamped with music, and the music may be of that time or of a time fifty years prior. The music I associate with my time in San Francisco will always remind me of the particular sense of isolation I felt during that time.

Finally, “A Home Without” returns to the question of the nature of community, as I examine my surroundings in New Orleans, especially those nameless neighbors without walls. A few years removed from the band in this essay, I find that my identity is still largely formed by connections through music, connections formed long ago that are always there, still waiting to be returned to.

In some ways, my understanding and appreciation of music has grown immensely beyond the experience of a twelve-year-old kid, in his bedroom, listening to Little Richard through headphones. In some ways, it hasn’t. The initial thrill, the reason behind it all, is still at the heart of my endeavors. I hope that my experience can offer insight to the human condition: as we absorb the blows that life has to deal, we cling steadfastly to the bits of joy found in between. Music is the bits, man, the crazy, beautiful, noisy nuggets. Thus this collection of essays, culled from writing between 2005 and 2008, presents glimpses of the life of a fan, a fan of life, with a guitar in his hands.

Part One

Reflections on the Wrayman

In 1958, guitarist Link Wray came crawling out of the backwoods of North Carolina and lurched to the forefront of the rock 'n' roll revolution with a top-ten hit called "Rumble." The record was an instrumental, part of an early trend of rock instrumentals that rode a huge wave of popularity through the late 50s and early 60s with records like "Rebel Rouser" by Duane Eddy, "Walk, Don't Run" by the Ventures, and "Tequila" by the Champs. From the moment needle hit groove, though, "Rumble" was a different sort of creature. A massive wall of guitar crashed down, reverberating like an earthquake on Mt. Olympus, and a slow, slinky, throbbing beat fell into place behind the guitar. The sound was menacing and dangerous, a soundtrack so in tune to images of switchblade fights and drag races that it inspired such acts of delinquency and rebellion where no predilection existed before. The song became inexorably linked to juvenile delinquency in the minds of civic watchdogs and religious groups and was actually banned by radio stations in several markets, most famously in the Boston area, where the popularity of the record coincided with a rash of JD related violence and mayhem. The ban was a first for an instrumental. That a record without lyrics could be banned based solely on the seething, primitive, psychosexual energy generated by its sound alone was an awesome testament to the deranged and mighty power of Link Wray, the Wrayman.

As a junior in high school, I began to play guitar in my own garage band. Short on musical talent but long on loud, distorted guitars, we took as our main influences

seventies punk rockers The Ramones and The Stooges (led by the “godfather of punk” Iggy Pop), sixties psychedelic rockers The 13th Floor Elevators and one Link Wray. We did crude versions of a handful of Wray’s instrumental tunes including a two-chord beauty called “Jack the Ripper.” With its ridiculously simplistic structure and driving rhythm, “Jack” provided a young band and an inexperienced guitarist an excellent opportunity to make a whole hell of a lot of noise and fill up five to ten minutes of rehearsal time, house-party time, or, god forbid, actual club show time in front of paying customers. My main goals as a guitarist at this time were learning to control feedback and bending strings until they popped, two “techniques” that lent themselves perfectly to the songs of Link Wray.

Predictably, my band went nowhere. Still, although we didn’t realize it at the time, we were riding the cusp of a burgeoning revival of interest in the garage rock sound of the fifties and sixties. This revival took off huge on college campuses and in the underground scenes of major cities. Bands like The Lyres, The Cynics, The Woggles, and Girl Trouble carried the mantra of Link and other garage heroes into the grunge-dominated nineties rock scene. The sound stuck around long enough to see its influence re-emerge in the mainstream in groups like The Hives and The White Stripes, whose chart-topping records revealed distinct, guitar-laden traces of fifties and sixties garage rock.

One band--and one guitarist in particular--seemed to channel the power of Link in a manner that elevated them above mere imitators paying tribute, to a level of guitar-fueled dementia that must have rivaled the impact of the original. Their name was Southern Culture on the Skids, led by guitarist Rick Miller, and they hailed from Link’s

home state of North Carolina. A flyer once likened their sound to swamp gas and watermelon seeds. They sounded to me like a cross between Link, CCR, and Tony Joe White. Featuring songs like “Fried Chicken and Gasoline” and “Dirt Track Date,” their live shows were beer-soaked, southern fried, psycho-billy freak-outs that left audiences gasping for breath and howling for more at the same time. Miller donned overalls, white leather “pimp” loafers, and a mesh trucker cap as he strutted the stage doing the funky chicken and let rip with some tremendously thick slabs of twangy, fuzzy guitar. “Jack the Ripper” was among the handful of Link tunes in their live repertoire, and its performance often marked the frenzied high point of the set. As the drums pounded out a hyper “bird” beat and the bass undulated with insidious pulse, Rick pummeled his guitar like a rag doll, causing it to emit unholy squawks and squeals. He even threw his guitar onto the stage, squatted over the instrument and played it with his ass.

In 1997, I saw Link Wray perform at Tramps in Manhattan, one of his first American appearances in thirty years. He took the stage decked out in full leather, all five foot five of him. Dude was not tall. He wore one of the most unusual yet rocking hair-dos I’ve ever seen. It was kind of like a mullet but piled high on top and with a long ponytail hanging down the back: a pompadour ponytail. His patented wraparound shades completed the look. The Cramps said it best in their song “Garbage Man”: “one half hillbilly and one half punk. Now do you understand?” The grinning redneck hep cat looked like the wolf that ate the three little pigs. Of course, being from Carolina, he

would've smoked them in an open pit, smothered them in vinegar-based sauce, and thrown them on white bread with slaw on top.

He launched into "Rawhide" and charged ahead full-bore with a crunchy, twangy, dirty guitar tone and some phenomenal fretwork. The man could really play and had not lost a thing since his heyday. In an inspired rock 'n' roll moment of brash flash and damn-it-all irreverence, his trophy wife came on stage and brushed his hair in the middle of the song. I guess he just wanted the crowd to get a good look at her and to let everybody know that he was still the man.

Seeing him live brought a phase of my life, started ten years prior, to a full circle. Aspirations of "making it" in music that I held before had become tempered by reality, and the blind optimism of my youth had by that point simmered down to a more guarded cynicism. But none of that changed the fact that I still loved to lose myself in some noisy guitar every once in while. Looking up at that grinning rockabilly wolf, still plugging away deliriously to a roomful of cult-worshiping fanatics some forty years after his one and only brush with large scale fame, made me think that maybe my course in life might not be a complete waste after all.

Speaking to NPR's Terri Gross in a 1997 radio interview, Wray described how he came upon his unique sound. In a thick Carolina drawl and using beatnik-era hipster-speak, he told of the night he came up with "Rumble." During a live performance of an improvised instrumental based on the popular "Stroll," his brother and bandmate jammed the vocal mic into the guitar amp speaker, causing the small speaker to vibrate and overload and the guitar tone to break up due to the volume. The kids went nuts over the sound. When they brought it into the studio to record, the sound was too clean, and the

visceral thrill of the live performance could not be replicated. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Wray took a pencil and punched a series of holes in the amp tweeters, the smaller of the speakers. Distortion was born.

The story might've been more mythic if he'd stabbed it with an ice pick instead of with a pencil, but the result was the same. With that one moment of improvisational genius, rock guitar as we know it was launched. Everything massive and noisy that followed, from Townsend and Page to the Stooges and Ramones, from AC/DC to Nirvana, owed a bit of gratitude to the Wrayman.

Since '97, I took my own minimalist approach to guitar as far as I could. After three albums and three tours with a punk band, I decided to give it a rest. My chording hand had a bad cramp from too much power-chording, and the rest of my body needed a break as well.

I threw on some Link recently though, and it still sounded fresh and raw. It reminded me all over again why I dug that stuff in the first place.

Link Wray died on November 5, 2005, at the age of 76. He performed on stage, playing rock and roll, until the last months of his life.

Soul Connections

There's a certain connection one feels when listening to Sam Cooke. It's a feeling brought on in part by the warm immediacy in his voice. He sings a phrase, emphasizes certain words or adds an emotive non-lyrical gesture like an "mmm mmm" and completely draws the listener in. It's not as if the listener feels that Sam is singing only to him alone. We know that he's not. But it doesn't matter. The inviting, confidential tone surrounds and immerses one. Others may hear it too. But at that moment when one is listening to Sam sing, the connection between the listener and the singer is completely personal.

Other singers invoke similar reactions. Part of the success of any popular singer depends on his or her ability to communicate something to the listener that transcends the limitations of the simple combination of music and lyrics, of chords and words, of instruments and voice. Soul singers especially rely on this ability. They manage to communicate profound emotions, at times the very essence of emotion itself, with relatively mundane chords and lyrics. Try to find a soul song with more than four chords, with more than one minor chord or with lyrics that, alone on the page, resemble anything more than junior high love poems. The best soul singers communicate feelings with grunts, groans and moans—things beyond the words, between the lyrics, beneath the music. Listen to Ray Charles, James Brown, or other masters of the genre. They do things with their voices that can't easily be pinpointed but that keep listeners hooked, clamoring for that connection.

Sam began his singing career in gospel music, which during the late 1940s and early 1950s was a vibrant and productive scene. Fueled by countless touring groups who

worked the huge network of black churches in the South and Midwest, the gospel scene generated a modest record industry, a commercial radio industry, and even a few national stars such as Sister Rosetta Thorpe. Dynamic live performance was the key to success in this highly competitive field, so Sam learned early on how to communicate directly with an audience. His gospel group, The Soul Stirrers, earned a reputation as a top act in the field, due in no small part to their brash young lead singer. The subtle and not-so-subtle vocal techniques that Sam honed on the gospel stage served him immensely in the studio once he “went pop.”

But Sam’s seemingly simple recordings contain surprising complexities. Look just beneath the surface of Sam Cooke’s music, and many disconnections begin to appear. There’s the disconnection between the simplicity of his lyrics and the power of the music. “Darling, you send me. Honest you do” is the majority of the lyrics of his first big hit. In fact, it’s the entirety of the chorus, but that doesn’t begin to explain how the song almost by itself moved black music out of doo-wop and R&B and laid down an archetype for soul. Similarly, there’s the disconnection of modern listeners, who can’t always grasp how such a seemingly innocuous and run-of-the-mill fifties song initiates a monumental shift and announces the arrival of such a major talent.

Dig deeper. There’s the disconnection between the syrupy, puppy-eyed love lyrics of songs like “Cupid” and “Only Sixteen,” which proclaimed true and undying love for just one girl, and the turbulent, bitter, and sometimes violent reality that was Sam’s love life. Not that his story is so different from that of many entertainers, but he married and divorced several times over a relatively brief career, leaving homes broken and children without a father. There’s the disconnection between the smooth sophistication of a song

like “Chain Gang” with its orchestrated strings and theatrical “work” sounds, and the harsh realities of chain gangs experienced by African Americans in the South. Chain gangs were the first cousins of lynch mobs, the most murderous, brutal form of institutional racism, which sprang up after the Civil War as a means for whites to maintain control over free blacks. After emancipation, blacks were often arrested for unsubstantiated accusations, held, and tried unfairly and sent to work on the chain gangs where abominable working and living conditions went unchecked and disease and mortality rates were appalling. Ironically, the song was a major hit among both whites and blacks.

Similar disparity exists between many of Sam’s hits and the realities of racism in America—realities that persist to this day. Sam consciously crafted his songs in an attempt to gain white listeners and to achieve the sort of crossover appeal of singers like Nat Cole and Harry Belafonte, whom Cooke viewed as the measure of true success. Breezy teen symphonies such as “Everybody Loves to Cha Cha Cha” and “Twistin’ the Night Away,” which did appeal to whites and blacks alike, belie the underlying struggle for equality facing blacks then and now. As is well known, for all the crossover success of Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Michael Jackson, and countless others, blacks in America still experience economic marginalization, racial profiling and abuse by police, and many other forms of fear and hatred, both subtle and overt. How can we love a singer and his music and still hate and fear his race? Is this phenomenon just another contradiction among the many built into American society, or is it glaring and inexcusable stupidity?

Finally there’s the disconnection between the way Sam lived--full of class and dignity, dressed sharp in Ivy League perfection, raised right in the large family of a

minister socially conscious and genuinely trying to make a difference—and the way he died—in a senseless shooting indicative of a stereotypical black community, in a graceless moment of depravity, chasing a woman he picked up into a locked hotel office, shot dead by a hotel manager claiming self-defense. It's the sort of incident reported almost every night on the six o'clock news in any given American city. Whites and blacks shake their heads, think what a shame, what a waste, and then go back to their dinner. Only this wasn't some random ghetto drug murder of a poor kid who never had a fair chance in society; this was Sam Cooke, gospel and soul singer, and one of the great performing artists of century.

I first heard Sam Cooke in the film *Witness*. Harrison Ford, hiding out among the Amish to protect a young witness to a murder, begins to fall for an Amish woman played by Kelly McGillis. They are alone together while he is tinkering with an old car in the electricity-deprived household, when the car radio suddenly comes on, and Sam Cooke is heard singing “Wonderful World,” his 1960 shuffle hit with a light Latin feel and silly school-inspired lyrics. “Don't know much about history. Don't know much biology,” Sam begins, only to come to the lyrical conclusion that “what I do know is I love you,” and “if you love me too, what a wonderful world it would be.” Harrison Ford's expression brightens as he is struck by the feeling and memories created by the song. This is a good one is what he says, or something like that, and he smiles and takes McGillis in his arms and does a slow dance that the seductive feel of the song naturally induces. The implication of the moment was clear, even to me at age twelve. This young

Amish woman has never heard rock ‘n’ roll, and the moment that she does, she realizes fully the beauty and power of the music. Sam Cooke’s music is held up in this scene as an instantly identifiable example of hip, popular culture. Sam is the good stuff that makes all the bullshit worthwhile. Yes, (in her view) science and technological advancements may be speeding human beings along a doomed path toward ultimate annihilation, but some damn fine music, one hell of a soundtrack accompanies the trip.

The scene and the song stuck with me, and not long afterwards I bought my first Sam Cooke cassette. It was the RCA “Best of” with the yellow cover and included only his very biggest and most well known hits. My uncle Dan took me to a local record store one afternoon to get it. I loved early rock ‘n’ roll as a kid. Up until then my favorite singer was Little Richard. Something about the passion and energy in his voice really excited me, and Sam’s voice, although much more refined and laid-back, contained the same sort of passion, the same soul. Dan always indulged me on music-buying trips, and with his support I amassed a nice collection of cassettes that provided hours on end of listening pleasure--geeked out up in my room with the headphones on or in the back of our grey Chevy van on road trips with the amazing new Walkman. Looking back now, it seems odd for a kid to have been so enthralled by music produced ten plus years before he was born, music that seems quaint and innocent, especially now but seemed so then, even then in the mid eighties. I just thought that the stuff was made for kids; it seemed like kids’ music the same way that The Beatles in *A Hard Day’s Night* seemed like a kids’ band. My connection to Sam’s voice transcended time and place; none of my friends even knew about this stuff, much less spent hours alone listening to it. At the time it just felt right. And it still does.

According to music critic Bruce Eder, writing about Sam on Allmusic.com, interest in Sam's music declined sharply in the decade following his death in 1964, in large part because of legal wrangling that kept much of his catalog out of print. Compounding this decline, what was available were a few inferior albums he recorded early on. Thus in the early seventies, when many original acts were enjoying a revival in popularity from a second generation of rock fans, due in part to a post-hippie era nostalgia exemplified by films like *American Graffiti*, Sam was nowhere to be heard. Young fans were told that he was a great soul singer, the precursor to Otis Redding and Wilson Pickett, but when listeners heard the misguided, syrupy, string-laced output on the few records that were available, they could not understand what all the fuss was about. According to Eder, it wasn't until the late seventies, when the film *Animal House* made use of two of Sam's songs, that Sam began to regain credibility and enjoy new exposure to younger rock fans. Of course, the black community didn't necessarily need John Belushi to remind it that Sam was great, but the toga-partying members of Delta house certainly brought back the musical richness of the early sixties. Once a decent collection of Sam's RCA hits became available in the early eighties, the world was able to hear again and for the first time the power and intensity in his voice, and his music ascended in the rock canon to occupy its proper place among the very finest sides ever laid on wax.

In the fall of 2005, I attended an event marking the release of a new Sam Cooke biography by Peter Guralnick. Assembled at Atlanta's Black Cultural Center were Guralnick, soul singer and producer William Bell, and Julian Bond, chairman of the NAACP. Guralnick, a diminutive nerdy white guy with large glasses, said that he first began working on the book over twenty years ago. He read a brief excerpt, then opened up the panel for group discussion and questions from the audience. Bell, known for the late sixties soul hit "Everyday Will Be Like a Holiday" among other songs, spoke in a deep, velvet-smooth voice about touring with Sam on large package tours and about the way that the other acts hated following Sam because not only could he turn the house completely out, but his repertoire consisted of one million-selling song after another. Sam wrote or co-wrote almost all of his big hits, and Julian Bond spoke of how Sam's "A Change is Gonna Come," deliberately penned by Sam in response to the growing demand for civil rights, actually helped coalesce the movement by giving voice on the radio to what was happening in the streets. The movement fed off of the music, and the music, Sam's "Change" along with James Brown's "Say It Loud" and others, fed off of the movement. Bond also praised Guralnick for bringing the presence and the power of Sam back to life with the bio, in much the same manner as he had done for Elvis Presley in a previous biography.

Then they opened it up for questions, and the discussion turned to memories of great soul shows at the old clubs of Atlanta's Sweet Auburn district, in the fifties and sixties the heart of the city's black community. In addition to having much nightlife, Auburn Avenue was the site of the Ebenezer Baptist Church where a young M.L.K. honed his preaching style. Julian Bond was there for many shows. William Bell was

there as well. Most of the audience that night, it turned out, was there too. They had come to share memories not just of Sam but of all the legendary soul singers and the times had listening to them. One of Sam's granddaughters spoke briefly from the audience. History filled the room that night with a tangible presence. What was to be a thirty-minute Q-and-A session went for two hours. It's alright, someone said, tonight we're on CPT tonight, colored people's time.

When the panel broke up, we filed into the lobby to line up for book signings. Guralnick had long been one of my favorite writers, so I took the opportunity to make him a mixed c.d. of 60s soul and included a little note about myself. It was a preposterous gesture, really. This man had gotten closer to the life and the music of Sam Cooke than anyone who didn't know him personally. He crafted his book to place Sam into the context of his time and to give voice to the moods, the feelings, the tones behind the simple facts of his existence. Passages bring the reader in close: "Everyone looked at him like he was their fucking savior . . . and yet he couldn't muffle the growing discontent, the helplessness he felt at his inability to control not so much the world around him as his private world." Despite Guralnick's impressive achievements, I knew that we shared a love for the music and that love was behind my impulse to give him the disc. I put a bunch of Solomon Burke, some Big Maybelle, whatever I had, on it—music that he had no doubt heard many times and had probably studied and maybe even written on. But who knows, I thought, maybe because he's traveling he doesn't have anything with him and just might need something to throw on in the car on the way to the airport—something familiar, something good. I shook his hand after he signed my book and told him I especially enjoyed an early piece he did on Charlie Rich, in which he sat

with Charlie's wife while Charlie performed in some small dive. I handed him the disc and kept the line moving. The note said that I was an aspiring music writer and would love some feedback on what I was doing. I included my email address but never heard from him.

Sam made several other remarkable cross-cultural connections. Even though Sam was a consummate student of popular music, the appearance of Bob Dylan on the scene took him by surprise. Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" fascinated Sam, who felt ashamed that a white boy instead of a black artist had written a song whose lyrics were so in touch with the times and seemed to capture the mood and the spirit of black struggle in America. Sam featured the song prominently in his live set at the Copacabana in Manhattan, the club that represented the pinnacle of mainstream showbiz success and to which Sam triumphantly returned in '64 after bombing there on his first appearance years before. Sam seized the second opportunity, not just to showcase a great and important song but also to demonstrate to the white audience that he was a fully immersed, highly conscious artist who would not be relegated solely to rehashing his feel-good hits from years prior. The song also inspired Sam to write "A Change Is Gonna Come," considered by many his most important work because of the way it brilliantly combines a melancholy but uplifting message with heart-wrenching delivery. And because when the song hit was precisely when its message most needed to be heard.

Although he died in 1964, Sam lived long enough to witness the British Invasion and to realize fully its impact and impending change in the music industry. His respect

for and appreciation of The Beatles, The Animals and The Rolling Stones put him at odds with others in soul music, particularly others within his own camp, who saw the young groups as vocally and musically inferior and resented them for scoring bigger hits with some of their own material. Coming out of gospel music as Sam and many other singers had, they understood a tradition of vocal virtuosity and one-upmanship. In the world of live gospel, you just tried to out-sing the next guy, and the most dynamic singer, the one who brought the house fully down, became the biggest and most successful in gospel. Live reputations ensured large turnouts and more successful gigs. Thus daily competition in performance was part of the music.

Sam saw the change on the horizon. The new groups communicated a message effectively with a combination of image, attitude and some raw talent as well. Sam encouraged groups, especially guitarist Bobby Womack's group, The Valentinos, to emphasize their two-guitar sound. Womack wrote and recorded "It's All Over Now," which the Stones covered with much greater success. This embittered Womack, but Sam told him that they could compete with the new groups, that they were the real deal and just needed the right image.

Sam had long possessed a firm grasp on what worked and what didn't work in music. During an interview on *American Bandstand*, Dick Clark asked him how he came up with the ideas for his songs. Sam told Clark that the key is to tell a simple story, one that everyday people can relate to and understand. One of Sam's last hits was a remake of "Tennessee Waltz," a song made popular by country singer Patti Page in 1950 but also recorded by artists such as Guy Lombardo and Les Paul and Mary Ford. It was a song, in other words, straight out of the "hit parade" era, the era of popular music just before rock

'n' roll, before music marketed directly to teens. In recording material such as this, and in gestures such as appearing at the Copa, Sam reached for a broader popular audience, one that would legitimize his status at the top. He wanted the same level of fame as Nat Cole and Sammy Davis, and when a soul singer like Sam got a hold of that old tune, he knocked it straight out and over the top. The "waltz" part is gone, replaced by a steady swinging backbeat. Horns fill in the off beats. The vocal comes in strong and up front, telling a simple story just as he said all along. It's a sad story of lost love but sung in a joyful, defiant manner. The recording exemplifies the very essence of soul music: happiness in misery, joy in sadness. The record moves; it's loud and noisy—a glorious moment of rhythm and soul, and when he hits the high note in the last chorus, he seems to be singing down from a place up on high, letting the whole world know how great it feels to be alive.

Part Two

A Jew in a Nazi Band?*

The sun broke hard into the fishbowl that was Orphan Andy's 24-hour diner. It was a usual sleep-inducing afternoon. The sunlight created a warm, drowsy sensation. The windows and glass door filtered the light and the noise. The streets outside bustled, but quietly from inside. The view through the fishbowl windows, which are a necessity in the window-candy-filled Castro, swirled with activity. SF citizens of all sorts moved about the intersection of Market and Castro. The trolley clanged (I realize this is a line straight from a song by all-time gay icon Judy Garland, but I swear to god it did) as it turned on the end of the F line and headed back down Market.

Not many people came in to the diner during that time of day. A handful of regulars, drinking coffee and working crosswords, some others wanting to eat a real early dinner, and the trolley drivers. And Grant. Well not often. But every once in a while, for a hamburger to go (no cheese) and fries. That's where I first met him.

I'd seen him walking around the neighborhood, looking distinctly out-of-place with dyed-black hair, black jeans and band t-shirts. He walked with purpose, as if not wanting to acknowledge his neighbors or even that he lived in the Castro, an exceptionally busy area, one lacking the more informal pace and customs of a traditional residential neighborhood. I could tell he was a band guy: someone into music, most likely garage rock. One familiar with that scene and its participants can easily recognize brethren.

* The names of band members, their former bands, and the record label have been changed.

He recognized the same in me. I often sported band t-shirts behind the counter. Like any other visual modifiers, the band t-shirts worked as a code. Names like The Swinging Neckbreakers and The Lazy Cowgirls might go completely unnoticed by the majority of citizens. Castro residents especially were more in-tune to reading codes such as the bandana colors that indicated a wide range of sex preferences and fetishes. Underground cultures instinctively develop visual codes as a survival mechanism, a way of negotiating normal society without drawing too much unwanted attention. Obviously, a lot more was at stake in the underground codes of the Castro than in garage rock: the survival and development of gay culture as opposed to people who think they're cool wanting to let other cool people know they're cool too.

Anyway, it was the band t-shirts that first caused Grant and me to meet. Specifically it was a t-shirt of The Mummies, a San Francisco band, that caused him to remark one day, "If you like that band, you might like my band."

"Oh, yeah? What's your band?" I asked.

"Well, it's The ZKs, but I used to be in Rocketcycle and The Jam Jobs."

"You must be Grant Loudly."

I had blown one of the golden rules of fandom: I had let on that I knew who someone was. Very un-cool. Part of the whole aura of coolness is to never let on that you know (or care) who anyone is. Therefore, you never acknowledge their significance or open the possibility of their coolness somehow overshadowing your own. But I never bought into all that. I knew it, was aware of it, but wasn't interested in playing that game on anything more than an ironic level. So I acknowledged Grant. I did know who he was. I had been listening to his bands since '92 (this was 1999). His groups weren't among my

favorites, but since I was a Hoover of all things garage, they were on my radar. I knew of Rocketcycle but found their sound unbearably tinny. But The Jam Jobs—now that was a solid record. He told me about an upcoming ZKs show at The Covered Wagon, said I should come check it out, took his burger and split.

I did go check them out. It was later that week or early the next week. I went down to The Covered Wagon on Fifth and Folsom by myself, as I did often over my years in San Francisco and in New York. It's not that I liked running solo, although I really didn't mind it. It's just that I didn't always have friends as into the music as I was. I had a few more in New York, very few in San Francisco, but even they weren't always as motivated for live music, or for the same shows. I never let any of that stop me. If there was a band I wanted to see, if I could get to the show and I had a little cash in my pocket, I went. Simple as that. Whether the show was out in Coney Island, over in Hoboken, South of Market or down in The Mission, I went. By myself if necessary.

I don't recall much about that first show, other than that I thought they were pretty good, if a bit stand-offish. But things didn't start rolling with me and The ZKs until several weeks later. I ran into Grant at another show at The Covered Wagon: Stinky's Peep Show, a monthly event that featured extra-large go go dancers, an actual peep show in the back, and punk and garage rock bands in between. We would later play some of our most memorable shows at Stinky's, but that night the band was Jackie and The Cedrics, a Japanese band styled after the classic, early 60s surf music sound, but filtered through the weird lens of obsessive Japanese rock kids. I loved them. Grant hated them: "I hate surf music," he said, after commenting on the fact that I was wearing the same

Mummies t-shirt from the restaurant. If I hadn't been, would he have recognized me?
Would we have had the following conversation that would lead to my joining the band?

“How's The ZKs?” I asked. “You guys playing again soon.”

I don't recall his exact words that followed, but it was then that he indicated that The ZKs had suddenly and thoroughly imploded, that the reason was a power play by the two guitarists, who had become girlfriend and boyfriend and had decided that they could form a better band without him. He also indicated that he thought the two of them were out of their minds, that their union would be short-lived and ill-fated, and that they had a less-than-zero chance of forming a successful band without him.

“So, what are you going to do?” I asked. “Is the whole thing done?”

“Well, they were the two guitar players,” he said. “Where the hell am I going to find two guitar players?”

“I play guitar.”

I walked up the brick steps and knocked on the door of the Castro Victorian.
“Come on in,” he said. “What, is everything you own a band t-shirt?” This one read The Sinister Six. “Have a seat in there.” He gestured towards a living room off of the main hallway and continued down the hall. “I'll be out in a sec.” It felt all-of-a-sudden like some sort of serious interview, like he was employing classic institutional intimidation practices, having me wait alone in an unfamiliar room for an unknown period of time.

I took a look around. Pop culture artifacts decorated the built-in white shelves: Evel Kneival, Astro Boy, Ultra Man. Stacks of records lined the bottom shelves, many of

them still sealed. In fact, bunches of unopened copies of what were obviously the same record lined the shelves. Odd, I thought. I later learned that he ran a mail order record business, Jam Job Records, right out of that living room. I looked a little closer at some of the smaller knick-knacks on the shelves. One caught my eye: a folded red Nazi arm band that looked like it might have been real. I scanned the shelf closer and found a toothpaste box emblazoned with a swastika. This was odd. Was this guy some sort of white supremacist? He was white, which, as far as I knew, was the main prerequisite.

“Hey, sorry.” He appeared in the doorway. “So did you get a chance to listen to the cd?” He had dropped one by the restaurant so that I could pick out a few of the songs.

“Yeah, I did,” I answered. “It’s good. Fast.”

“Yeah, I know it’s good, but can you play it?”

I remembered then that the first song on the disc was called “Nazi Interrogation.” This is going to be interesting, I thought, when he asks me to join the band and I have to tell him I can’t join a Nazi band because I’m Jewish.

“Here plug into this.” He handed me a little practice amp, designed like an effects pedal, with a speaker about an inch in diameter. What the hell, I thought, I’ve got to play through this little thing for an audition? I unzipped my Gibson SG from the gig bag and plugged it into the little amp. I flipped it on and it buzzed—sounded like a toy guitar.

“Well, let’s hear what you can do.”

I played the chords to “Nazi Interrogation” and to “Somebody’s Getting Screwed,” the only two I’d had a chance to learn. I played them fast, just like on the record. A solid block of electric buzz shot out of the little amp. He watched my rhythm

hand moving furiously up and down, and the neck hand, locked in power chord position, moving equally fast.

“I think you’re going to end up playing with me.”

I was curious to see how far his white power inclinations might go. I didn’t believe that he was a Nazi, but with all the little signs pointing that way, I just didn’t know for sure. I certainly wasn’t averse to some good Jew jokes. What Jew is? And I wouldn’t mind a few Nazi barbs either. After all, this was punk rock. You had to be able to laugh at yourself. But if being in the band meant summer camps in Montana with “like-minded” individuals, I might have had to reconsider.

“Cool,” I said. “What’s the master plan?”

I Hate Hardcore

“I hate hardcore,” Grant said, sitting in his sparsely furnished living room. Sunlight poured in through a large bay window bereft of any covering. “I want to be fast, but I don’t want to sound like fucking hardcore,” he insisted. He thumbed furiously through a saggy cardboard box full of dusty punk forty-fives, looking for something old and obscure that we could steal a riff from. I sat on the edge of an early-seventies-era brown couch holding a cheap Fender Tele knockoff plugged into an amp the size of a cigarette pack. A few posters hung on the white walls of the creaky old Victorian: Evel Knievel “Live” at the Cow Palace, *The Shining*, The Ramones. A built-in bookshelf held more artifacts from the seventies: a box of Quisp cereal, packs of Funny Face drink mix, an Evel Knievel Stunt Bike in its original box, all unopened.

I’d heard this speech before. Grant drilled this fundamental difference into me all during the writing and rehearsal process leading up to the recording of *Have a Blast*, my first album with The ZKs. We met in his living room almost every day during the summer of 2000, writing and rewriting songs, listening to old records, stealing a verse here and a chorus there. If you want to sound like the best, you’ve got to steal from the best. Everyone in the history of rock did it too, perhaps just not as mechanically or blatantly as we did. Or perhaps so. Look at Elvis. Look at the Stones.

“What about this?” he asked, cueing up “Automobile” by The Rings. “Anything we use off this?”

A chunky, spitfire guitar riff shot out the speaker. Drums fell in after two bars. The singer sounded manic, insane.

“It’s a killer riff,” I said, “Why don’t we just cover it?”

“You’re an idiot,” he responded. “We can’t. Everybody already knows it.”

It was a fine line to be sure, the distinction between fast punk rock and hardcore. I knew what he meant, though. Most hardcore was decidedly un-catchy. Sure, the intensity and the energy were incredible, especially live, but ask a hardcore kid how his favorite song goes, and a series of non-musical staccato grunts blurts from between his lips.

We weren’t musical geniuses; no one was ever going to confuse a ZKs record for *Physical Graffiti*, but we tried to make the songs catchy. Stick-in-your-head catchy, almost annoyingly so, so-that-you-can’t-get-it-out catchy. Someone once referred to Grant’s lyrics as “punk rock Dr. Seuss.” A perfect description of what we were going for: simple, childish, even imbecilic, but catchy, catchy, catchy. “The true test is that if a little kid can like it, then it’s catchy.” Another one of Grant’s mantras. True to his word, he would test out new material on his eight-year-old nephew.

The records we stole from were mostly straight out of the seventies punk canon. Not the mainstream punk canon of The Ramones, The Clash, and The Sex Pistols. Sure, those bands were all great, but their sting had long since worn off. I mean, how punk can you be when they sell your T-shirts at the mall? And not even in music stores but in stupid trendy clothes stores. The bands we ripped still resided in the underground canon, the stuff collector geeks and punk fanboys secretly drooled over, bands like The Kids, PVC, The Pack, Hubble Bubble, The Psycho Surgeons, The Fun Things, The Ivy Green. Ironically, all European and Aussie bands. American punk was too picked over.

I was somewhat new to this game. Growing up in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, allowed me to pick and choose the bands I liked without the hipper-than-thou pressures of a well defined, big city punk “scene.” Hardcore punk fell in alongside seventies punk and

sixties-style psych-garage, as well as grunge, metal, surf, rockabilly, psychedelic and the indie sounds (now called “alternative”) of bands like Husker Du and The Replacements. Without the scenes to accompany the sounds, we were free to listen to whatever we wanted. Going from Tuscaloosa to NYC and then to San Francisco, I continued practicing the pick-and-choose ethos of my college-town upbringing. But on joining The ZKs, I, perhaps unknowingly, had aligned myself with the underground punk scene. Grant quickly indoctrinated me on what was okay to like and what wasn’t, and hardcore definitely wasn’t.

It’s not that he hated all hardcore. Some of it fell right in the holy canon: bands like Black Flag and The Zero Boys. But listen closely to those bands and you’ll find that they didn’t fit in with most other hardcore. In the case of Black Flag, it was the beat. Most hardcore used a one-two beat, played super fast: one two one two one two. This beat made the music impossible to dance to in any traditional sense of the term “dance.” Sure, you could move your body to the music, but not in any sort of rhythmic fashion. The beat was just too damn fast. Hardcore originally tapped into the angst and aggression of Reagan-era suburban youth, and the beat and speed of the music reflected as much. More importantly, so did the movements generated by the music (utter chaos, skanking, slam dancing, and the mosh pit). Speed and adrenaline-fueled mayhem. The one-two beat was perfect for inspiring the controlled-chaos movements of a group of shave-headed, violent, unruly suburban kids. But not for dancing, in the traditional rock ‘n’ roll sense, in other words, not for shaking your ass until the early light, not for drunk white kids to feel like they got some soul, and certainly not for getting chicks. Rock needs girls to survive. Girls like to dance. Girls must like to dance to your band in order for a) a band member to

go home with one or b) anyone else in the crowd to go home with one. Thus, the root of the major distinction between hardcore and other punk: girls. The hardcore scene was, well, too “hardcore”: angry, righteous, disgusted with any and all trappings of mainstream society, including boy/girl pursuits. Other punks were just fed up with mainstream *music*. Sure, they might rip their clothes, dye their hair and wear make up, but c’mon. They still wanted to get laid. Right?

Rehearsing the songs proved another challenge. Keeping our fast punk sound from blurring completely into hardcore meant daily battles with our drummer, Bobby Badass, whose nickname derived from his massive tattooed biceps and forearms. Bobby abstained from drugs and alcohol. If he started drinking, he once told me, we might have to talk him down from a flagpole on Fisherman’s Wharf, the way they did Jonathan Winters that time. Instead he spent hours in the gym. When he realized that he was never going to be “rock ‘n’ roll skinny,” he decided to go the other way.

We practiced in a dilapidated building in the Tenderloin known as the “Pepto Palace” due to its dull pink interior walls. The building stood in on one of the worst blocks of one of the worst areas of San Francisco. Just a few blocks off Market Street, the intersection of Turk and Taylor displayed a rich sampling of the dregs of San Francisco street life (drug deals in bright daylight, people shooting up in doorways and urinating in the street). Next door to “the Palace” was Aunt Charlie’s, one of the oldest and dive-iest drag bars in the city. Withered and wrinkled drag queens wandered in and out, gals

who'd been in drag so long that they didn't even bother to take the curlers out of their hair before heading down the street to the bar.

I stood outside with Grant trying not to make eye contact with anyone.

"Goddamn it, I'm sick of this shit," said Grant. Since the room was in Bobby's name and he shared it with another band, Bobby held the key.

"You know that there's one thing I can't stand," Grant continued. "It's people being late." Bobby was always late.

Eventually some other tenant came along and let us in the front gate, but we still couldn't get into the room. So we sat by the door on the worn carpet in the pink hallway while the cacophonous sounds of various metal bands bled through the thin sheet-rock walls, creating a monotonous hum.

"This is the soundtrack to my suicide," I quipped.

Band rehearsal spaces throughout America are littered with metal bands. All they ever do is rehearse. Their songs have so many different parts and the band members are so freaking high all the time that, by the time they make their way to the end of a song, they forget how the whole thing started and have to go back and do it all over again. You'd think guys with weed-depleted short-term memory would write shorter songs with fewer parts. Next thing you know, they've been in the room for ten hours, it's nighttime, the earth has turned, the season has changed, their hair's fallen out and their hearing's gone. Then when they do play a show, it's on a bill with fifteen other metal bands, and that thing lasts until everyone in the crowd is old and deaf too. If hardcore bands didn't attract girls, then metal bands actively drove them away with Marshall stacks and warlock guitars.

The ZKs, on the other hand, hated to practice. We tried to get in and out as quickly as possible, just enough time for what we needed to get done. Of course, it was hard to get in and out quickly when the drummer was half an hour late. When he finally did show, he offered no explanation. Grant silently fumed as Bobby unlocked the Masterlock, and we went in.

I plugged in my guitar and flipped on the amp. Grant did the same with his bass. Bobby, meanwhile, methodically adjusted the drum hardware, pounding on the tom, then walking around to the front of the kit to tighten the rack and reposition the tom, then back behind the kit to pound on the tom some more. This irritated Grant to no end. If the guy was going to take thirty minutes to set up the drums, then shouldn't he be there thirty minutes early instead of thirty minutes late?

Jane, our second guitar player, was exempt from this particular practice, since we were just trying out different versions of some of the songs for the new record. This was how Grant liked to work. We'd write a song in the living room, take it into the practice room, then bring it back to the living room the next day to try to make it catchier for the next practice.

This was not how Bobby liked to work.

After blowing through a few warm-up tunes, we got down to the new stuff. "Let's try 'Accidental Homicide' this way," Grant said. "Show him, Jeremy." I played the rewritten riff, freshly ripped from the Vom's "Electrocute My Cock."

"What about the way we did it last time?" asked Bobby.

"Yeah, we just want to try it this way," said Grant, "just to see how it sounds."

"But, but I liked the other way," said Bobby. "It sounded good."

“Yeah, I know,” said Grant. “We might end up doing it that way. We just want to *try* it this way to see how it sounds.”

Bobby stood up behind the drums in full protest mode. “Nooooo,” he cried, clenching the drumsticks. “You keep changing it, and it’s already good.”

“Jesus Christ,” said Grant. “We just trying to see if we can’t make it better. That’s all. Now can we just try it this way?”

Bobby finally relented, offering afterwards: “The new way sounds pretty good.”

On the way home, Grant voiced his disapproval. “What the fuck was that? The guy’s insane.”

I nodded.

Grant continued, “Plus, he’s playing the shit too fast. It sounds like fucking hardcore, and I hate hardcore.”

He was right. Bobby was pushing the tempo, speeding up the songs to the point where whatever shred of melody we might have had going got blurred beyond recognition. I struggled to keep up on guitar and to jam all the words into the decreasing space left for the verses. Song parts changed so quickly that I couldn’t find a place to breathe. I was turning blue just trying to make it through.

“You’ve got to talk to him, man,” said Grant. “He listens to you. He won’t listen to me.”

Right again. Bobby inherently mistrusted Grant because of his lack of bass-playing ability. He felt that Grant had no business telling him how to play the drums

when he couldn't even tune his own bass. But this was Grant's band. Things were going to be done to his liking, or, as he put it, the record "will never see the light of day."

It wasn't all just a maniacal ego trip, either. Grant ran the label. He put out the records. The label's solid reputation in the punk underground allowed for wide distribution overseas. The availability of our records overseas was the key to making a European tour feasible. Sure, plenty bands go over with no distribution and play to no one. But we wanted a decent tour with some promotion, a few guarantees, a couple of perks and an audience to play for. If the record sucked, we weren't going anywhere. "End of story." Another Grantism.

It always amazed me, the degree of control the drummer held over the various bands I played in over the years, and the sometimes childish and pathetic ways drummers manipulated and wielded their power. This might piss some drummers off. But this is where drummers get their reputations as impossible to work with, as band-wrecking, juvenile egomaniacs. This is why bands use drum machines. Drummers sit in the back. Nobody can see them. The singer often stands directly in front of the drummer. Yet drummers crave attention just like everybody else in rock bands. Plus, rock drumming is often simple and repetitive. Drum solos are passé. They never get to take a solo, show off, fall to their knees, jump into the crowd or do pretty much anything besides sit in the back and play a two-four beat. If a drummer gets too flashy and does too many fills, the singer or the guitarist gets mad because the drummer is stepping all over him or her. Bands want simple, steady drummers. Successful rock drumming requires individuals of enormous selflessness, cooperation and team-playing ability. These are not the inherent qualities of most rock drummers. It's just not why they got in the game.

Instead, drummers learn to manipulate from behind the scenes. If they speed up or slow down, the band speeds up or slows down with them. If they're late for rehearsal, the band doesn't rehearse. If the band is on stage ready to start the show, the house lights are down, house music off, and they're standing there holding their guitars in front of a packed house, looking like idiots because the drummer is at the bar getting a drink, then so be it.

So there I was stuck in a position of trying to negotiate between Grant and Bobby, to soothe their inflated yet sensitive egos, and with the ultimate goal in mind of making sure the record didn't suck. It felt, at times, like more than I cared to take on. I saw the band as a means to an end, namely world travel. And chicks too but mostly the travel. I wondered if that end would be worth daily headaches.

I didn't even have to make the call. My phone rang as soon as I walked in the door. I answered, and Bobby proceeded to vent for ten or fifteen minutes about how Grant didn't respect his drumming, or appreciate the level of talent he brought to the table, or trust his decision making ability when it came to crafting the drum parts. I half-listened patiently while watching *Sportscenter* highlights. My mind drifted. I thought about what I was going to eat for dinner. The Thai place down the block had an excellent roast pork with wonton soup, with loads of garlic and fresh green kale, about \$6.50 plus tip, which I thought I had. Then again, they also had a great red curry mixed seafood that came in a 32-ounce styrofoam cup. Curry? Wontons? Soup? Rice? Respect? Bass tuning? Rewriting? Too fast? Too much? Too soon?

In the end I told him to just let Grant have his say and not get too worked up about it. Try to incorporate the suggestions and ideas he had but use your own drumming

instincts as well. And, for god's sake, please try to slow down. You're killing us all. Total appeasement for all parties. I should work for the freaking UN.

Before I could phone in my order, Grant called. "Did you tell him to slow the fuck down?"

The Saturday before Halloween we played a house party in the Mission District. Friends of Jane, our second guitarist, occupied the house, a large, two-story Victorian affair. A double staircase lead from the front door up to the second floor where bedrooms lined a long hallway. It was a typical San Francisco floor plan, similar to the one in my flat. Kitchen in the back, with a room off the kitchen that served as the common area. That's where we played. Of course, hauling guitars, amps and drums up those steep double stairs was part of the deal, but house parties always promised free booze and plenty of women.

Jane and her friends were part of the Mission punk scene: the Cali-style, tattoo, skater, druggy anarchist scene. Their music was a combination of punk, hardcore and metal, evolved from the eighties hardcore scene and the days of "hardcore matinees." Stoner rock, grindcore and death metal fell in alongside hardcore punk and extreme noise: Neurosis, Napalm Death, Cannibal Corpse, The Melvins, The Misfits, The Mentors. Bobby called them "fast music hippies." Grant called them "non-bathers."

Jane wore a sexy nurse outfit. Bobby wore an executioner's hood. Grant dressed as a "morlock" from the 1960 film version of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. He wore

brown cut-offs with his body painted entirely blue, down to the toes, and a long white wig. I wore a cheap plastic mask. Grant's costume won.

We went on after a pretty good set from another local band. The room was small, but people crowded in to see. Women, dressed in their best, stripper-esque Halloween gear lined the walls. Things looked pretty good. Until we started playing. Bobby must have been nervous that night. Sometimes, when he got nervous or his brain wasn't one-hundred percent there, he tended not to pay attention to what the hell he was doing. And he also tended to speed up a bit. Actually, a lot. I knew we were screwed from the moment we launched into the first tune. The drum set jerked forward from the pounding, crumpling the carpet underneath. A wall of white noise erupted from the amplifiers. Without a sound check and with no mixing or monitors, we had to guesstimate our levels before we began. We guesstimated wrong. Intense, deafening sound blasted off the walls. The drums and guitars competed in an all-out volume war. The puny PA system was completely overmatched. My face contorted as I screamed out the vocals, but no sound came out. You could watch me sing, but, because of the volume, a single word could not be heard. The thing was a race: a mad dash, a full on sprint to the finish line. Bobby played so loud and fast that even if the band had been able to keep up, the changes couldn't be heard because the songs were a sheet of noise.

The room cleared. You'd think fans of bands like Cannibal Corpse might get into a little speed and volume. But even they had their limits.

Afterwards I was down. Bummed. Embarrassed. Depressed. What the hell was I doing with these guys? I knew I would have to make some sacrifices in joining a band that had a predetermined agenda. I relinquished whatever artistic influence I might have

otherwise exerted over the musical direction of a project I was involved in. But I hadn't envisioned embarrassing myself. Everybody has off-nights, but how many horrible performances would I have to endure? Our lineup featured talent of wildly varying degrees. Key members, who weren't giving up their spots anytime soon, sucked more than they rocked. It was part of the "punk" ethos, being barely competent on your instrument. I wasn't used to it. I loved rock 'n' roll. Much of the best rock might've been bonehead simple, sure. But it was played really well, with flair and passion. The Cramps or The Saints might have been musical primitives, but they sounded fucking awesome. They had style.

I left the party without saying "bye" to anyone and wandered aimlessly down Mission Boulevard, guitar strapped to my back. The San Francisco night was clear and crisp. Lines formed outside trendy bars, revelers flocked into taquerias, and cars cruised slowly up and down the boulevard. Soon I was heading up the hill to my neighborhood. I had broken a sweat by the time I reached the top of Haight Street. The front gate crashed behind me as I climbed the steps to my quiet room.

Three Nights in the Tight Pants Aquarium

“Let’s play a little game,” Grant said, leaning towards the back so that everyone could hear, while keeping his eyes on the road. “Whatever the temperature outside is, that’s how fast we’ll go.”

He pointed up at the red LED readout under the rear-view mirror of the rented van. It read 107. In the backseat, Jane curled into a ball and buried her chin into her knees as the van accelerated. Everyone else seemed indifferent. 108.

The white minivan sped down a thin strip of two-lane blacktop that cut through the desert under the California sun. Inside were The Zodiac Killers--Grant, Bobby, Jane and I--plus a guest, on our way to play a show in Vegas: the Las Vegas Shakedown, a three-day punk rock festival.

I had witnessed this sort of driving display once before. On a trip to Los Angeles, Grant had driven recklessly on a mountain pass portion of I-5, about thirty miles outside LA. On that trip, as he sped through the winding curves, passing cars on especially hairy turns with nothing but rock walls or straight drops on either side, he remarked how previous band members had been scared by his driving and had threatened to quit the band because of it. “Fucking pussies,” he said.

This trip, as the red light turned to 109, he told a different story.

“This is the stretch of road Sam Kinison died on,” Grant said, still straining towards the back. Sam Kinison was the famously raunchy comedian, popular in the late eighties and early nineties, who crashed his Trans Am and died after being struck by a drunk driver. “Supposedly,” Grant continued, “after the crash, his buddy, who was driving behind him, found him in the road, like still conscious. He’s going, he’s going,

‘Not now, not now,’ like staring off, like talking to someone. Then he’s going, he’s going, ‘Okay, okay,’ like laughing and stuff. Then he just died.”

110.

I stared out the window from the backseat. I knew we were traveling at a dangerous speed, but somehow I felt safe. The road was flat, and the ride inside the van was remarkably smooth. Outside the sprawling brown desert moved by deceptively slowly. I wondered if Grant had some kind of death wish. I’d heard him make some odd remarks while driving, such as if he goes, he’s taking people with him. Sometimes, while driving in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic in San Francisco, he’d say that he’d like to do a “power slide” into the crowd and take a bunch of people out. I mostly thought that he was joking, just messing with me. But I wasn’t a hundred percent sure.

It was the summer of 2000, and I had been in The ZKs for less than a year. We had done maybe a dozen shows, including some out of town, but this was to be, by far, the biggest. Grant had negotiated a main stage slot, not through the merit of our band but strictly through the reputation of his previous bands, Rocketcycle and The Jam Jobs. Our band was not well-known, but we would be sharing the stage with some of the biggest names in punk and underground rock: old-school legends The Dictators, original New York punks from the Bronx, going back to the early seventies, right there with Iggy and the New York Dolls, before the Ramones; Boston’s The Real Kids, seventies underground rockers; more recent names, Nashville Pussy and The New Bomb Turks.

These were bands I idolized. Well, not so much the newer ones as the older ones, but the newer ones I dug too. I was a fan. A real fan. I’d always considered myself way more of a fan than an actual player, even though I’d played guitar almost as long as I’d

listened to music. I loved punk, but I wasn't a punk. I was a punk fan with a guitar. And now, here I was, about to enter the PR game in a big way and to put myself out there to be judged, worthy or not worthy to occupy a place under the banner. I was nervous as hell but not about the insane driving. There in the van, I compartmentalized my fear and didn't let it get to me. Yet.

On a pit stop, Bobby, our drummer, came out of the store and just stopped and stared into the van. We all sat in the car waiting for him--we were always waiting for him--but he just stood there, staring into the van. Freud had stolen his seat. Freud was the guest of the band who had agreed to roadie in exchange for a ride to Vegas. Freud stood around six feet tall but appeared much bigger because of his rather sizeable head. He had short bleached blonde hair and wore thick horn rim glasses, tight band T-shirts, and black cut-off shorts. His odd appearance brought to mind a punk rock Charlie Brown, and his personality didn't disappoint. For one, his name was Freud. Then, he told wild and not believable stories of, among other things, having descended from Arabian royalty and being heir to a tobacco fortune. Stealing Bobby's seat was the first but certainly not the last bit of consternation Freud caused on the trip. Bobby slowly made his way to the van, begrudgingly took his new seat, and we were off.

In 2000, Vegas was, as it had long been, a popular destination. The 1996 film *Swingers* had helped re-commission the city as the bastion of decadent bachelorhood, recalling the glory days of The Rat Pack posing in front of the marquee at The Sands, sharkskin suits, thin ties, scotch on the rocks and cigs in hand. Gone also was the era of Elvis working the room at The International in a bejeweled jumpsuit, backside constantly split because the suit was too tight and he was too fat, three-quarter cape and handing out

white silk scarves. But this trip was before the massive TV advertising campaign that would explode Vegas to a new level of success in the industries of tourism, film, advertising, fashion and sports. This was before broadcasts of poker tournaments on cable at any hour of any day. That the NBA All-Star Game would someday be held in the city seemed about as likely as, say, marrying a stripper or hitting the progressive jackpot on a Double Diamond machine. In 2000, even there among the colossal glass and metal palaces of modern opulence, traces of trail dust, kicked off of cowboy boots, left over from the town's days as a remote, western outpost, still lingered in the neon oasis.

The fest was being held at the Gold Coast Casino, just off the strip, next to the Rio, but Grant had decided that the band should stay at Binion's Horseshoe in the old Fremont Street area of Vegas and not at all near the venue. He had stayed at the Horseshoe before and liked its rooms and their rates. Plus, it had a pool on the roof.

The inside of the casino was dark and cool, completely removed from all outside conditions. No changes in climate, no sunrise or sunset, no passage of time could ever be discerned in a casino, in any casino. No sense of any world beyond the casino doors. Disorienting yet seductive; repulsive yet addictive. The omnipresence of the blinks, chinks and flashes of the slot machines, the rhythmic staccato of coins hitting the bottoms of steel trays; the cigarette smoke; the cloudy patrons culled from the fringes, and the cocktail waitresses in short skirts and high heels, women with faces of all ages, showing varying degrees of weariness, all singularly reduced to being floating sets of legs.

Despite having made the reservations months in advance, at the front desk, Grant encountered a problem. We stood off to the side and watched him argue with the desk clerk, a grey-haired woman probably in her sixties. He wildly waved his arms. His face reddened. He would collapse his head in his hand, thinking of a new strategy, then launch back into animated argument, to no avail. We joked about what he might be telling her: Do you know who I am? I'm Grant Fucking Loudly. I'm the president and CEO of Jam Job Records. Give me a room, goddamnit. Apparently his reputation was enough to get us booked on the main stage but not enough to secure preferential treatment at Binion's Horseshoe.

Turned out that we did get a room, just not in the nice part of the hotel. Instead of the newer ten-story hotel with the rooftop pool, we were in the old original hotel building. We made our way across the dark, densely ornate carpet, that thick industrial pile stuff seemingly made strictly for casino floors, patterned in blue, black and gold, gaudy and garish. Machine gun slots fired from all sides. Chink chink chink chink. We passed the new elevator doors, the normal double ones adjacent to a roomy lobby, the ones that led to the rooftop pool. We found the old elevator in a back corner of the casino, a narrow single door adjacent to . . . slot machines. The elevator was a shaky Otis, the floor numbers rubbed off its black plastic buttons. At least we were on the top, the fourth floor. The size and appeal of the room mirrored those of the elevator. Greenish paint was alternately globbed on and chipping off the walls. Beyond the heavy velvet window shade was a view of a wall of another, taller hotel building. We cranked up the window unit, chucked our stuff in, and split.

So the room was depressing, but I didn't particularly mind. Why should I care? What did I have to worry about? I was in Vegas to play a freaking rock festival. Besides, how much time would we be spending in the room anyway? I was happy just to be there, in the buzzing, sparkling city, there to take it all in. For the moment, I lodged my apprehension, as best I could, in the back of my mind. We weren't scheduled to play until the third night. I had two whole nights in which to try to relax and enjoy the fest as a fan, that little fan, that spectator I'd always been. Two whole nights before I had to deal with the reality of performing in front of a thousand people.

On the van ride over to the Gold Coast, I thought about the past couple of months. The band had been cooking up something special for Vegas. Grant itched to experiment with some pyrotechnics, but because we lacked the proper knowledge or equipment, the experiment had been reduced to dousing an iron circled cross, about two feet in diameter, with lighter fluid and setting it ablaze. Not too fancy. Then, we had scored some cheap guitars to do the show with, ones we could smash up, Who-style, during the noise-drenched finale. Not original but still effective. Time and again I had seen live bands resort to the clichéd props of the genre: fire, blood, broken glass and destroyed equipment. Yet these simplistic devices almost always succeeded in contributing to a memorable show. Live rock wasn't brain surgery. As Grant was fond of saying, we weren't trying to reinvent the wheel. Give them a little explosion, a little shock, a little thrill, and the drooling cretins would remember you forever. We could do it. I felt confident. It wasn't until a few years later that Grant would realize the racist neo-Nazi implications of burning a circled cross, even though we'd been trying to tell him. But for now, that was the plan: burn cross, smash guitar, live in infamy.

I relaxed a little when we arrived at the venue. The scene inside the Gold Coast was a plush, inviting visual feast. Red-and gold-carpeted, surreal and fantastic, the interior of the rodeo-themed hotel featured western-framed photos of rodeo champions from the past and present. Memorabilia--lassos, spurs, boots and saddles--were also on display. The house poker chips featured full-color images of rodeo champs. Many of the patrons of the Gold Coast maintained the theme by sporting Wrangler jeans, giant belt buckles, ten-gallon hats and pointy boots. Was there rodeo in town? Seemed like it. Or were there really just this many cowboys in Las Vegas? They milled about the floor area, smoking and sipping long neck Budweisers. But that weekend they weren't alone. That weekend the cowboys of the Gold Coast had some company at the tables.

Rockers. Black. Leather. Leopard print. Tats. Dye. Spikes. Bleach. Studded Belts. Creepers. Everywhere. Not just punks but West-Coast punks. Detailed punks. Fashion-oriented, scenester punks with expensive ink and custom cars in the parking lot. Glammed-out, eyeliner-wearing punks. Skinny little punks on coke. Thick-necked greaser-punks with pin-up girlfriends. White punks on dope, as The Tubes succinctly put it. Everywhere. They mixed in among the cowboys on the gaming floor and at the tables, like some bizarre alternating wallpaper pattern. A loud pack stumbled by, looking like zebra-striped roosters, sipping house-special cocktails from souvenir plastic cowboy boots. I wondered where they all came from, but, more importantly, I wanted to know where they got those drinks. The place was alive, man, really pulsing, buzzing. I felt an adrenaline rush just being in there. I soaked it all in. The scene reminded me of some sort of Twilight Zone in which the casts of *Sid and Nancy* and *Bronco Billy* accidentally got invites to the same wrap party.

When we walked in, Freud came running up. He had met up with people he knew upon arrival in town, had promptly ditched us, and thus was not staying at Binion's Horseshit. But now he had bought a handful of collectible punk records from some vendor and wanted to show them off.

"That motherfucker," Grant said later, "he kept telling us he didn't have any money for gas. He sure as shit better not disappear when it comes time to load in."

I took the escalator up, showed my wristband, and entered the electrified ballroom that, like some kind of tight pants aquarium, swarmed with geeked-up rockers, punks, hipsters and freaks. The bill that night featured, among others, the aforementioned Nashville Pussy and an Aussie band, The Onyas, who went on last, after the headline spot, to a thinning crowd, but did not fail to delight. The Onyas followed in the great tradition of Australian punk, a long line of bands, going back to the seventies heyday, that showed great flair for the style and consistently pounded out straight-ahead, no-bullshit rock but with a knack for catchy hooks and snarling vocals. The three-piece Onyas aimed to make their countrymen proud when the well-fed caveman of a guitarist stripped to his underwear in the middle of the set. Then, after playing a song in his tighty-whiteys, he pulled those down, stepped out, took out a lighter, set them on fire, tossed them to the stage where they burned to nothing. Again: fire. But, this time, not for awe and grandeur. More pragmatic. To get rid of. To destroy. He then finished the set nude, nonchalantly displaying his giant hairy gut and tiny penis.

The next day I got up and left the hotel room as quickly as possible. The little AC was barely cutting a dent in the brutal Vegas heat. I wandered Fremont Street, heading

vaguely toward the Golden Gate Casino and its advertised ninety-nine cent shrimp cocktail. I thought about the previous night's show. The Onyas had played their part expertly—no pretense, no apprehension, no artifice—just a fat man burning his underwear and playing guitar naked. For the hell of it. For fun. How were we going to match that? Could I be as confident and relaxed in whatever it was we were going to try? I worried.

Grant hadn't exactly done much to ease my fears. Since we first got the gig, he had been drilling into the band the importance of doing a good show, of establishing a rep of our own, of leaving our mark. We had to go all out, leave it all on the stage, pull out all the stops and several other "all" encompassing motivational clichés. I knew that our little bag of tricks could work if we could somehow pull them off. As I said before, dumb as it seemed, that shit worked every time. But what if we couldn't pull it off? What if they saw right through our little facade as a laughable attempt at showmanship? If the gimmicks failed and we had to fall back on the quality of our music, we could be in big trouble. I sucked down a shrimp cocktail. Then another. And another.

Saturday night was an endurance test. Our buddies from Texas, The Reds, were scheduled to play the show room, the smaller downstairs venue, at three in the morning. Grant put out their first two records, and we had done a few shows with them. They embodied the opposite of gimmick—a ferocious, straight-ahead, melodic pop-punk attack, sans fire. Not that they were completely without show. They exhibited manic, sweaty energy on stage, but if anyone bled, then the vein was surely opened unintentionally, in the line of duty. Instead, they relied more on serious song craft, tight musicianship, and endless hooks.

The key to making it until three would be Zen-like pacing with the booze. Not my strength. I had taken to trolling the corridors of the casino with an ass-pocket of Beam stashed snugly in my tight black Dickies. That's right; just because I wasn't a punk didn't mean that I didn't want to look cool. Being able to fit into a thirty-inch waist and size "S" band T-shirts made the task easier. The look, that is. Not the sobriety.

I'd held off the booze pretty well most of the night, but once I got downstairs to gear up for the Reds, the dam broke. The Beam got gone. I flew, high on hooch, electricity and adrenaline. The Reds took the stage all in black, picked up their cheap Danelectro guitars, and from "one two three four" everything was a blur. Ringing guitars. Driving, driving. Relentless drums. Bodies flying. Movement. My body. Moving. Energy. The singer's face contorted as he wailed, not screaming, singing, intensely, long, drawn out wails. Power. Emotion. Not "emo." Real guts. Real feeling. Stops and starts with precision. The band in full control. Not drunk. Not drunk like me. Me drunk. Not they. They good. Ringing. Driving. Ringing. Too much. I couldn't stop. I loved it. I couldn't stop loving it. The fucking Reds. Holy shit. The fucking Reds.

The next day I didn't pop up and leave the room as quickly as possible. I couldn't. My head was throbbing, and my ears were ringing. Jane was in the room.

"You were pretty fucked up last night," she said.

"Yeah? What was I doing?"

"You just kept talking about how great The Reds were. Kept going on and on about it. You wouldn't shut up."

“Really?”

“Yeah and then when we got to the room, you started going, ‘I’m Grant Fuckin’ Loudly. Do you know who the fuck I am?’ Like talking like him and stuff.”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, it was pretty funny, especially seeing how Grant wasn’t back from the show yet. Then you just passed out face first and started snorin’ real loud.”

“Great. Sorry.”

“He does talk like that, though.”

“Where are they?”

“At the pool.”

I found the rest of the band and a few others on the roof poolside. The bright sunlight split my head like a pitchfork. The water felt good, though. Bobby was there, wading in the pool, holding his giant tattooed biceps just above the water.

“Did you hear? I almost got kicked out last night,” he said.

“Kicked out?”

“Yeah, like kicked out of the place and banned from coming back.”

“What happened?”

“There was a fight down in front, and, I was coming in as a peacemaker, but then more punches got thrown, and when the bouncers got there, they grabbed me too.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah, and I had to talk my way back in, telling them what happened and that I’m supposed to play today and everything. The one guy was cool, but the others were dicks.

They were saying they didn't care if I was in a band or not. But the one door guy was cool, the black guy with the British accent. He saved me."

I stared over the rail of the roof, out at the jagged foothills in the distance. I thought about how far away they might be. Ten miles? Twenty? More? Vegas was so still and peaceful up there on that roof. No noisy slots. No loud bands. No manic energy. The water and the spacious desert drained it all out of me just then. I had gotten so drunk and was having such a good time, blabbing about how great The Reds were, that I didn't have time to worry about the show. I succeeded in forgetting about it. Now I had slept late, and the hour was upon us. No time to think. It was time to go.

As we walked into the ballroom, the stage manager approached us and instantly began barking in our faces. Something was wrong. From around the corner comes Freud. He had spilled the beans about our plans, and now the stage manager was laying down the law about what we could not do. Fucking Freud. He broke the first rule of punk: never ask permission. Now the manager had heard that we planned to use fire and smash equipment and was freaking out on us, warning us explicitly not to do it.

Grant was pissed. Freud had just blown months of planning. Grant mulled things over for a minute and then came to a decision. The band gathered backstage. We couldn't do the fire at the beginning because they would pull the plug and we wouldn't get to play. But they couldn't stop us from smashing our guitars at the end. Well, actually, since Grant would be holding only a mic then, I would be the one to smash my guitar. Just me. It was up to me.

We were scheduled to start at five, first up. Sure it sucked having to play first, but we were on the big stage. It seemed people were making that extra effort to get there

early for us, too, as the place began to fill up. I paced nervously. Not nervously, insanely. I could not stop pacing back and forth. I was freaking out. Jane tried to calm me down. Said she'd never seen me like that. I had never been like that, not lately. One time. The very first show I ever played, Tuscaloosa, 1989, I remembered being that nervous. That was a house party for a bunch of my friends. The consequences were nil. Still, I wanted to be good. I wanted people to like it. To love it.

We hit the stage. The lights were bright. I flipped the guitar on, and it squealed. No time to think. Just go. We were into the set, and things were okay. "Kamikaze Attack."

My whole world's turning black.

It's like a kamikaze attack attack attack!

Then straight into "Somebody's Getting Screwed."

Somebody's getting screwed. Yeah yeah yeah.

Somebody's getting screwed. Yeah yeah yeah.

Somebody's getting screwed and I think it's me!

During the first set break, Grant announced something about me being in gambling debt and willing to give blowjobs for ten bucks. I told him that I fucking hated him, and if he didn't shut up, I was going to shove my guitar up his ass. The crowd ate it up. They fed off the silly hate talk. During the second portion of the set, we had to stop and restart a song--"Gonna' Kill," I think it was--that we messed up the beginning of.. That was usually death for a band. Not for us. Grant played it off. Called the crowd a bunch of stupid assholes who didn't know any better. They laughed. They loved it. I

loved it. We fucked up and then called them idiots, and they cheered. A picture began to form in my mind: we could do no wrong.

Halfway through, my black polyester gear was drenched with sweat. Dark glasses completely fogged. I could only see the very front of the crowd, and it was a writhing mass of sweaty hair. We neared the end. Grant passed the bass off to Jane in place of her electric guitar for the last two songs, the covers “Electrocute My Cock” by The Vom and “Solitary Confinement” by The Weirdos. This move was to give Grant the freedom to jump into the crowd, mess with them and sing the songs from out there. He held his arms out and spread his trench coat wide open, like some kind of Peter Lorre action figure. He brandished the mic triumphantly. He leapt into the crowd. They mobbed him, ripping the mike and screaming into it. The song deteriorated. Without the vocals, we had no idea where we were. We started the last song. It was a wall of white noise. Grant climbed back onto the stage just in time for the last verse.

I live

My life

Underrr . . .

Solitary confinement, solitary confinement, solitary confinement.

That was my cue to smash. I grabbed the neck of the guitar and slammed the body onto the stage. Metal hardware flew off, but the wood did not break. The stage was hollow underneath and absorbed the impact. I did it again. Nothing. The thing was only cheap in cost. It was a Mexican Fender offshoot and built solid as fuck. I grabbed it by the body and slammed the headstock down. Tuning pegs flew. The wood would not

break. The rest of the band was gone. The guitar squealed and fed back. Hapless, I tossed it across the stage and walked off. The crowd cheered.

After the show, I ran into a girl I knew from San Francisco. I'll call her Tory. She was a bit younger, maybe five or six years so. A former San Francisco State student, she had come up from southern California to go to school, like so many other girls I met around that time. They all hated southern California and loved San Francisco. I met her one night in Murio's Trophy Room on Haight Street. She was with a few friends, and I was by myself, sitting at the bar. Murio's around then was an exceptionally drunken neighborhood bar known to attract a rock and roll crowd, which in general was not afraid of public displays of over-intoxication. In other words, crazy drunken drama shit happened in there and nobody cared, everything from embarrassing make-out sessions to public puking and falling down to the occasional pool cue beat-down, all performed to a soundtrack of loud Pogues, Social Distortion and Oasis.

Tory must have been around 23 at the time, just out of school. She had straight black hair cut into kind of an Egyptian thing, which, combined with her big brown eyes, gave her the look of a 1920s Hollywood queen, like Claudette Colbert. Anyway, she was a knockout. Our personalities jibed: hers bitter and sardonic, mine wry and sarcastic. But we couldn't skewer our way around some serious mutual attraction.

We ended up back at her place that night, but any hopes I had of dating Tory were soon dashed when I realized she preferred to keep an open and flexible social calendar. A boyfriend was definitely not in her plans; she kept a small but motivated coterie of suitors

around town. But since she lived near the Haight and frequented the spots around that area, I would see her quite often. And, on any given night, depending on the time, place and company, I had as good a shot as any of being the one she went home with. I had picked up on Tory's act pretty quickly and immediately started playing it cool before she even had the chance to cool me. I was no dummy, not like some of these other USF types who thought they actually had a shot. I think she liked that about me. She knew I liked her but would stay out of the way and let her do her little Holly Golightly act. Then I'd just be there every once in a while, when I was convenient.

In Vegas, though, things were definitely breaking my way, especially right after I came off stage. Here, all-of-a-sudden, I wasn't just some dumb pretty-boy in a neighborhood bar on Saturday night. I wasn't even some fan like her, who had made the trip to Vegas to see the show and to party. I was part of a main stage act, a headliner. The band might not have been deserving of the spot, but we certainly made the most of it, both onstage and off.

Few words were needed between Tory and me when she found me after the show. We really only needed a place. My room was all the way on the other side of town. Hers was closer but she had no wheels. Her friends were at the show and weren't going anywhere. Well, at least I had the keys to the van, so I figured we could take the drive over to Fremont Street. But when we got to the van, the van all-of-a-sudden seemed so close. There wasn't much room, but at least the windows were tinted. Parked in a concrete hotel garage all day in 110 degree Vegas heat created a stifling atmosphere inside. But I had already been sweaty that day, just a few moments before. And she, well, she didn't seem to mind the heat. Clothes came off and things transpired.

The air in the garage actually felt cool when we finally emerged from the van. I looked at Tory. She appeared more disheveled than previously. And, like greasier or something. I wondered if I looked like that too.

Driving back to San Francisco, the band exchanged stories about our different adventures over the weekend. It was just the band since Freud had bummed a ride with someone else. Bobby told us about the drummer for The Dictators, who asked to borrow Bobby's kick pedal for the bass drum, because he liked the wooden beater ball.

"He kept saying it with that New York accent," said Bobby, " 'I love a wooden beeta bowl.' I couldn't even understand him at first. He just kept going, 'Yeah, that wooden beeta bowl on ya pedal.' I'm thinking, 'What the fuck is a beeta bowl?'"

Everyone laughed. The mood in the van was light and giddy. We had done a decent job in Vegas, and, even though we didn't spend too much time patting ourselves on the back, we felt proud. I couldn't figure out why I had worried so much to begin with. What was I so freaked out about? I had been playing guitar and doing shows for years, even before The Zodiac Killers. This one was a little bigger, but so what? That didn't mean I had to try to pretend to be something that I wasn't, just to try to impress some cynical fans. We screwed up songs and still lived. We laughed at ourselves and kept going. That's what we did in practice. We insulted each other. Same thing. That's just what we did. We weren't cooler than anyone else. We weren't even cool at all. At least I wasn't. I was just a nervous kid, standing in front of people, playing guitar and singing music that I liked. Same as always. Nothing had changed.

Well, almost nothing. Some of the magic had worn off, the wonder of seeing a live band under the lights, working their spell on a crowd. I had peeked behind the curtain, and the wizard was out of tune. Live rock is a transient experience, a momentary confluence of sight, sound, image and imagination. When it's over, no two people remember it exactly the same, and the memory becomes more abstract and constructed than the performance itself. It's a wonderful charade but a charade nonetheless. But so what? I would go on loving music. Nothing would change that.

“That British guy, the bouncer,” Bobby continued, “he was asking me who the weird guy was who was working for us. I guess he had an encounter with him or something. I said, ‘Oh, you mean Freud?’ He goes, ‘Freud! That’s his name, Freud?’ I said, ‘Yeah’ and he goes, ‘You mean like Freud chicken?’”

Tossers

“We didn't come here to watch bloody videos. Start the bloody show already.”

The crowd grew restless. They had been slamming pints of warm, flat lager and chain-smoking unfiltered cigarettes for nearly two hours. Skinny, sweaty twenty-somethings, decked in black leather, denim and punk “badges” packed the club, some crappy English “pub” in Camden called the Canevern Castle. When the English say “pub,” what they really mean is “dive,” and this place was a total “pub.” Smoke, thick like greasy chips with curry, choked up every last cubic inch of breathable air in the place. Lack of ventilation and abundance of bodies created a stifling atmosphere that caused much formerly spiky, dyed-black and bleached-blond hair to wither and cling to pale, emaciated faces.

I stood at the back of the room as a video played on a screen in front of the stage. On the screen a cheaply produced series of music clips and comedy sketches played to the bemused laughter of the crowd. Ever the maniacal manipulator, Grant envisioned the video as producing the sort of reaction it was producing at that very moment: Utter frustration. The idea was to build crowd anticipation to an absolute peak, so that when the band finally hit the stage and the drums began pounding, the crowd would be so grateful for any respite from the tedium of the video, that they would erupt with delirious joy. He cooked up the idea sometime after our first tour and before this, our second European tour. Bemused laughter gave way to blatant disinterest until finally, as the video rolled past the 12-minute mark the entire crowd united behind a common desire—that the fucking thing end and the band begin immediately!

“Start the bloody show already! What the fuck is this shit?”

Grant's plan worked to perfection. Wearing a white, doctor's smock and bug-eye sunglasses, he grinned a beady little grin as he crouched on the side of the stage, his dyed-black hair plastered up in classic, mad-scientist form. I was more apprehensive. Since this was the first show of the tour, I wasn't as certain that angering the crowd before the show was in fact the best idea. Grant loved every minute of the tension the video created. I wanted to hurry up and get the shit over with. As the final scene of the video began, I worked my way nervously through the crowd, climbed onto the stage, donned my own smock and glasses and strapped on the guitar.

As the screen rose, the drums began. We stood, shrouded in darkness, backs to the audience, as the drums set a fast and aggressive pace. I turned and approached the mic. As I shouted the vocal cue that starts the song, a super-snotty "1-2-3-4," the stage lights flashed and mayhem erupted. Bodies crashed over one another. Microphones and monitors flew everywhere. The energy that had been building through two opening bands and countless pints of beer, finally exploded. As a result, a good ol' punk rock show broke out.

The ZKs were just like hundreds of other bands. We were a group of four individuals who came together over a common love of performing live rock and roll. I can't even say that it was a love of punk rock that did it. Of the four, only Grant Loudly would even claim punk as his favorite style of music. Drummer M.K. Shrugg preferred mid-sixties style beat rock. Female guitarist Rena Wednesday liked that shit called nu-metal-- FM radio-friendly schlock with heavy guitars and "impassioned" vocals that

passed for rock music and proliferated the airwaves in the early 2000s. Me? Well, I liked punk as much as the next kid, growing up in the metal/ new wave wasteland that was the Reagan eighties. Punk always felt like the real deal, stripped of big hair, keyboard, spandex stupidity. But I had other musical interests too, namely early rock 'n' roll, rockabilly, blues, honky-tonk and sixties soul. But more importantly, none of us had any pretensions whatsoever, that what we were doing was ever going to "make it" in the music business.

It's not that punk was completely dead. In the bigger spectrum of popular music, hip-hop and electronica had all but squeezed guitar-based rock music of any kind off the board. And of the sliver of popular rock left, sounds resembling real punk rock were micro blips. Still, every once in a while, a band claiming kinship to the punk canon—the legacy of bands like The Damned, The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, from the original heyday of the late seventies—came along and hit the top of the charts. Bands like The Hives, The White Stripes come to mind. But it was rare. Maybe The Yeah Yeah Yeahs. But all of them were at least two steps removed. Sonic Youth took their cue from punk. The Yeah Yeah Yeahs took their cue from Sonic Youth. And with the style of punk that we played—hyper-fast, 30-second blasts of lo-fi mayhem, with titles like "Microwave Slave" and "My Boyfriend is a Masochist"—the chances of popular appeal were infinitesimal.

We were a cult band, to put a positive spin on it, and the cult was extremely small. That's what I meant by being like countless other bands. Almost nobody knew who we were. It turned out though, that the cult was actually a tad bigger in Europe. That's why, when we got the opportunity to go, we went. We put our musical differences, conflicting

personalities and competing agendas aside, and united around the possibilities presented by a three-week barnstormer. We knew we wouldn't make any money on tour. Breaking even was hopeful at best. Plus, we all worked full-time and would have to sacrifice some income. The band was strictly for kicks. We never made money, even at home. But we all felt the lure, the eternal call of the stage and of the road, and when opportunity knocked, nobody had to even think twice. We just went for it.

The energy and enthusiasm of the English fans impressed me even though their reputation for rowdiness preceded them. My head throbbed and my legs trembled from the intensity of the first couple of songs. The mob at my feet screamed for more. Faster, louder, harder, more, more, more! Through sweat-stung eyes and steamed up glasses, I glimpsed a few rowdies in front mouthing the words to the songs. That picked me up as the band refused to let up the pace, launching into one rapid-fire song after another. I was obligated to not collapse and pass out right there on the stage. Even though we had gotten off a trans-continental flight only a few hours before, I was in a punk-rock band and my duty to faithful punk fans all over the world, and no matter how few in number, was to entertain, at any cost.

And this was only the beginning. Over the next three weeks I would hit the floor countless times, bash my head on a concrete beam, twist my ankle so that it swelled into a purple grapefruit, get kicked in the back so hard that I couldn't breathe, fall over the drum set, fall off of tables and fall off the stage, all while playing guitar. I would burp chunks. I'd have inch-long, blue sparks jump from microphones to my front teeth that left

me seeing stars. I would come very close to blacking out on stage, so close that at times blackness crept into the edges of my vision. I'd go to sing a line, a throb would emerge behind my eye and I'd momentarily lose all track of where I was, what I was doing, only to snap back just in time to remember the words to the next verse. But this was only the first show for chrissake. I really had no excuse to not make it through this one.

Band guys (and girls) answer to a different call, they feel a certain pull, a distinct desire to do what it is that they do, no matter what the unfortunate and unforeseen consequences might be. Sure, they might sacrifice normal lives, tables full of food, steady income, regular hours, good sleep, healthy lifestyles, and functional relationships. But so what? They're in a *band!* Who can explain it? They might get stranded on snow-covered highways, sleep on floors in dingy rooms above dirty nightclubs, eat nothing but pizza and McDonalds for three weeks straight, go to bed every night at dawn with belly full of a bourbon, ears ringing and clothes reeking of beer and cigarettes, only to wake up with a splitting headache and have to immediately hit the stage for sound check or worse, climb in an overcrowded van for a nice, little, three-hundred-mile drive. So what? They're in a *band!* And for what? The chicks? Yeah, right. The fame? Not likely. The glory? Don't count on it. The money? Hah!

When we finally stopped for air between songs, Grant wasted no time tossing some petrol on the fire. "You know, we were looking forward to coming to England because we figured, hell, at least we speak the same language. But we can't understand shit you guys are saying! We've been all over Europe and you guys speak the worst

fucking English we've heard! Speak English, you fucking wankers!" They responded with a bunch of noisy grunts and groans, cheers and jeers. With that, we blasted forward through the second half of the set. The ranks of the die-hards up front thinned a bit towards the end, as meeker souls crawled to the back to prop themselves up onto the bar with the aid of a pint glass, but the ones who remained continued to bounce off each other with unrelenting determination as if to make amends for the vacant floor space. Soaked with sweat and delirious from jet lag, we answered the call for an encore.

When the show finally ended and the lights came up, I coasted on a third-wind high, propelled by the smiling faces of foreign brethren who stopped by to give thanks for a job well done, pound more pints and talk tunes. I glanced over at the carnage that once was the stage area. Everything was trashed: broken bottles, pint glasses, mike stands, monitors, cables, drums, guitars. Everything. Trashed.

Well, not my guitar.

We loaded out and teamed up with the opening band, the Ulcers, and their friends to procure some after-hours entertainment, which came in the form of a smoky pool hall with nice wood paneled walls and large round wooden tables. We ordered up a round of extra-strong beers in large cans. To them it might have been an imperial pint or something, but to me it was a tall boy. The beer was good and strong, fifteen percent alcohol, similar to malt liquor but better tasting. Sub-groups around the table engaged in conversations, most of which were, without doubt, about music. Music, records, bands, punk rock, which bands rocked, which bands sucked, which records ruled, which ones

blew—this type of stuff consumed the lives of the people we met, town to town, country to country throughout Europe and around the world. They all dug the same shit. I dug it too.

I talked with the girlfriend of the Ulcer's guitarist, a girl with close-cropped blonde hair, tight leopard print pants and a denim jacket with badges of bands like the Vibrators and the Undertones. We discussed the state of garage music in England. “Garage?” she said, emphasizing the second syllable. “What a fancy pronunciation. What are you, French?”

“Why, what do you call it?” I asked.

“Gare-ij, of course, the way it's written.”

“Whatever,” I told her. “Who invented garage music? That's right, we did.”

In a way it was true. Garage music specifically referred to a brand of mostly amateurish rock promulgated by baby boomers in their parents' suburban garages in the mid sixties. The fact that ninety percent of them aped the Stones, to me, doesn't obscure that the term and the music were purely American phenomenon.

“Don't be so pedantic,” she told me.

For a moment, I felt very dumb, as if I didn't quite know what she meant by that comment. I silently blamed American public education.

As we got up to leave I noticed the place had filled with sharp dressed, pinstriped, slicked back types, shooting pool, and chatting up British Barbie Doll-type “birds”—similar to American Barbies but with bad teeth. On the way out, I caught a distinct, powdery vibe. It didn't take a genius to figure this scene out. Or maybe it was just my American public school education kicking in.

“What, is every drug dealer in London hanging out in here?” I asked Eric, the Ulcers' drummer.

“Why, would you like some? Because this is the place.”

Yeah, no kidding.

In the morning we woke and headed down the street to collect the breakfast portion of the 20 quid bed and breakfast. Our friend James Petter found the place, a dirt-cheap B+B in Camden, relatively near the venue. It was a quiet, working class area, with red brick buildings lining the narrow streets. At one end of the block was the office and breakfast area with a very small adjacent kitchen. The proprietor was an English woman in her mid to late fifties, not particularly friendly, but not mean either. She was just a proper, working English woman, of an age that offered no more pleasantries than necessary, no more offense than received, and nothing but an unreadable yet somehow cold demeanor in between. The guest rooms were located at various doors down the block, and ours was situated next to a sort of English off-track betting store, a public bookmaking house that I supposed sold lottery tickets and maybe took wagers on cricket or rugby or whatever. A thin, plywood door opened into a narrow a dark, dank, carpeted hall. Narrow doorways off the hall opened to our two rooms, two beds in one, three in the other, bathroom down the hall—truly a rat hole. There was little furniture other than the beds: a couple of chairs, a small coffee table, a vintage ten-inch black and white TV. Pasty blank walls swallowed up a few undersized, framed pictures. I recall surprise, in light of upcoming events, that such a small amount of furniture created such a huge mess.

Lying on the pitiful, mismatched twin beds revealed the unfortunate combination of worn springs supporting an old, lumpy mattress. That first day, none of us cared about the sorry state as we were just off the plane and had only a few hours to sleep before the first show. But when I returned to the room late at night, even large amounts of English ale couldn't numb me to the painful, uneven sleeping surface.

Our second night in the rat hole was no better than the first. The bed was even more uncomfortable as certain raised spots in the lumpy mattress had begun to bore bruise prints on my back, and of course, there were no fresh towels.

Yet, the place was cheap: twenty quid a night, each. It was among the cheapest accommodations in London. So there we were, in the morning trudging down the quiet Camden street again to collect the meager breakfast.

The breakfast, to put it in proper British colloquial, wanked. It was comprised of runny eggs, a bit of soft, fatty bacon, white toast, jam and weak coffee—a true English delicacy—served by the old woman and her staff of one, possibly a relative. Why eat it, one might ask. Well, twenty pounds, while a small fee for a B+B was still not a small amount for any of us. England would be the most expensive leg of the trip, and if we could cut costs there, we'd have a better chance to break even on the continent. A little toast and coffee, crappy as it was, was already paid for and could get us through half a day.

“This toast has butter on it and I asked for no butter,” said Grant.

“There was only one no butter,” the old woman said.

“No, I asked for no butter also.”

“Right, then.” She smiled and acted very proper and English, but it was obvious that she hated us. For what, I wasn’t sure . . . then. After we ate, she started in on us.

“I looked in the room and someone slept in the extra bed. That’ll be an extra twenty quid.”

I had seen this thing brewing between her and Grant over the money. He didn’t appreciate that she’d asked us for payment up front the day before, thinking we might ditch out when clearly our stuff was all in there and we had already told her we were staying.

“Right then. That was I. I’ll pay,” said Petter, ever the proper English gent.

On the way back to the room, Grant was pissed. “Twenty pounds for that extra bed is bullshit. We already paid for the room and the bed was already in there anyway. Plus, the place is a dump and those beds suck. We can’t let James pay. He’s been helping us out a lot. We should pay for him.”

I agreed. I also was certain that if the old woman had known that James and his girlfriend Sian had *both* stayed in the same bed, she would’ve charged *another* twenty.

We packed up and loaded the car for the drive to Stansted Airport, about thirty miles outside London, where we were to catch a cheap flight to Belgium. Grant went to return the room keys and when he returned, he was fuming. “I can’t fuckin’ believe it. The old bag held an extra five pounds back from the key deposit for the breakfast Sian had. Five pounds for that miserable breakfast! After we already coughed up for the extra bed!”

Sure, it was a bare bones operation, and the proprietors probably needed every pence they could get just to stay afloat. But five pounds at that time was about seven

bucks, and the breakfast was a \$2.99, greasy diner special, maybe five bucks in a big city. At that point, there was nothing that I or anyone else could've done to prevent what was about to take place. I'm a decent person, raised by parents who taught me to respect others' property. I never went for vandalism. It wasn't my thing. I was more into self-destruction. But now Grant had been slighted, and Grant welcomed and even encouraged little challenges and confrontations on matters of principle, especially involving small amounts of money. It seemed at times that the smaller the amount in question, the bigger the personal affront, and the greater the degree of retribution. That said, I felt that he showed even-handed judgment in this particular instance, and that the justice meted out was worthy of the offense.

“That's it, I'm tossin' this place. Anyone gonna help?”

We watched in disbelief as he stormed back into the rooms. I followed just to see what would happen. Grant had a possessed look on his face as he methodically began to dismantle the first room. First, he turned the mattresses over. Then he strutted around room flipping the pictures off the walls with a single index finger in a mocking manner as if to say, “Oops, how unfortunate.” It was a comical little dance that reminded me of the “Singing' in the Rain” scene from *A Clockwork Orange*. Next, he grabbed a vase of fake flowers, pondered it for a moment and then spastically flung the flowers all about. His face was contorted and focused. A creepy, sadistic grin set in as he moved efficiently from one task to the next. At that point I'd seen enough and went back outside to allow him his creative space.

“What's goin' on in there?” one of the others asked.

“He's goin' nuts,” I said.

Apparently the first room was just a warm up. In the second room, a large decorative fan hung on one wall. From the street we heard a knocking on the window from inside and turned to see him waving the fan up and down, just to make sure that we saw it. His face had a demonic look. “When I saw him with that fan,” Matt would say later, “I knew he’d lost it.”

When he finally emerged after several minutes, he didn’t seem pleased as much as contented, as if now he could go on with life with some small burden removed.

“Okay, I’m good. Let’s go,” he said.

I went back in to take a quick look at his handiwork. The second room resembled modern art. Not wanting to actually cause any unfixable damage, he simply rearranged the place in an abstract, absurdist manner. Imagine Jackson Pollock decorating a hotel room. The mattresses were placed vertically in the center, in an angular position, forming a sort of teepee. The TV was face down on top of the box springs. The chairs were balanced upside down on top of the dresser, one atop the other. Everything was removed from the walls and scattered about in a random, yet somehow aesthetically pleasing way. Nothing was left upright. Everything was upset, tossed and turned. Tossed, just like a salad. Just as he had said. It wasn’t exactly the same British usage we’d been hearing, as in “bloody tosser,” but it was tossed nonetheless.

“That’ll teach her not to put butter on my toast.”

The Pits

The brewery owned the bar. It only existed as a bottomless tap for the locals to suckle at the teat of Bockor, the area's swill-mill. The music venue backed up the main act, which consisted of a handful of Euro-bohos downing epic amounts of pilsner at all hours of the day and night.

We pulled up mid afternoon and piled out of the white Euro-van which over the next twenty days would be our home on wheels, but which at that point we'd only been in for the duration of the two-hour drive from the Ostende airport to Kortrijk. Sun poured down onto a small sidewalk table in front of the bar. The building was non-descript—white, stone, old—like many buildings in the sleepy Belgian town. No sign signified it, nor marker distinguished it among the quiet, residential neighborhood, yet folks from miles around and indeed from all over the world knew the place called the Pits.

The Pits, from what I gathered, was simply the non-ironic name of the club and was not intended as any sort of affectionately descriptive moniker. Tough sell I know, but when I think of the random and inebriated nature of the English information I did receive from the Belgians, it's impossible to ascertain whether any of it was reliable. Such is the nature of drinking with wise-ass, foreign punk rockers. I can therefore offer no definitive origin or credible explanation of the bar's name.

Three guys and a woman sat around the table holding several small glasses and one large pitcher full of beer. They appeared somewhat disheveled, late-twenties to mid thirties, wearing loose dark clothing and sunglasses. The sight of a van filled with four

Americans, a Dutchman and a bunch of music gear, pulling up and unloading right in front of them did little to shake them from their slow, rhythmic tip-and-sip.

“Hi, we’re um, the band.”

Low murmurs and nods.

Inside, cool, musty darkness contrasted the bright sunlight, which was blocked by thick, stone walls. The distinct, heady aroma of dried beer overwhelmed. A skinny guy with ratty, half-dread hair greeted us with a warm, red-nosed smile. He wore ankle-length, brown, cut-off shorts with a long wallet chain hanging down and a stained thermal shirt. “Hello. I am Rom-sis,” he said in short, choppy English.

“Pardon?”

“Rom-sis,” he repeated, “like the king.”

“Rom-sis, the king?” I asked.

“Yes, the pharaoh of Egypt.”

“Oh, Ramses, like the condom.”

“Yes, Rom-sis. I am the cook.”

Ramses was more than just the cook of the Pits. Like all of the staff, he was a volunteer who happily did anything the club required such as cooking cleaning, bartending, sound and door. They all shared duties equally, a collective of a handful of dedicated music fans who selflessly donated time and energy in order to keep a local, live venue operating. Well, they didn’t work entirely without pay. There was the beer. Volunteers drank free.

The Bockor pilsner flowed from three taps into Bockor logo glasses under a red plastic Bockor sign. A spigot at the base of the taps blasted glasses held upside down with water so that one could drink with the same glass, rinsed, all night and the bar could save on dish soap. Apparently, they gave away so much beer, that they cut out all other expenses in order to pay the brewery with what little money they did take in.

Ramses simply held an open glass up to each of us to glean whether or not we wanted one, and soon four filled glasses sat on the bar. “We take a drink, then we load in,” proclaimed Ramses. No arguments. The beer was good, cold and mild, with an easy drinkability. I realize Budweiser owns that word, but this stuff had way more drinkability than Bud. I foresaw the possibility and the probability of ingesting a lot of it. Like I said, it was mild, not too bitter.

Of course, Belgium is the land of beer-brewing Trappist Monks, double brews, triple brews, all sorts of wheat brews and white brews and brews with such subtle and complex flavors as to rival fine wines. The crew kept a few such special brews stashed in a cooler below the bar, and indulged sparingly. But if you’re going to drink beer like it’s water and hoist a perpetually full glass for twelve hours at a time, then you’re going to want a mild brew. It’s a principle practiced all over the world, but the Belgians have it down to a science. Midwesterners drink Old Style, Belgians drink Bockor. I’d take Bockor any day.

The Pits consisted of three rooms. The bar flanked the narrow stage area. A room behind the bar with its own outside door served as an entranceway/ lobby and also held the bathrooms. Well, actually the lobby was the bathroom. A spare urinal was mounted on the wall near the door, and a plywood door opened to a stall about five feet from the

urinal, the “women’s.” I paid no mind to the set up at first, assuming that what I saw was non-functional and that another bathroom existed somewhere. Grant, who’d been to the Pits before, squashed that notion when, in the middle of loading in, he whipped it out and started going. What put me off wasn’t that he peed with mixed company wandering in, out and about. I’ve gone plenty times with people around. That didn’t bother me. What threw me was when he started talking to me in the middle of it.

“Hey, did you see that box with my sunglasses come in?”

“Pardon”

“That box that had the records in it also had my sunglasses. Did you see it?” he asked, midstream. Grant constantly lost stuff, and relied heavily on others to keep track of his things on tour. I knew what he was saying but it didn’t register because I couldn’t get past that he asked me while he peed. I never accepted urination conversations. Breaks my focus. At sporting events, if someone sidles up next to me with a “good game, eh,” it stops the whole show. I have to bow out, circle back and start anew. Though an inverse scenario, his query stumped me nonetheless. I thought, dude, just finish, we’ll talk in a minute.

“Yeah, um, it’s over there with the merch.”

“We gotta ace this show tonight.” Shake, shake, zip.

A steep, narrow staircase led to the third room upstairs. Negotiating the stairs proved difficult, sober. Not only was it steep and narrow, but the individual steps were

about six inches wide. I called them the Anne Frank stairs. Basically, a person, a guitar and an opened beer—my stage set up—could not all go together.

Once upstairs, we relaxed and dined on a nice pasta dinner prepared by Ramses. Grant ate nothing, which I found slightly odd. Ramses graciously cooked, served, filled glasses and made sure we were all taken care of.

A few hours later I squeezed into leather pants, donned goofy glasses, tuned up and moved slowly down the steps. Downstairs the bathroom had filled with cigarettes attached to chain-drinking Belgians. There were two options to get to the stage: squeeze through the bathroom crowd, out the door, back into the barroom door and through that crowd up to the front of the stage, or enter a small passage in the bathroom that led to behind the bar, climb over the bar, over the d.j. and onto the stage from the side. I climbed.

The view from a four-foot stage, rather high, presented a sea of curious, half-drunk faces. I preferred a lower stage, or no stage really, to achieve the maximum, in-your-face action of a good punk show. But this was the legendary Pits, and I'd heard that the crowd there demanded excellence, hence Grant's desire to "ace" the show. Fuck that, I thought. I ace 'em all.

They stood asses to elbows, smoking and drinking, and greeted us enthusiastically as we one-two-three-foured through a blisteringly paced set of hopped-up R'n'R. They had no room to move but managed to throb and sway during the songs and raise hands and yell in between. Sweat poured off my brow before the first break. Unfamiliar equipment threw me some curveballs. Sound cut in and out. Was it my guitar, the distortion pedal or the amp? Half-drunk, wearing dark glasses, I fumbled around the stage

while the show went on. Never stop the momentum of a show. If a guitar breaks or something fucks up, so what? The others pick up the slack while you fix it. Do not, under any circumstances, bring the whole thing to a halt. The sound is ninety percent white noise anyway; who cares if guitars fuck up? The void created by a loud band stopping for a long time kills a show. A half-drunk, out-of-tune guitarist going crazy on stage because he doesn't give a shit keeps a show alive.

Once I pulled it together I sought to boost the energy with some tried and true theatrics. I didn't have to look far for something to jump on; the bar was like two feet in front of me. Standing on a bar, playing guitar to an amped-up crowd below might seem like a bit of an obvious and hackneyed posture, but let me tell you, when you're up there, holding the guitar up toward the ceiling, pumping a fist and screaming back at the crowd, it's for fucking real. Distorted guitars make white people go crazy. I surrendered to the power of the moment and they felt it.

The bathroom scene was in full swing after the show. Guys in mid conversation with girls, turned and relieved themselves. How convenient! I peed outside.

Back inside, changing from a sweat-drenched shirt into a dry one could not prevent cigarette smoke from permeating every pore. I sat on a bench behind the merch table and chatted with a French girl. She had driven with a group from Lille, just across the border about twenty-five kilometers away. A few of her friends saw us play in Lille in 2001. One of them wandered over. "I saw you play before. Very good," he offered.

"Thanks."

“Before, you wear all leather. Now you appear like ze Briefs, wis ze cravat, and ze stripes,” he said. He referred to my new-wave style, black and white horizontal striped, sleeveless shirt and polka-dot tie. This band, the Briefs, he mentioned, had been through there recently, sporting a new-wave look and retro seventy-seven sound. Everywhere we went, people were all over their bandwagon. I didn’t like where he was going with it, implying that we’d ripped them off, when really we’d been doing the black and red, new-wave thing since ninety-nine. He’d only seen one particular night when I happened to channel sixty-eight Comeback Elvis with some full leather gear.

“Fuck the Briefs,” I said, “they’ve got like one good song.”

I really had nothing against the band, but felt some bitterness that they were like three times as popular as us, doing the same shit for half as long and not as good. Buzz off Pierre, can’t you see I’m trying to make time with Madame here.

When the night finally wound down, a handful of very soused Pits regulars milled about while we loaded out. Among them were Ramses, almost too drunk to stand, and a tall, lanky guy with a mock-hawk. A sort of bull session erupted with the two exchanging jibes as others looked on and laughed. Soon, the session devolved into wrestling on the bathroom floor, which was covered with spilled beer and cigarette butt slime. The larger guy lifted Ramses by one arm and one leg, shoved his head into the urinal and flushed repeatedly. Ramses, left on the floor, struggled for a few minutes before finally managing to pick himself up, much to the amusement of the small audience.

We stepped into their world if only for a moment. I shared their appreciation for good rock 'n' roll and participated whole-heartedly in helping spin the night into a full, bacchanalian slop fest. It was my job and I loved it. But as I stared at the drunken cook groveling on the filthy floor of what surely was his home away from home, and listened to the strange, foreign commentary, I realized that I, one step removed, could never completely engage in such a lifestyle. I loved the fury, but not the filth.

We drove on to provide the music portion of another night's entertainment to another town, to aid in others' decadence and revelry, while Ramses returned to the Pits, night after night, to cook for other bands, to drink and to fall down.

On the way out of town, Grant remarked, "That's why I never eat anything at the Pits."

Noise, Sweat and Tiny Coffees:

Rock and Roll Travels in Europe

In 2005 The ZKs embarked on what would be our last tour of Europe. I had already decided to leave the band, to return to school, and informed everyone of as much. So, even though we would do a few more shows back in the States before I split, we all knew this would be the final go-round. My personal goal was to enjoy myself as much as possible, to revel in the fandom, the passion and enthusiasm for the music, of course not just our music. We were a small spoke in a very large wheel. But I sought to soak in the culture of all of the music: the garage punk, the sixties stuff, the seventies glam and rock and roll culture of which I knew the Europeans to be exceedingly fond. I wanted to celebrate that common bond one last time and therefore sought consciously to minimize the potentially damaging effects of the marginal musical ability and pragmatic social interactions of the band at that point. Oh and one other thing: I tried to keep this trip on the cheap. On previous tours, we shelled out of our pockets for food, lodgings on off nights and other stuff with the understanding that at the end, we would split whatever was left over from the earnings after paying the driver, promoter and equipment rental. Well, there was never anything left over, so this time I intended to soak up whatever free booze and food I could get my hands on.

The lineup was Grant, Rena and new drummer Bob Randle, and I. The driver was Michael, a German vegetarian in his early twenties.

England

Our first London show is almost a complete disaster. Everything that can go wrong, does. Two songs in, I break two strings. One song in on the backup guitar, I break another, and the screw that holds the strap pops out. Now I've got to stand still so the guitar doesn't fall. The busted string makes the tone sound like shit: feedback hell. Yet somehow we manage to keep the energy up and the crowd going wild. We have them in our hands. We can do no wrong.

How is it possible? How can we sound like utter crap, not give two shits and still entertain? Are they drunk? Dim-witted? No. The answer lies in their indestructible Englishness. They will enjoy themselves no matter how dour the circumstances. The rest be damned. The English, to quote directly from my tour notes, "rule." Once again, as on tours past, we love them, and they love us. London is a rocking town. The city-dwellers possess a propensity for drink, don't mind falling down and fail to concern themselves with exactly how vile and base it all might seem.

It is not easy for us to leave everything on the stage (to go with the cliché) night in and night out (to go with another). This is all for a cause that I'm no longer sure I believe in. But here's the rub: during the shows, guitarists from the support bands file on and off the stage. They get up, do their thing, and they are good. I do not want to get blown away. It's Showbiz 101. Do not get upstaged. Much as I'd like to consider myself above such shallow competitive instincts, when the show begins and the bands parade before my eyes, some dormant gear at the center of my ego kicks in, and I refuse to lose. I want to hold my own and I do. I sweat, bleed, scream, jump, fall and leave every little bit of myself on the stage, each night, for these handfuls of fanatics. And for what? For this

headache music (to borrow a phrase from Ice Cube in *Three Kings*) which I'm starting to not be able to stand?

Of course after the show they dance for hours to sixties rock and love it. I used to love it too: that globally unifying call of primo garage-rock hipdom. Still love the tunes. But the scene? Not sure that four-four beat is enough to power me through countless endless nights of rock and roll bliss-quest.

We travel the unknown south part of the city to Brixton. Not just unknown to us. Everything is unknown to us. But South London is unknown to our hosts, James Petter (aka Jimmy the P, or just Petter) and his wife Sian (pronounced "Shawn") as well. It seems Northies don't venture over to the south side too often.

The neighborhood is dodgy. Nothing too unusual, but a leave-nothing-in-the-van type of neighborhood. On the way over we get stuck against another vehicle trying to cross a narrow pass at the same time. The side mirrors are caught. Any acceleration by either vehicle would bust them both off.

"Now listen to me, love," says Petter in his best, restrained impatient accent. "You've got to just back it very slowly."

The other driver is afraid the vehicles are too close and that reversing will cause deep scrapes. Petter angles his wheels back and away, assuring her that the cars will free without contact. "You've got to listen to me and just do as I say. Go directly back from where you are and I promise we'll be free." She doesn't want to but finally does. Petter is right: no scrapes.

“Bloody dumb cunt. We had right-of-way there. Clearly.”

Clearly.

So much for English propriety.

The club is hard to find. Once we do, it’s a dark noisy smoky caphole: the usual. On stage is a repeat of the previous night: bad notes, huge gaps between songs, ears shot, throat gone, gas heartburn, mushy peas, cigarette smoke.

In the middle of a guitar solo, some drunken English tosser tries to grab my genitals. He’s reaching while I’m out front, but I stay just beyond his reach. I’m too much in disbelief to really care. On stage in Italy one time, a crazed fan chucked a glass ashtray my way. I saw it coming and actually blocked it with the neck of my guitar. It shattered. Weird shit happens on stage. A girl takes the tosser’s cue. Now, she wants to touch my crotch while I’m playing. While I’m playing and singing, there really isn’t much I can do short of kicking her in the face. She’s wasted and disheveled but still, I might want to make out with her after the show. So I don’t kick her. Not hard anyway. Who knows? She might even dig it. I ham it up for the crotch grabbing action. I turn and show my ass. She rubs it. She’s leaning right onto the front of the stage, basically using it to hold herself up, seemingly oblivious to the noise and confusion all around. I jut my guitar forward in mock rockdom, sticking it in her face as I play a solo. She one-ups me. She licks my hand as I play!

After the show an older woman, had to have been sixty (ninety?), wants to give me a hug. She climbs onto the stage to do so. She has long stringy hair and a melting face. As I half-willingly hug her, she kisses my neck. We’re both dripping with sweat. I’m more astounded than disgusted although the whole thing is truly gross. She turns to

walk away and completely eats it off the stage. Falls . . . hard. I immediately go to help, but she's only worried about her beer. Her freaking spilled beer. Her main concern. She could have a broken hip. Seriously. She can barely walk as is and she's worried about not wasting the last bit of her warm flat English swill. She was trying to hold the beer upright as she was falling. Cheers, love.

North of the city, in the Midlands of England, the crowd is tougher. They don't want to like us; they want to not like us. It is more comforting for them to believe that the cultural products of more metropolitan places (San Fran, London) are not inherently superior to their own regional products. In fact, they believe, that the quality of the cultural output is disproportionate to the size and reputation of the metro-area it's from. In other words, it's all hype. Just because some band is from a big city doesn't mean that they're necessarily any good. In fact, they probably suck and everyone just thinks they're great because they're from San Francisco or London or New York or LA or wherever. People from big cities have their heads up their arses and think that their farts smell like almond biscotti. If a band bombs in a small town, the residents feel justified in their cynicism. This holds true in the States, but in England, the regional culture is as firmly ingrained as a dart in red bristle bull's eye.

We take the stage, and through sheer force of will, begin to win over the grumpy crowd. Things start slowly but build. Reaction to the first few songs is sparse, but we don't waste any time worrying; we jump straight into the next few, and by the time we're halfway through, we're sweating, huffing and puffing and the crowd begins to respond.

They cannot deny the earnest hard work we put forth. They respect our no-frills approach. They respect our concise and aggressive songs. They are hearty punks, English punks, Midlands punks. Some are of an age that indicates membership in an original punk generation. Punk had a hard go in the Midlands in the 70s, same as it did in the American heartland. Kids felt the buzz and wanted to participate in the angst-ridden frenzy, but the overwhelmingly stifling culture did its best to beat the buzz out of them. They endured, persevered, to the point that punk gained a legitimate foothold in the culture. The old folks might still scoff and shrug their shoulders, but now the original punks had kids of their own, who grow up rooting for the Leicester Tigers of the Premier League and listening to Sham 69 sing “Borstal Breakout.” Now, here they are, the old and the new, watching carefully as the ZKs sink or swim on stage. We earn their respect. By the end, they are with us. We are accepted, and this acceptance into the punk rock hearts of these Midlanders means much more than the tacit non-hatred of any big city crowd.

I personally will not be denied on stage. Performing hurts, but I get it done.

Headliners The Rezillos struggle through their set with borrowed equipment. Joe Callis plays my SG. Funny it doesn't just go out of tune for me. Joe Callis enjoyed great success in the early 80s with the group Human League. He wrote the song “Don't You Want Me,” which was a huge hit in the US around the time I was in the sixth grade. I remember every word. And now, here he is with his disturbing facial cocaine twitch, struggling to keep my guitar in tune. I guess the eighties were too much fun for one to turn down any of the piles of cocaine, which were shoveled up techno, new wave, angled haircut noses (red leather fairy boot, parachute pants, eyeliner wearing so and sos).

The Rezillos maintain professionalism, but play slow, and their voices are rough and not good. Faye Fife still looks like a b-movie, sci-fi mascara nightmare in day-glo mini dress. When she raises her eyes to the sky and sings, bathed in the yellow spotlight, mascara running and stringy black hair hanging down, I'm momentarily transported to the soundstage of Top of the Pops in the heyday. I imagine they perform on a set filled with cardboard pop-art props, blocks and shapes, go-go boot dancers mingling with bad-seventies haircut, denim jacket-clad, transitional music fans. It's a beautiful moment.

During the last of The Rezillos' set, they play a cover of "Somebody's Gonna Get Their Head Kicked In Tonight," by LA's Youth Brigade. Even though the group were US West Coast punks, the song is similar to British Oi, and probably appealed to skinheads. The song's catchy and violent chorus is just the type of thing to put anyone in the proper mindset to destroy. During the song I notice a big bald bloke singing along. He's got a huge scar across his face. It occurs to me that there's a damn good chance he got that scar in some kind of punk rock altercation, possibly during a performance of this very song. What sort of memories must this song conjure for these fans? Memories of a life without doubt rough and dedicated to punk rock.

After the show I'm approached by a fan who resembles Lemmy from Motorhead, with the long hair, fu-Manchu and denim jacket. He wants to express his pleasure but I cannot understand him. He spits out a rapid succession of grunts and groans. Theoretically, it's English he speaks. But I cannot tell. It's indecipherable. Our communication is fine as long as he only wants to express his pleasure. I can just smile and nod. But then he wants to ask me a question. Uh-oh. I cannot answer. I do not understand. I'm used to having this problem on the continent. European fans can try out

their English on me, but I am not expected to understand. This guy speaks English. This isn't supposed to happen in England. "Good?" I offer, and this does the trick as he laughs, shakes my hand and moves along.

After everyone's cleared outside, the club owner stiffens us, locks the door and leaves. What can we do? Welcome to England. The drummer of The Pokers waits on the curb with his drums for a cab. They played before us. Three bands used his drums and he's left alone on the curb as we drive off. He and his stuff wouldn't fit. No worries. He waves and smiles. Rock and Roll Leicester.

Germany

How wild can a German get on a Tuesday night? This isn't the set up to some ten-cent, night club joke. This is the actual thought running through my head at the moment. Hamburg is cold and the hookers are aggressive. They get right up in your face as you pass. They move too quickly and get too close. The motion combined with the foreign words coming out of their mouths create an uncomfortable feeling. I try to avoid them, to walk quickly by, or to use another pedestrian as a blocker. It's scary solicitation. This is the famous Reeperbahn, street of decadence and entertainment, whores and techno culture. Germany's Vegas strip. Hans and Franz meets Danny Gans. The Rat Pack meets Daft Punk.

We climb the stairs to the flat of The Kidnappers. Inside we talk with the flat mates as they prepare a communal dinner of pasta, salad, bread and beer. They are

curious about Rena. “What about Rena?” one asks. “Don’t you want to have sex with Rena?”

They don’t understand how we could be on tour with a female and have no sex occur. To them, the natural instinct simply takes over after a certain point and those in close proximity must engage in sex in order to keep the psychological dynamic whole and healthy. The after product is everybody feeling less weird and more comfortable. For us, the opposite is true: sex between band mates is strictly out of the question, because the after effect would wreck the delicate group dynamic. Americans cannot get around the social ramifications of sex. The meaning is more central than the act. To Germans, the centrality of the act itself supercedes any potential upsetting social ramifications, which most likely would never arise.

Another flat mate sports a fresh scar from an altercation with a pimp. The sex industry seems to control the streets. It is the main attraction of an attractive city. The incident was “over nothing.” The girls got in his face after a late night and a noisy exit from a club, and he told them they “stink.” The pimp stepped in.

“The worst thing you can do,” another adds, “is go to the police. It would mean death.”

Back out on the street, old men usher outside live sex clubs. Strip clubs, live sex shows, gay, lesbian sex. “Bizarre,” reads one sign. On Herbertstrasse, a notorious street in an already raunchy district, huge-breasted hookers in lingerie sit in windows under actual red lights. The street is blocked on either end by a red metal wall with a gate, plastered in stickers. A sign in German indicates that women are forbidden from passing.

We cannot understand. To us, it's like banning women from strip clubs. In America, women aren't banned from anything. In Germany the culture is different.

Rena decides to chance it. She has no qualms about it really. Pulls her hoodie tight over her head and walks. The hoodie hides nothing. The women shout insults all along the way. I feel slightly nervous and move through quickly, stealing only quick glimpses of the fake and not-appealing women in the windows.

What did they say? "They call you 'bitch,' 'slut.' They say 'get the fuck out of here.'" Rena finds it ironic that they call her a slut. We're told they've been known to lob cups of piss at women who pass. They send word down the line that a woman is passing, so the ones on the other end are ready. The whole code seems strange to us. Why shouldn't a woman be allowed to solicit a female prostitute?

We visit the site of the Star Bar, marked by a plaque honoring the legendary club and the groups who played there. It is impossible to not think of The Beatles in black leather, hair still brushed back, playing all nighters hopped up on speed, crashing all day and getting shots for VD. Hamburg is where they tightened their sound, honed their stage banter. Hamburg is where Astrid first combed their hair forward. Hamburg is where an English band came to immerse themselves in a decadent and foreign culture and to dedicate themselves to beat music, decadence and visceral celebration of all that is good. Hamburg is where they became The Beatles. I must at least acknowledge.

After, we pass a street of 24/7 bars reminiscent of New Orleans. One bar has long tables full of older drunk women and men, yammering away, drinking and smoking at 3 a.m. "One look is enough to understand what goes on there," says one of the flat mates.

We stand for a moment and ponder what to do. Inside looks somewhat fun, somewhat depressing. We decide to skip it. I don't have the energy anymore, really.

My ears continue to ring. They suffer major damage in the clubs each night. We struggle yet continue to win over small but enthusiastic crowds of Germans. They are curious and critical.

Winning over a German crowd is like dragging an ailing elder to the doctor's office: they're stubborn, old-fashioned and bitter. When confronted they become listless and defensive. Yet deep down they know that the visit is good for them, that it is something they need, that their very survival might depend on it. This is the mood under which we operate.

At this point in the tour, I am proud of the band. Night in and out we bring a certain credo to performance that will not be bested. James Brown set the precedent. Maximum effort. Maximum energy maintained for the duration of the evening. It's not easy. I'm not patti'n' myself here, but we are not young. The music is for the young. Was and always will be. Rock and roll music is forever for the young. We are holding on.

My ears ring, my body aches and I struggle for air. Yet still. We bring it.

We near the show's end before the crowd even begins to warm up. But at last, at long last, they become ours. They too bend to our charms. They've fought as best they can, but they are on their way to the doctor's nonetheless. Still complaining in the car, yet glad to be out of the house and actually enjoying the ride.

What's it all worth? Personal satisfaction for a job well done? What, for a handful of Germans who want to hate you and whose opinions don't matter anyway? Hardly seems worth it. Yet it doesn't matter who is out there when we're on stage. There could be one guy and his wheelchair-bound cousin who just came in to take a piss and ask directions. When we are on, we do everything within our reach to make sure they have a good time. When they see us, there will be no doubt that we are fully in our element; something exciting is going down on stage. We leave no doubt. We will not be bested.

After the show in Frankfurt things get interesting. In the dark noisy club, a smallish crowd hangs around the bar and seated table areas. A killer rock dj plays. It's the guy who booked the show. He spins Nathaniel Maier's "Village of Love." Solomon Burke. Good shit. Soul. I'm with Bob and Michael having a few pops after the show, just trying to get loose, get our rock vibe on, get our groove thing and such. Digging the tunes. Digging the crazy Germans who were treated earlier to a fine if pragmatic show. The three of us have formed a bond at this point in the tour, over drinking. We drank. Us three. And whatever other booze-loving Euros we happened to be in the vicinity of. Alcohol is the universal salve. The balm. The nectar. The juice. The hooch. The healer. Michael despises heffeweisen, or German wheat beer. His reasons are cultural. His region doesn't do the wheat. They do the something else that I can't remember. I and Bob on the other hand, much enjoyed the regional specialty, even though I'm not even sure if we were in the right region. Bob, his Mickey Dolenz-looking self, sported a red poly shirt with a high collar, under his usual leather jacket. We drank and drank and drank.

Later a drunk German is dancing around after the show to the rock dj. Really going at it, throwing himself around the cavernous basement room. At first not harming anybody, he eventually starts grabbing people. He seems to just want to get others involved in his fun, but he's really drunk and aggressive, weird, foreign. He grabs Bob's leg and tries to pull him off his stool. Bob's not having any. Bob kicks his leg to get out of the grasp and the guy reacts to Bob's kick with a bit of beer tossed from his bottle. At this point the situation becomes fully, on. Bob rises slowly, calmly, deliberately, and grabs the guy by the shirt collar, then proceeds to empty the contents of his mostly full beer directly over the poor guy's head. The guy's trying to break away, but Bob's got him by the front of the collar. In trying to escape, the guy falls backwards into a table and eats it onto the floor. The table crashes. A girl comes in. She grabs Bob. She thinks he knocked the guy over on purpose, but he didn't. She's screaming at Bob in German cursing him like she was Eva Braun and he was, well, he was Mickey Dolenz. (Actually Mickey Dolenz is atheist, which doesn't necessarily preclude him from being Jewish, but doesn't indicate either way.) Bob returns to the table where Michael and I watched with much delight. I had gotten him a fresh beer right away and he received a brusque round of cheers from the two of us plus a couple others for his entertaining display.

Later still, everyone is gone from the club and gone away or to bed, and as we are staying directly above the club, the bar owner leaves us the key and goes as well. Michael begins challenging me to some drinking, claiming we'd been on the tour for a while now, and he's yet to see me do any serious drinking. Making like I've been some sort of pussy or something, like I haven't lived up to this reputation as a big drinker. I am somewhat pleased to learn that I have a reputation in Europe (or is it just an image?). Either way it's

juvenile male challenge stuff. But of course because I love to drink and also I am already drunk, I accept the challenge and we set about with some ice cold Jagermeister and some beers. Shortly after we are on to the bourbon. Michael insists that I choose the brand, and presented with a limited selection of American liquor, I opt for the Beam over the Jack.

Later we decide to go the river, the Main. I imagine Frankfurt to be an epic and mysterious city. The glimpses we had on the way in were tantalizing. A river city with old bridges and stone river walls. A trip to the river's edge seems a grand idea. We set out. Outside, Frankfurt is cold and breezy but I am warm on the brown brown bourbon. Everything is grand and smooth and the purpose I have on the earth is to play rock music in exotic foreign destinations all over the world. The sun will always shine on me because I have the beating heart of the four-four inside, propelling me forward through the universe. The world bends to the logic of rock and roll and the grand scheme reveals itself. All is glorious. All is grand. The music is fine in my mind as we walk the river bank streets. *Shake. Some action's what I need. I gotta break out at full speed. So give me what I need. To make it alright. Make it alright, alright alright.*

When we arrive I find the water way too cold. Docked on the shore is a party boat, a kind of business-looking operation boat, open during the day. Of course it's not open at night. But in the day, it's like a happening party boat cruising folks around the old river of Frankfurt. But it's like the middle of the night and there's nobody around. The boat's got a bunch of beer clearly visible. We don't need anymore beer, but the opportunity is right there, presenting itself. We have no more beers, and there are some beers right before us. All we have to do is climb the fence and jump onto the boat, and we can have the beers. Even though we don't really need anymore beers, there are still some

beers right there. So I go to climb over. I summon the spirit of my hero William Holden, because not only was he a fine, underrated actor in many classic films such as *Sunset Blvd* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, he was also a world-renown drinker and accomplisher of feats of balance, performed under high inebriation. He was known to balance on high hotel balcony ledges for fun, and especially while in Kenya at a hotel of which he was a part-owner.

The boat is docked at a small pier with the pier blocked by a razor-wire gate, with the razor wire at the top of the gate, sticking out both ways. I climb to the top of the gate and attempt to make my way around the outer edge of the razor wire. I swing a leg around to the other side and am balanced atop the gate, looking down onto the rail of the boat. But I realize that if I were to swing my other leg around, I'm still more than an arms length from the rail of the boat, with only the river below. I realize I'm losing balance and I'm about to eat it into the river. Michael grabs my leg at the last moment, but as he pulls me back to land, my leather jacket catches the razor wire and rips, right on the chest. A flap hangs down on my favorite rock and roll leather jacket all from trying to do some drunken William Holden stunts out on the freezing river in the middle of the night in Germany.

Not satisfied and still wanting a good climb, we find a train construction site and climb into it. It's not much fun, but climbing back over is a bit of a thrill. We finally give up, forgetting how or why we even began the entire thing. We go in. Back in the bar after a long outing, we are thirsty. We have some more shots of bourbon and sit and bullshit until dawn. Talking about music. Always music.

We make our way upstairs to the bed area. It's my second all-nighter in as many nights. It will be a full twenty-four hours before I can even think of drinking alcohol again. Of course my hangover hits about an hour before show time the next night in Freiberg, and no amount of BC powder and Emergen-C can help the sickly shakes and sweats I get detoxing on stage.

Sweden

In Stockholm the sun sets at ten and rises at four. It never really gets dark. The night sky glows, constantly. The detour to Sweden is costly for the tour. Grant made the call early on. And how could I argue with going to Sweden? At the time it seemed logical. But now, with less than 24 hours to do it in and with two more bullshit Ryan Air flights with extra charges for our overweight crap (guitars, merch) it hardly seemed worth it.

Out of Germany we fly over cold blue water in a small plane up into Scandinavia. We wait for awhile at the airport. Our host finally arrives, Thomas—a grinning, cherubic, jovial sort with a great round face, belly, thinning blond hair and tiny, smiling Nordic eyes. We cram into his small car and drive an hour through brown woods in winter. The landscape is stark, bare, Nordic.

The bold city appears from around a curve. In town, we catch the first warm day of the year and everyone is out in the parks, drinking beer and barbecuing. This might hurt our attendance, especially when coupled with the national hockey team playing, and

losing, in the World Championship semifinals. We don't care because we're paid in advance. I already know that those who see us will have a great time.

Sweden's is an insular and well-defined rock scene with its own stars, own modes, codes. We of course do not fit in anywhere in this scheme but could not care less. Support group The Rohipnols sport half and full tattoo sleeves, black t-shirts, Marshals and Gibsons, a reality-tv-like, almost laughably clichéd "rock" look. They play in typical Swedish Rock mode, ala The Hellacopters, etc. The sound is heavily lifted from other sounds: seventies AC/DC-style, American Grunge, early punk—New York Dolls, Dictators. It's decent but almost too familiar and a bit dull.

The club Alcazar is a clean, stylish basement venue with pro-lights and pro sound set ups. The ZKs take full advantage of the pro gear by delivering up out-of-tune guitars, harsh, raspy vocals, a slapped together mix that's completely too loud and unbalanced. Matters not. Of course. Kids are hearing damaged, brain damaged, and do not know or care about the difference.

Between songs I continue my mission to say "cocksucker" in every language. Grant initiated this quest, but I have taken up the cause. It provides useful on-stage fodder and I learn and pronounce the words better than he does. Germany was easy. Marcus in Munster taught me "schwanz lucher." Said Americans always key in on "schwanz." Schwanz this and schwanz that. I guess it sounds so much like "schlong" that we just naturally fall into using it. It's got a natural phallic sound that is irresistible. Schwanzlucher. Hey schwanzlucher. Grab you a beer? Why don't you suck my schwanz, you schwanzlucher. Americans love terms for penises. Apparently we enjoy talking about or referring to penises in slang terms more so than Europeans. Are we obsessed with

pricks? Maybe so. Is it rooted in envy or just pure juvenile impulse? Whatever it is, it cracks us up for days, not just me but the whole band. We even drag our German driver down into the stupidity. He starts using it incorrectly like we do, and he speaks perfect German.

Sweden is a little tougher. I got a head start from a Swedish band we played with in Köln. They wanted to teach me some nice phrases to use to meet some nice Swedish women. I wanted to know how to say “cocksucker.” Like that’s ever going to come in handy in any practical situation. And it’s definitely not going to help me meet Swedish women. What it will do though is allow me to insult the crowd in their native language in a manner consistent with the arch concept of The ZKs as envisioned by one Grant Loudly.

“Kook su-caret,” is what it sounded like, but I could not get the pronunciation just right. He kept repeating it and I kept repeating what I thought I was hearing. “Kook suuu-caret,” he said, emphasizing the “su.”

“Kook suuu-caret,” I said.

“No. Kook suuu-caret,” he said.

Goddamn it. It’s close enough. I’m not delivering a goddamn Nobel acceptance speech. I just want to know how to say “cocksucker” in Swedish.

Well maybe I should have practiced a little harder that night in Germany because when I go to break it out on stage in Stockholm, I get a confused reaction. Apparently the work for “cocksucker” is very similar to the word for “sugar cookie.” I was shouting out some bastard hybrid of the two. When I come off stage, Thomas informs me that, to the Swedes, I seemed to be shouting “cookiesucker.”

After the show we meet the people. The people are different: the north. Nordics. Different: clean, efficient, friendly. The girls are beautiful with weird angular haircuts that frame their tiny Nordic faces. Anna, Ellen, Tess and the other one. They're young and crazy and love punk rock and take little tobacco pouches in their mouths. Like little Skoal Bandits. They say it is in anticipation of a new smoking ban, a national ban in pubs and restaurants to take effect in a few weeks. Can you imagine the genuine foresight? What a rational approach. I cannot envision an American taking that sort of precaution. I try to explain that dipping snuff is not becoming of a pretty young lady, but it's lost on them.

Their appearances are extreme, yet the modes are easily identifiable. They're just all mixed up, jumbled, extreme. Gothic. Partially shaved dyed-black hair, freakish eighties-type miniskirts, leggings, garish mismatched boots. The lot of us rambles into the partially lit night. In a bar in King's Cross we take a table. The place is loud and smoky, really jumping for three in the morning. International Male-style dressed Euros drink and dance and the guys cling to the girls. We drink tall cans of beer and talk: music mostly. I can't divert my attention from the blonde, Anna. Her tiny square haircut face and cold blue eyes. She smiles but shies away from too much eye contact. I wear the pin of her band Kami-katze, pink with a cat. She plays guitar. Outside the sun that never set is coming up. We are sluggish and delirious. We have come a long way to hang out for a little while and to meet people who, although we have never met before and may never meet again, share the spirit of obsession over four-four beats and distorted guitars. To have a week or more to spend in Stockholm, to experience more of what this incredible city has to offer would be wonderful. But this isn't that trip. That isn't my life.

In the street we say goodbye and part ways with the girls, then drive to the house of Thomas to pretend to sleep for two hours in the daylight.

Italy

We pull into a village near the city of Piacenza. Piacenza is the home base of Morticia's Lovers, a band we will play the next few shows with. They will be the last few shows of the last tour. We have played with Morticia's Lovers on each of our three tours. And in fact, we have entered this same village each time as well. Piacenza is located in the north of Italy, south of and in between the cities of Milan and Verona. This village, which has a name I do not recall, is near the city but is not in the city. This situation exemplifies our experiences in Italy. We rarely play in cities. We almost always play in villages outside of the cities. This is where the promoters and the bands can find the venues to put on rock shows. We always worry that because we are in such remote locations, no one will come to the shows. Usually, plenty of people come to the shows. They come from the nearby cities, and from nearby villages, all connected by a seemingly endless maze of two-lane roads through sun-drenched hillsides and vineyards. Clusters of old stone houses stand atop gentle hills in the distance.

In the center of the village is a large square of old stone. Adjacent to the square on one side is a series of shops that seem barely open. We sit and have small coffees, gelato and little sandwiches of thin sliced ham on hard rolls. The sandwiches are dry. Adjacent to the square on the other side is a church with a large clock and steeple facing the square. Just behind the church is an old stone building that serves as a dormitory for

members of the liturgy and for theological students-in-training. This is where we will sleep. We have slept here before. It is strange and a bit creepy, but different and interesting too. On a previous tour, I felt like a character from *The Name of the Rose* while spending the night in the cavernous old rooms. The band took the opportunity afforded by the extra rooms to banish me from the main sleeping quarters because of my loud snoring. So I stayed alone in an old stone room containing about twenty wooden bunk-beds. I swear I thought some Quasimodo-type hunchback or some Ron Perlman-looking creature was going to approach me in the night, or wake me in the morning by nibbling gently on my toes.

For the second-to-last show of the tour we caravan with Morticia's Lovers from the village to yet another remote location, a compound that resembles a country club. When we arrive, I notice the large swimming pool, outdoor stage and warm, pleasant weather. "Tonight we make a big party," I say, mimicking the Italian-English spoken by our hosts. "Yes, tonight, maybe you get laid," says Bebe, guitarist for Morticia's Lovers. Bebe is short, as most of the Italian guys are, but muscular. He has sandy-blond, caveman hair, parted down the middle. He wears a sleeveless t-shirt with a multi-colored scarf and blue-lens Lennon glasses. Bebe is a cocky bastard, good looking enough to somewhat pull it off. He enjoys messing with The ZKs and I enjoy giving it back. He likes to try out his newly learned American phrases on me and I try out my Italian on him.

“Tell me, Jeremy, do you like eating pussy?” he asks. “Alfa Romeo, Maseratti, Lamborghini,” I respond. This inane conversation continues intermittently throughout the night. Other conversational problems arise. At the outside, cabana-style bar after dinner, I am conversing about music with the singer of Morticia’s Lovers, Gil, pronounced with a soft “g.” “Do you like tabascos?” he’s asking me. “Huh?”

“Do you like tabascos?” he repeats. I can’t figure out what he’s asking but decide to go with a yes or no answer, as I often do in situations like this. When you can’t understand something after repeated tries, answer “yes” or “no” and try to move on. “No,” I blindly go with. Gil can’t believe it. “You don’t like tabascos? Everybody likes tabascos.” At this point I understand. “Ohh. The Buzzcocks. Of course I like The Buzzcocks. Everybody likes The Buzzcocks. Who doesn’t like The Buzzcocks?”

“Dat is what I thought,” Gil says. “Who doesn’t like tabascos?”

Morticia’s Lovers take the stage for what is to be their last show. They have decided, much like we have, to end the band amicably and to move on to other things, to begin other phases of their lives. We first met Morticia’s Lovers four years prior, in 2001, when we played a large show together at a place called The Fillmore (yes there is a Fillmore in Italy). This place was about as large as The Fillmore in San Francisco too, which made it one of the biggest places we’d ever played. Grant joined the Lovers onstage that night for a version of The Controllers’ “Do the Uganda.”

Tonight they handle business without any guests. They have come a long way since then, and in many ways, are the better band. They begin with a cover of Talking

Heads' "Psycho Killer" done in a more distorted, punk style, and featuring their keyboardist, a relatively recent addition to the group, who gives them a more new wave sound. The keyboardist wears the uniform of an Italian policeman, including the round, banded cop hat. He plays, among other keyboards, a small Moog, that allows him to fall to the stage and perform antics normally practiced by guitarists.

Over the course of the set, they all hit the stage. They are a ball of action. Their sound is tight: two distinct guitars along with the spacey sound of the moog, fast but danceable, and catchy. A handful of girls dressed in striped shirts and denim mini-skirts dance near the stage. A few more people bob along and raise fists and shout during the familiar choruses. The band sings in broken English, adding to their charm, and some of their song titles are slightly off, Italian English constructions: "Baby you better stop—with the chemical drugs, with the chemical drugs." In fact one song addresses the situation directly: "Hey baby, I don't speak English," sung over a "Great Balls of Fire" type riff. Bebe's guitar shimmers. Gil slurs his vocals stylishly. The bass player, the one they call Dr. Molecular, either for his fondness for science-fiction or for his resemblance to a Vulcan, makes goggle-eyed, Marty Feldman-type expressions while attacking his bass in a stiff, robot-like manner.

During the set I remark to Gianni, the Italian promoter, how much better they have gotten over the years. "They are the best band in Italy," Gianni answers. "I hate it that they are quitting."

The set ends with a wonderful cacophony of scratchy guitar, warbley keyboard and crashing cymbals. The sound travels far into the night. The outside venue provides no enclosure for the sound, which escapes like hot gas. The waves simply move away from

the center, as “up” is away from the center of the earth, and carry into the night as far as they can, until they die out, probably somewhere in the next village. Morticia’s Lovers have put on a fitting last show. They should be proud. They have come to worship at the altar of Rock and Roll and have brought excellent and noisy gifts to lay at the feet of the behemoth.

A few more people arrive by the time we begin, and we proceed to give them our (by this point) standard dose of fastness. Inspired by the chaotic goodness of Morticia’s Lovers we crash about on the stage during the extended noise break of “Genetic Mutation,” our closer. I play guitar on my back as Rena straddles me playing her guitar. It’s a clichéd move to be sure, but who cares? What did we think we were doing? Reinventing the wheel? The guitar poses we adopt are tributes to decadence, not decadence itself. We mock sexual ferocity. We gesture towards debauchery, climbing onto the back of the worn dinosaur that links rock guitar with fornication. It’s a restrained gesture, but somehow, one that feels just right in the moment of sped-up pretense that is the closing moments of our show, of our tour, of the band. If a rock band cannot aurally and visually induce unbridled carnal abandon (Few can en masse. Who has, really? Only the very best), then the most they can hope to provide is a reminder that such heedlessness exists, that it’s out there, just beyond the precipice. One must only peek over the edge and the driving rhythms will do the rest. Just as the first monumental poundings of Fats Domino and Ike Turner clicked a rhythmic trigger that unleashed chaos among the youth, and caused them to move, move, move, we are still there pounding the drum, leading the exploring party deep into the dark jungle. If we can’t unleash the beast, then at least we can rattle the keys to the cage.

After the show a swirly dance party ensues. A dj blasts sixties rock poolside as girls and guys swing each other madly about. “Mary, Mary, you’re on my mind. Folks are gone and the place will be mine. Gonna have a goodtime tonight. Rock and roll music gonna play all night. Come on baby it won’t be long. Only take a minute just to sing my song, yeah.” I sit near the stage and take it all in. Bebe pushes Michael unexpectedly into the pool. This causes some buzzing among the crowd. Later Michael gets revenge as he, with some enlisted help, picks Bebe up in a plastic chair and tosses him straight into the pool. They are both wet, drunk, breathing hard. Somebody had to get into the damn pool. I’m glad it’s them and not me. The night air is cool. Exhaustion and alcohol set in. The music fades into the background. The lens through which I view the entire spectacle dissolves into black.

One more show to go. Elated by the prospect of going home, I feel fuzzy yet comfortable in the morning. For the past three weeks, I have fought a battle of endurance against booze, cigarette smoke, ringing guitars, hundreds and hundreds of kilometers in a stiff van, erratic sleep and irritable, and irritating travelers. I have wished often for the whole affair to be over so that I could return to comforts of my own bed. But now, with one night left, I appreciate the uniqueness of the situation. I am in a small town in Italy, with a group of people who, despite their disgusting humanness, all share a love for rock that I share, and I’ve got nothing to do but eat, drink and play music. Damn, this is a pretty good deal. I might actually miss this when it’s over.

The group of us head down the street around noon (no single day on the tour has ever begun before noon) to an unmarked restaurant. Townsmen sit at tables in small groups, smoking and drinking tiny coffees. It's an open establishment in a small town; it's not the sort of place where patrons come in, eat, then leave. It's the sort of place where the same group of men congregate daily and sit for hours and hours on end. The women work in the kitchen and behind the bar. There is no menu. They serve what they prepare. You can have it or not.

We occupy an separate dining room adjacent to the main room. Along both sides of a single long table are the four ZKs, Michael the driver, the five Morticia's Lovers, the promoter and a few friends. The waiter comes and Gil informs him that one among the group is a vegetarian. The waiter thinks for a moment and then tells Gil that they can prepare some "asparagi." The Italians ask among themselves the English translation for this word to pass onto the German. They snap their fingers. The answer is right there, but cannot be retrieved. They ask the waiter in Italian for an English translation. He has none. Instead he holds both arms high above his head, hands together, like a football ref signaling a safety, in an attempt to mimic the shape of the vegetable. "Asparagi," he repeats, holding the position, in a game of Italian to English charades. "Asparagus," someone finally guesses. "Ahh, asparagus." From now on the waiter will be known as "Mr. Asparagi" for his performance.

When he returns with the first course, everyone at the table greets him by holding arms straight above heads, hands together. Mr. Asparagi laughs. Several courses come out. Salads, cheeses, proscuito, bread. When the main course arrives, it is two gigantic platters of what, in American restaurants, would be called mixed grill: meat of all types,

chicken, ribs, chops, together with large rectangles of golden grilled polenta. Gil explains that this region is known for its polenta, and in fact residents of this area have a nickname, known all around Italy, that roughly translates to “polenta heads.”

The meal is delicious. I feel bad for Michael and his plate of grilled asparagus. But he doesn't mind. Together with the salad, bread and cheese, it is enough. Oh, and the wine. No Italian meal, no matter what the time of day, is served without wine. This region is known for a semi-bubbly red that is so smooth and refreshing that it goes down like a soda. But it packs a punch. It's not my idea to be drinking first thing in the day, after a night a heavy drinking, preceded by three weeks of drinking. But hey, when near Rome . . . After the meal Mr. Asparagi brings out another long tray, this one with slices of lemon running down the center and two long trails of brownish powders on either side. This is different. I'm intrigued but confused. The situation becomes more clear when a bottle of some kind of liquor appears. We watch as Morticia's Lovers demonstrate. They take a lemon slice, dip one side in one brown powder, the other in the other brown powder, then suck it and take a shot of the liquor. Even though I now know how to do it, they are unable to translate what any of it actually is. So, trial by fire. I go. The powders are sweet, chalky and bitter, and the liquor is strong and warm. After a moment to shake down the booze, I determine that one powder is cinnamon or cinnamon and sugar, the other must be ground coffee or espresso and the booze is most likely some sort of dark rum.

After a couple rounds of this, we lift ourselves up from the table, salute Mr. Asparagi and stumble out into the midday sunshine. Getting drunk at lunch wasn't what I had in mind when I awoke, but as I've learned over three weeks, there can be up to three

separate buzzes every day. The first is when we awake and have the first meal (there's wine on the lunch tables in Spain and France too), the second when we arrive at the club and do the sound check, and the third during the after-party. To maintain a single buzz throughout the day's events would require not only resourcefulness to procure a suitable amount of booze (often there's a hundred kilometers between lunch and sound check), but also a drinking stamina that I have not personally displayed since college and good ol' football Saturdays back at the Capstone.

We say our goodbyes to Morticia's Lovers. They will not be accompanying us for the last show. We exchange email addresses, t-shirts and cds, snap a few photos, pledge to see each other again, and hit the road. As we pull away, I lean my head against the side window of the van and stare out at the rounded hillsides bathed in sunlight. The sunlight through the glass amplifies a warm, sleepy sensation brought on by the lunchtime rum shots. I close my eyes and imagine for a moment that I am already home.

I should be keeping better track of exactly where the hell I am. In the future, that's what people will want to know. Oh, you were in Italy? Where did you go? How can I explain that I was in some little town the name of which I have no idea? You don't know the name of the place where your band played its last show? What the hell kind of traveler are you? Well, let's see. It was in the north, northwest I believe, not too far from Treviso. Treviso is the airport we flew out of, and it's a couple of hours drive. So, near there somewhere. Describe the town? Well, let's see. It had a small town square with a church, the buildings were all very old and in the square was a small cafe with a little

service counter that sold coffees in tiny cups. What? I've just described every town in Italy? Well, then we were in one of those.

The club is mostly a restaurant, with a shoebox of a stage area near the front. We throw our gear in a hallway adjacent to a bathroom. We change for the show in the bathroom. Rena, at this point devoid of all decorum usually employed among friends of the opposite sex, strips down to her underwear and fishnets right in front of me. I think back to the Germans. What about Rena? Aren't you attracted to Rena? Sure, under normal circumstances, an attractive woman wearing nothing but a bra and fishnets might be a source of arousal. But I'm really too tired to care. And she's obviously only concerned with getting this show over with and going home too. The circumstances are uncomfortable: changing in a bathroom, out of a suitcase, stepping over amps and guitar cases, for like the twentieth straight night. I know, I know. Cry me a river. You're on tour in Italy with a rock band. Get over it. Sure, it wasn't exactly hell on earth, but my point is, at that time, I just wasn't thinking about sex with a band mate in a bathroom.

People gather in the parking lot outside before the show. Our old buddy Jean-Claude of the Atom Smashers is there, the fast-talking Brit/ Italian with the stage-destroying impulse. He speaks with an odd accent derived from split time in England and Italy with British and Italian parents. He is a rather large guy, built like a linebacker, with short hair, bad teeth and a crooked smile. "What the hell happened to your hair, Jeremy?" he asks. My hair. Well, my hair in its natural state is mostly dark brown but rapidly turning gray. However, for the tour, in an attempt to avoid looking, as Grant puts it, like Grandpa Munster, I have dyed it black. Actually, it was more of a blue-black, kind of like Superman. But over three weeks, a couple things happen: first the blue sheen wears off,

appearing only sparsely and in the sunlight. Then, the black itself wears off, leaving spots of dark brown, which is actually turning gray. I did the dye job myself, so it is extra bad around the hairline, where a professional would've been more thorough. So, there in the bright Italian sunlight, my hair is a combination of blue, black, brown and gray. Having not actually seen it in bright light myself, I'm certain it looks quite absurd, sort of like a bruised skunk. "Fuck you," I say. "That's what happened."

Everyone drinks, the sun goes down and the first band plays. It is the band of a guy we know from previous tours and from previous shows on this tour as well, Franz. He is a fan of The ZKs. Almost all of the bands we play with are fans of The ZKs. While the music might sound like horrid noise to me at times, they all seem to love it. It's good to be loved.

There is no stage, only a little stage area, like a nook. The band is crammed inside this nook, and the crowd stands all around them, at close proximity. Set ups like these are my favorite. This is where the best punk rock happens: not when the band is removed, up on some stage, where nobody can get to them, but right there on eye level, so that when you approach the mic, you're singing and spitting right into bobbing fans' faces. They can grab you, knock you about, throw beer and scream. And you can do the same to them.

Franz's band is good. They do a punk-garage-rock and roll style. At the end of the set, they invite Jean-Claude to sing a song with them. Jean-Claude wastes no opportunities to leave his mark. He has attempted to destroy things during shows on tours past. I think back to a show in Italy on the last tour, where, missing one guitar player from the band, he attempted to compensate by destroying a bass and an amp, jumping up

and down on it and kicking it over. He left the stage in proper disarray, but then The ZKs proceeded to finish the job, upending the mics, monitors and the drum kit during our set. “I didn’t think you guys could wreck the stage any worse, but you did,” he told me at the time.

Tonight, he sings only the beginning of the song, even then thrashing about like a madman. Then, he cannot resist the urge. He crashes his linebacker’s frame squarely into the drum kit, thus ending the song and the set to wild cheers from the crowd. When he emerges from the ruined kit, he is smiling and dripping blood from an inch long gash in his forehead. This all in the space of one verse of one song. The force is strong in this one.

Yet, once again The ZKs answer the clarion call and rise to the challenge. (Was this his intent? To ensure a good performance from us by laying down a challenge? Or is he a self-contained phenomenon, incapable of viewing anything beyond his own impulse to destroy and be cheered?)

We groove on the close-proximity of the crowd. People squeeze in to try to get a peek as I jam my face right into mic. Grant whips at his low slung bass and gestures at the crowd. On the other side, Rena flashes her sexy smile and poses defiantly in her mini-skirt and heels. The band at this point relies heavily on signature moves. Each of us keeps the energy level high but still saves a little something extra for our own spotlight moments in the show: a lead vocal, a guitar solo, a nightly trip crashing into the floor.

At moments I close my eyes and auto-pilot takes over. Sweat pours off my brow. I taste the metallic mesh of the microphone. I’m there in body, singing the too-familiar lyrics, but my head drifts away, fighting off exhaustion: “I don’t wanna be, no. I don’t

wanna be, no. I don't wanna be a genetic mutation!" I stretch the last syllable of the lyric out into an emphatic snarl, then collapse to the floor, knocking over the mic. The band doesn't want to quit. They launch into a noise finale, banging instruments, coaxing the most extreme amount of noise out of them as possible: crashing cymbals, screaming distortion, howling, yelping, churning into mind-numbing oblivion. For a moment. Then the show ends. It's over. The crowd cheers. I slide through the sweat-soaked masses, out of the steam-bath club and into the cool Italian air. The tour is over. We've played the last show. I lean delirious against the van as faces pass, thanking me for coming, saying "great, just great." Thanks. Thank you. You're all great. It's all been truly, truly great.

Back in San Francisco, I stop at a neighborhood coffee shop on the way home from the airport. I'm struck by how similar the interior scene is to what I've just spent three weeks immersed in. Quiet reggae music plays. Youngish patrons sit and talk quietly or read at wooden tables. A dreadlocked hipster takes and fills orders alone behind the counter. It all looks so. . . European. For a moment I become disoriented. I forget that I don't have to point at what I want, or ask someone to translate my order for me. I can simply open my mouth and ask for exactly what I want. I'm back home. These are my people. They'll understand me. It's a nice feeling.

I take a seat and wait for my drink. I have no show to play tonight. No show to play tomorrow. Nobody's waiting for me and my mates to show up in some little town with not much to do, and provide them with an excuse to party for a night. The next person I talk to probably won't be obsessed with The Flamin' Groovies. I won't be

leaping off a stage, playing a solo on my back or raising my guitar triumphantly over my head amid wild cheers again anytime soon. Maybe never. Then again I won't be changing in a van, into clothes still wet from sweat and reeking of smoke from the night before, or lugging my amp down some 500-year-old steps into a tiny, ear-ringing club where I'll spend the next eight hours any time soon either. I'm just another dude in a coffee shop in San Francisco, another like so many, stuck between growing up and staying a kid. I took a shot at something I wanted, something that looked fun and worthwhile, and it was. But now what? Now it's over. Now it's memories fading steadily into the past, and I have to figure out what to do next.

Part Three

The King of Haight Street

Damp air, thick fog, tall pines. The white blanket rolls in off the Pacific and billows between the Victorians. A cold metallic spray. The trees rise out of moist dirt and when the fog wraps their tops, it shakes a damp, earth scent off the tips of the needles. In the evening its thickness muffles sound from the street, high up in the park. Wind doesn't blow; the movement is slower, more even, deliberate. Fog creaks the tall trees and creates a steady whoosh in the ear.

At the base of the park down on the street, an electric bus pulls to a stop emitting a blast of compressed air and another, hiss less-loud, as the pneumatic door folds open. The whine of the motor increases in pitch and volume as the bus pulls away, disappearing down the block, red and yellow lights visible for a moment. Then silence again. Once the sun is completely gone, down into the endless sea, and over layers of distant headlands the hazy light dissipates into blackness, I descend.

There's a reason they call it the Upper Haight. From Divisadero Street to the edge of Buena Vista Park is a three-block climb at about forty degrees. From the top of Buena Vista, the entire city is visible in between the trees, from the Golden Gate to downtown to Candlestick point—hence the name, “good view.” The neighborhood stretches flat from Buena Vista to the foot of Golden Gate Park about a mile away, and for a few blocks on either side of Haight Street. Golden Gate Park then descends gradually all the way to Ocean Beach. You might not even notice the grade in the park but if you sit on a bike, you can coast all the way to the ocean almost without peddling.

I hit the corner store on the way home for some beverage supplies. Inside, under the fluorescent lights, the old guy sweeps the broken, vinyl checkerboard floor. He's always there, drinking coffee, sneaking peaks at the porn mags, smiling and talking to everybody. "Hello, my friend. How you?" he asks, clutching my arm. He's Turkish, I believe, or possibly Pakistani.

"Hey, Pops," I reply.

"The girl you with, your wife?"

He has seen us in there together recently. "No, not married."

"Girlfriend?"

I don't have the heart to tell him. I feel like such an ass. He has always taken a passing interest in my love life. Probably in everyone else's too, and in pretty much anything whatsoever having to do with women.

"Yes, girlfriend," I lie.

"Very good, my friend. Dis girl for you, very good," he points into my chest while looking me straight in the eye, as if to impart fatherly wisdom.

Yeah. This girl for me very good. Maybe so.

Behind the counter stands T, a full-on Middle Eastern "player," all feathered hair and gold-capped teeth, dressed in powder blue Fubu gear and chains. "What's up, T?" I say.

"What's up, man?" he replies, instinctively reaching back for the pint of Jim Beam that he knows completes this particular purchase. I pay cash.

"Thanks, man. Have a good night."

"Alright, man."

My roommate greets me at the iron gate leading up to our flat. “What up, J,” he says, pushing the gate open, leaning out, glancing both ways down the block. Bony white hands with dark hairs stick out of the sleeves of his Carhardt jacket. In the glow of the porch light, his mid-thirties face appears pale, emaciated, with stubble and a thick black porn star-style stash. Who the hell wears a moustache like that? His black hair is cut close and parted neatly. His dark sunken eyes gleam, yet appear ghostly; intriguing, troubled yet friendly.

“Guarding the fort?” I ask.

“You know it.”

Surveying the block is more like it. He’s a longtime resident. Too long. Stuck amidst the evolution of the neighborhood--from the hard drug, low-rent district of the early 90s, when the area was still crawling out of post-hippie desolation, to the uber-hip, pierced-tattooed, shoe-boutique and noodle bowl strip that it has become. He monitors happenings on the block, as he has for the last twelve years, with a mixture of pride, fear, resentment and wonder. He acts at times as though he feels that if he left the stoop, if he stopped looking out even for a moment, the progress on either side would close in suddenly, eradicating his existence, and any memory that he was ever there.

“Got any weed?” I ask, knowing he almost always does.

“Yeah. You want to smoke? I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Cool,” I say and climb the steep gray stairs up to the second floor, knowing that his minute could be hours, or maybe even tomorrow or the day after that. But I don’t really care.

I sit up in my room looking down on the Bob Marley mural across the street. Tourists snap photos in front of it during the day. I guess it's sort of a landmark, superficially embodying the "spirit" of the neighborhood, but it's not old at all. I've seen it redone three or four times in the five years I've lived here. Once, the artist depicted Bob burning a spliff, with a glowing red tip. That one came down in about two days. Despite the bong shops all around and the medicinal marijuana outlet across the street, SFPD still frown upon open public display of drug use, even in the Haight. Go figure. T keeps a photo of the spliff mural by the register.

Books and records clutter my room. The turntable stands as a centerpiece with a chair and couch directly opposite, and a Goodwill glass-top coffee table in between. Despite the clutter, the three bay windows overlooking Haight provide a relaxed sense of open space—those ubiquitous bay windows, seen all over the city, angle out from the house to allow air to pass through the room without blowing directly in. And like most of the Victorians, ours has twelve-foot ceilings and ornate, foot-high baseboards. Record jackets featuring non-musical cover models of the 50s and 60s adorn the walls. That many old records in a small, carpeted space creates a unique smell—dusty cardboard, yellowed paper and thick black vinyl.

Frank Sinatra sings "In the Wee Small Hours" as I relax in my orange Lazy Boy with cigarette burns in the armrests. I scored the chair off the street. There are a lot of street scores in San Fran, some better and some worse than my chair. An entire sub-culture exists around street scores, mostly fueled by crystal meth. I knew a meth-head once who scoured the streets of the city for days on end, picking up electronics, then

wiring the different parts together and selling the new contraptions at a Saturday flea market.

I sip a cocktail of Jim Beam, Cointreau, lemon juice and soda with a splash of bitters. The oil tanker, I call it, because after two or three, you're tanked. Yes, I invented a cocktail, sort of like a bourbon cooler--an excellent warm weather drink for the three or four warm days per year in San Francisco, but not bad for the rest either. I fancy myself a drinker but really I'm just a lonely drunk. Ice clinks in the glass. The smell of the bitters tingles my nose. The booze makes the tunes sound velvety smooth. Sinatra's voice, like a deep, oiled viola, fills the room with a bigness, even at low volume.

There's a beauty to the recordings of those old vocalists, even on the records considered cheesy, with the string arrangements and everything. The old jazz cliché says that players knew they'd hit the big time when they got to make a record with strings. Some might consider it as selling out, but they're probably just jealous. Maybe purists abhor the strings for their bourgeois artificiality, but I think they're beautiful—lush waves of gentle sound blowing straight to the center of my soul.

Lavern Baker sings "I Waited Too Long" and I think about a girl. The lyrics offer a piercing reminder. "I waited too long and now we're apart. / I never told you what I feel in my heart. / Somebody new has come along. / I was a fool for waiting too long." Pretty much sums it up. I think about a day when we walked hand in hand down Haight. She loved to window shop and comment on the silly window displays of seventies-dressed

mannequins in wigs. She wanted to buy me a money clip that day and I wouldn't let her. Giving me little gifts made her happy.

The whole time I was with her, off and on for the past few years, I kept thinking that I wasn't in love—that I wasn't sure what love was but I knew what I felt for her wasn't it. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I'd been a fool all this time. I even lost her once and got her back again. When I lost her that first time, I thought for sure that I'd missed the boat, that my last chance at love had come and gone. Funny how the most recent one always seems like the last chance you'll ever get. I can't even listen to that song anymore.

“J?” A soft knock at my door and it inches open, splashing light from the hall into my boozy den. My roommate sticks in his silhouetted head. “Still want to smoke that bowl?” he asks.

“Yeah. Come on in.”

He sits on the edge of the couch, bony white legs sticking out of cargo shorts and into combat boots. He pulls a long, green glass pipe out of his jacket and hands it to me already packed. This pipe means a lot to him, as evidenced by his repeated warnings about its age and fragility. He says he's had the pipe for over ten years, that he bought it when Pipe Dreams first opened and that years of smoke and resin have created a unique coloring in the glass that is impossible to replicate. The pipe represents a continuum to him, from the time he first arrived, as an eager and willing participant in the flavor of the Haight, until now, when he is more of a holdout, among the last of true “head” experimentalists who constantly look forward while embracing the past.

I fire the bowl and take a deep hit, watching as the burning weed turns and crackles. I hold for a few seconds, then exhale a sizeable billow of smoke that hangs in the air before dissipating through the screen out the bay window. He then does the same.

“Kids today don’t respect their roots,” he says while holding in a lung-full of smoke. I take it as a comment on the old music playing.

“I know, dude. They don’t know shit.”

“My mom used to play this stuff in the house all the time,” he says.

“Yeah, it’s great stuff.”

We’ve had this conversation several times before but I always enjoy it. The old music I play reminds him of his family and his childhood, especially some of the country stuff—Conway Twitty, George Jones, Charlie Rich. He appreciates the music because after living through phases of punk, ska and grunge, it’s a reminder to him that old music still has value, still resonates. You don’t always need to live on the cutting edge to find relevance. It’s okay to sit back and revisit old pleasures. They can offer new insight, universal insight.

He hands me the bowl but I hold up my palm.

“I’m good”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” That one massive hit put my head straight. That’s the thing about weed; once I’m high, I can’t keep getting even more high. Thus I’m usually “one and done.” To smoke more would be a waste.

“Thanks, though,” I say.

I never heard any of this music growing up. It only reminds me of right now, and when I hear it again down the road, it will still remind me of Haight Street. I appreciate his different perspective and as the buzz grips my head, I think how cool it is for two people to hear the same piece of music in such different ways—he rehears it after 20 or 30 years and it brings back a flood of memories, and I hear it for the first time and it creates new ones.

“Alright. I’m going to go watch TV. I’ll catch you later.”

“Late.”

After he leaves a stillness sets in. I’m alone with my buzz. The night has no more future, no more possibilities, if it ever did. I might have previously entertained some vague notion of walking down to Magnolia or The Gold Cane for one or two, but now I realize that ain’t happening. I play another record to try to rein in my rapidly expanding headspace, but as I recline on the couch, the floodgates open and a torrent of thoughts and emotions spills over into my consciousness.

Click. Here it comes again. Am I ever going to grow up? Am I ever going to not be second-guessed, talked down to, treated like someone incapable of making a good decision? Maybe everybody is right. Maybe I am an idiot. What the hell am I doing? Breaking up seemed like a good idea at the time, but it was just another in a long string of fuck-ups. Something grips and gnaws at me about it. How could I have gone so wrong, have miscalculated so severely, have let myself make another mistake, one so completely obvious to everyone but me?

It's an old familiar feeling to be sure, that sinking down in the pit of my stomach. Lost, completely. Hopeless. Fuck everything. Fuck it all. Don't know which way to turn, where to go or what to do. What's it all for? What the hell's the point of ever doing anything if it's always going to turn out shit, like this. You think you're in control, but you're not. You're never really in complete control of what you're doing. Never.

At two the bars close. Down the block drunken revelers pile out of Martin Mack's and Kan Zaman. They linger on the corners blabbing loudly. Shouts and laughter bounce between the buildings and shoot straight down the corridor and up into bedroom windows. Cabs zoom by carrying sloshed dot-commers back to Nob Hill and the Marina, or out towards the ocean and the outer neighborhoods. Soon the streets are quiet again—just the homeless, still like statues and a few returning residents quickly turning keys, clanging gates and ascending stairs. The moon shines brightly on the asphalt glistening from the damp air.

We first met when she was a freshman, just up from Southern California like so many college-age women in the city. San Francisco must have seemed like one big crazy playground to her at the time, the same way it did to me when I first arrived. So many young people occupying a space at once, involved in wholly experimental art outlets, displaying inventive, hybrid street fashions. The next generation always seems to soak up their surroundings in stride. The City was a grand old beauty, full of ritzy, opulent hotels,

bars decked with ornamental fixtures and bow-tied bartenders, dripping with rich literary and artistic history. But she and her friends had no problems strolling right in with mesh hats and Adidas sneakers, plopping down in the overstuffed leather couches and instantly becoming part of it all.

Soon after we met, we got drunk in the middle of the day, at The Pendulum, an old-school gay bar in the Castro, and ended up in her backyard lying out in the sun. She slipped ice cubes down my pants just as I was about to pass out. Back in the cool of the house, she saw that my skin had burned bright red like a lobster. She laughed and pressed white spots into my stomach with her finger. “I guess you were right,” she said. “You did burn.”

“Yeah, thanks a lot,” I teased. Later that night when I finally made it home after being gone for nearly two days, my roommate greeted me at the top of the stairs. “Damn, you look like you had a good time,” he said. He was right. Meeting her was just about the best thing to happen to me since moving to San Francisco. She let me see the city through fresh eyes as she discovered her own bunch of favorite spots and I got to share with her a few of mine. The Cliff House. Lucky 13. Hot Pot City Korean BBQ out in the Richmond. Okay, that last spot didn’t take too well. She froze up when the server set ten or so small dishes on the table, filled with different types of pickled condiments and spicy salads, some slightly less fishy than others. She was more of a hamburgers and spaghetti girl. Little kid’s cuisine, I jokingly called it.

We shared many chilly days and long nights together. She came around when I needed her the most, when I felt like my whole west-coast endeavor might have been a foolish failure. For a moment, while we were together, all the scattered pieces of my life

came together and mingled confidently, like the yuppie shoppers with the crusty punks on Haight Street. But eventually I began to think that she wasn't the right one for me, that somehow I'd be better off without her. Why? I don't know. I cannot say. These are the random and illogical thoughts that, if they blow around in your head long enough, you start to believe are true.

It's hard to let go of anything. Neighborhoods, cities, friends, women. One moment you're somewhere, feet firm, familiar with all that surrounds you. You contribute meaningfully to the totality of your time and place. The people around you are friends, even the ones you don't know. You are a vital part of everything, and everything is a part of you. But one day it changes, subtly at first. So subtly that for a while you can ignore it. Faces drop out of your daily experience, and others take their place. Until the day arrives when you feel like a moment has passed you by, that what you were a part of is gone and what surrounds you is something that you only marginally recognize. It's similar, but weird. Familiar yet foreign.

Ghosts haunt the Haight. The ghosts of the hippies, mostly. The Oracle office. The Diggers headquarters. The Dead house with Pig Pen on the stoop and a beardless Jerry in Uncle Sam hat on the porch. The Charlatans dressed in authentic 1880s western gear, posing between ornate banisters and columns. Moby Grape outside an antique shop with drummer Don Stevenson flipping America the bird. Nothing much visually would indicate that it's even the same place, save for the old Victorians themselves. But sometimes, up in the park, an odd, trippy feeling rocks the misty tree tops, like an old

soul blowing by--like it's all still there. Like it never left. The hippies could not have picked a more baroque and myth-inducing neighborhood in which to stage their attempted world culture overthrow.

I never wanted to overthrow anything, but I do have in common with the hippies, the desire to take a lot of drugs and make a lot of noise. But more prominent is my desire to carve out a little turf in the city. I want it all: the varied music, the gritty style, the urban art, and the left coast edge that those red bricks of Market Street offer. And for a minute, I have it, even if I don't know what it is that I have. It is all too close, all too familiar. The Irish DJs in track suits in the Lower Haight. The Mexican cholos in bandanas in the Mission. The anarchist bike messengers in tattoo sleeves along the wall on New Montgomery. The leather bears at Daddy's on Castro. They're all a part of my world as I am of theirs. But only for a moment. As the jeweled hills of the city sprawl out towards the bay and the lives of its inhabitants criss-cross and intersect at random intervals, I sit in my second story castle of a flat, guarded by an iron gate and a gatekeeper, as clouds dance through tall pines, high up in the Haight.

I eventually pass out on the couch, record still spinning, only to awake to beeping garbage trucks that prod me up and into the bed. In the morning, street sweepers will come by, shops will open and the sidewalks will slowly fill with hipsters and homeless, each striking a pose and delivering a line. Sun will touch the street mid-day, but the air will never warm. Then like clockwork, around five, the white blanket will slowly roll through, and I'll spend a few hours enjoying the beauty of the street—haunting, moody.

At night, the pattern repeats itself: cocktails, old records, lonesome moons and empty streets, with that cold, wet fog blowing silently through.

A Home Without

On the way back from the coffee shop, we came upon a freshly killed rat in the driveway. I pulled Mickey's leash before he had a chance to stick his face too close. The rat looked like it had gotten pinned against the fence, possibly trying to escape one of the SUVs that frequented the lot. It was crushed into the dirt pretty hard, its head obliterated to the point that its precise nature was not immediately apparent, just a gray brown lump until one got directly above it.

Since summer began, I had noticed a proliferation of not just rats but all sorts of creatures: lizards, frogs, spiders, roaches, several varieties of sizeable, flying, buzzing things. One day I even found a turtle in the driveway. How the hell did a turtle get there? I walked up to inspect it out of sheer disbelief, just to make sure it was in fact a turtle. It was alive, head straining out of its shell, looking up at me. Great, I thought. What the hell was I supposed to do with it? Should I give it some lettuce? Don't turtles eat lettuce? When I came back later in the day it was gone. Life was everywhere in New Orleans. So was death.

Adjacent to the front of my apartment, on the opposite side of a dilapidated eight-foot, wooden fence was a vacant lot. The lot was probably close to half an acre in size, although not having much experience gauging acreage, I could've been off a quarter either way. The front of the lot opened to Magazine Street and the back bordered that wooden fence.

The overgrown lot housed much urban wildlife, the most evolved form of which was the homeless. Hidden from view on Magazine Street by the thick brush, the back corner of the lot provided a suitable campsite for a group of homeless people, ranging in

number from three up to about ten or so on any given night, best as I could tell. A few makeshift tents provided shelter. The camp was so well hidden from view that I didn't notice when it was first established. Late in the day when the oppressive heat would finally break, I began to hear voices, conversations outside my door, and activity would resume around the neighborhood. It seemed their behavior wasn't so different from that of any group of campers. They lay dormant during the heat of the day. Then when the day cooled off, they sat out, talking, laughing, drinking beer. I even heard music from a radio and smelled pot drifting over the fence. They seemed to be having such a good time that, on several occasions, I felt like joining them.

But they weren't on a camping trip. They were homeless, living in a vacant lot adjacent to my house. And if one thing, more than any other, drove home that distinction, it was the particular nauseating stink that permeated the area and hung thick and heavy in the damp New Orleans evenings. Once I realized the source of the smell, I could not escape it. At times I would be about the business of the day, leaving or returning home, having momentarily forgotten the camp, when the choking stench would sneak up on me, suddenly and powerfully, as if each individual particle of humidity was fused with an atom of odor. Any breath, deep or shallow, did not fail to take in equal amounts of air and putrid stench. At times I gagged, held my breath and hurried away. As weeks passed the cloud grew larger until it was too large to hurry through.

Walking Mickey the next morning, I encountered a camper on the street. He had a grizzled pirate-like appearance: stringy gray hair, squinty eyes, gaunt face, scrawny and tanned frame, wearing high-top sneakers and what appeared to be a suede jacket,

unzipped with the sleeves rolled up, bare chest underneath. A suede jacket in the middle of summer? Jesus. He liked the dog, though.

“That’s a good looking pit. What bloodline is he?”

People had been asking me about the bloodline of my dog since the day I got him. I had no idea what bloodline he was. I didn’t get him from a breeder. I adopted him in the park.

“Um, I think he’s a Boudreaux,” I said.

Someone early on told me that Mickey looked like a Boudreaux. From then on I went with it.

“Bring him over here. Let me take a look at ‘em,” he demanded. “I used to breed pit bulls. Came up with ‘em. Been around ‘em all my life.”

Great, I thought. A homeless pit bull expert.

“Yeah, he look like part a Boudreaux, and part a red nose.”

Thanks, buddy. That’s pretty much what everybody told me.

“You shouldn’t a fixed him though,” he said. “Should a bred him.”

I was confused. Wasn’t “pit bull breeder” a job? Wouldn’t that entail a source of income? A sense of responsibility? A home? Things this guy clearly did not have?

“Yeah, he’s just a pet, man. Have a good one.”

I could not bring myself to be rude to my neighbors, no matter how much their presence and the stench that accompanied it infuriated me.

On the way back, I slowed down to try and catch a glimpse in between the slats of the fence. I was curious what their campsite looked like. Was it orderly or slovenly? Was there a common area? A table and chairs perhaps? What did they sleep on? Knowing the

proliferation of rats living in that thick brush, I was horrified by the thought that they slept on the ground. When I got close enough and moved slowly enough, I could see movement through the fence. A thought struck: they were simply going about the business of living their lives, just on the other side of that fence, so close. Not entirely different, I supposed, than the unknown lives of other neighbors, but certainly not the same as catching a glimpse of neighbors through their windows. More forbidden. Suddenly crept out, I quickly made my way indoors.

The homeless of the camp seemed much less aware than I was of the distinction between their society and mine. To them, we were neighbors, just as I was neighbor of the person who lived behind the door next to mine, despite the fact that the homeless lived behind no door. Was this an artificial distinction on my part?

Weeks crept by.

“Where y’at, Mike?” Mr. Frank called to my dog as I rounded the corner. “Ay, there’s Mike. What’d ya say, Mike?” Mr. Frank continued. My dog’s name was Mickey, which I’m sure I told Mr. Frank at some point, but he always called him Mike and I always let him. I enjoyed the sound of it, the way he said it, dripping with that New Orleans accent. Apparently Mickey liked the way he said it too because he’d get so excited, he’d start shaking his whole backside back and forth and pulling on the leash until we got up to Mr. Frank.

“Hey, there’s Mike,” Mr. Frank repeated, petting Mickey hard under the chin. “What’d ya say, Mike? Going to see your buddies in the park?”

“Naw,” I said, participating that weird conversation in which people ask questions to a dog and then the dog’s owner answers. “Just around the block. Too hot for the park.”

Like I had to tell Mr. Frank it was hot. Around 60 years of age, he’d already been up and working outside in front of his house long enough to build a nice lather by 9 am. His red polo was soaked through, and his gray hair matted to his brow and to his wire-rimmed glasses. The temperature was already over 90.

Mr. Frank lived on the corner of Magazine and Orange Streets in an old but immaculately kept New Orleans duplex. His front porch was a picture of uncluttered serenity. His small front yard and side walkway presented a neat, manicured appearance with thick piles of fresh mulch surrounding hearty tropical plants. The mulch never scattered, though. He always kept it neatly swept inside the borders of the triangular patches in the cement. On the side, the hose was always wrapped up neatly on its holder, never unfurled while not in use and never piled up on top of the holder, the way it might have been if one had lost patience while winding a heavy garden hose, especially after using it to do yard work in the hot sun.

“They still over there, eh?” Mr. Frank half stated, half asked, in reference to the camp. He hated it even more than I did.

“Yeah, they’re still in there,” I replied.

“Motherfuckers,” he said. “Damn cops won’t do nothin’. I talked to one of the sergeants over there at the precinct, and they told me they can’t do nothing unless the owner of the property wants them out. I said ‘Well who in the hell owns it?’ He says he don’t know. Meanwhile they over there shittin’, pissin’ all over the fuckin’ place. Place stinks like shit. Goddamn bathin’ in the alley behind my house.”

“I know. I know,” I interjected, just briefly though so as not to interrupt the jarring yet eloquent flow of his rant.

He continued. “I told him, ‘I’m gonna borrow that back hoe from the construction site across the street and bulldoze the goddamn thing myself.’”

I did not doubt him for one second. Frank was a hold out: a homeowner who’d been in the neighborhood long enough to see it make some strides in the years before the storm, only to see it slip back towards a heroin and prostitute-ridden, borderline area. His block in particular, his house actually, was situated right in between the more dilapidated, homeless and druggie-filled blocks on the river side of Magazine and the continually restored, high-price condos and houses along Coliseum Square. He believed in his neighborhood though, and was going to fight to try and make it fit his vision. I admired him for that. Even if I didn’t always agree with his wipe-em-all-out views.

“Next time they come cut the grass, I’m gonna ask the guy tell me who owns the lot,” Frank continued, “so we can get these motherfuckers outta here.” His voice resonated with restrained passion and dead earnest. Certain emblems and markings led one to deduce that he was not the sort of old guy to be taken lightly. The back of his LTD displayed a USMC sticker and license frame. The faded panther tattoo on his forearm somehow indicated overseas exploits, although I suppose he could have gotten it while drunk on Bourbon Street. Either way it was old. From time to time, on his front porch hung various flags: BPOE, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, a New Orleans Firemen’s flag signifying the group’s solidarity with the heroes of 911, and a USMC flag with the bulldog logo. During the Irish Channel Parade around St. Patrick’s Day, a green, Irish Channel Association flag hung, and his house served as a gathering

point, situated as it was near the start of the parade route. Clearly, Mr. Frank was a man of great civic and national pride and I was glad to have him on my side.

“All right, well we’re going to get going,” I said, needing to end the conversation at some point, as we both stood baking under the sun. “Don’t work too hard out in this heat.”

“Naw, I’m just going to finish this, then I’m outta mulch,” he said, as I made my way down the block. “We’ll run them motherfuckers outta here.”

I was conflicted over the homeless. I understood that homelessness was a social condition, a product of our society and therefore a part of our communities. They couldn’t simply be eliminated, or moved, or even ignored for that matter. I had had enough contact with different groups in different cities, New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, to understand that there was a certain social system, a code, a lifestyle even, which operated in homeless communities and held them together to a degree. Maybe the homeless didn’t all arrive at that particular lifestyle by choice, although I believe some did. Regardless of how they became homeless, once in that condition, they adhered to an old and established system that governed every aspect of social life, including ethical and moral behavior. The homeless governed themselves. They lived by a set of rules which most of us could not see for lack of want.

In the alley around the corner, I pulled Mickey to keep him from stopping at the rat. The body was almost indistinguishable by that point. One wouldn’t notice it if he didn’t already know it was there. But its tail was still distinct as something that was once

of an animal. An S-curved rat's tail on the side of the alley: if one looked at it and thought about it for even a moment, there was nothing else it could've possibly been.

Before I could make it back to my door, I was intercepted by a large homeless woman from the camp. She was probably heading for the water tap attached to the house adjacent to the alley. I'd seen her before. She loved the dog.

"Oh, there's the baby," she said. "There's the pretty baby. You're a pretty baby aren't you? Yes, you are."

Jesus Christ. Why?

She stood about six feet and wore a blue muumuu, her great flabby arms protruding from the sides, tanned from long days out of doors. The dress left the lower portions of her legs exposed. Her calves and ankles were swollen and purplish, most likely from some nutritional deficiency and too much walking. Her yellowish-gray hair was cropped close and when she spoke, no teeth whatsoever could be discerned.

"You are a pretty baby, aren't you," she repeated.

This wasn't what I had in mind when I adopted Mickey the previous summer. He was a great companion, but I also thought he might help me meet some single women in the park, especially when he was a ridiculously cute little pit bull puppy, before he grew into a sweet, but rather intimidating-looking pit bull adult. Instead, he's helped me meet the homeless.

"All right," I said, gently pulling Mickey away. "You have a good day."

The modern homeless person is a descendant of the old, romanticized American hobo: the free-spirited wanderer who embraced the wide open spaces of a new country, hopped trains from town to town and lived off the fat of the land. The figure was

sketched out in American literature going back at least to the early nineteenth century, and was fully formed by the time of Huck Finn. The hobo was also mythologized in popular song by such seminal artists as Jimmie Rodgers, “the yodeling brakeman,” the father of country music, who sang of the exploits of “Jimmie the Kid.” Later, country music’s prodigal son, Hank Williams, composed and performed a series of songs under the name “Luke the Drifter.” In fact, singers such as Johnny Cash, Roger Miller and Merle Haggard all sang about America’s disenfranchised population in songs such as “King of the Road” and “Branded Man.” They did more than sing. They *identified* with the homeless ethos. The ability to relate to the humble pride and dignity of the great forgotten was a mark of *honor* for these singers, even as they grew further away from those earthly roots. This I respected. . . from a distance.

But why did they have to live in *my* neighborhood?

That night the tattoo shop on Magazine gave a free concert in the street. I heard the noise from inside my apartment and wandered out to see what was happening. A large group crowded into a small space next to the shop. I couldn’t see through to what they were looking at but could tell that it was a band from the lights and from the glimpses of swinging hair that flashed sporadically over the crowd. And from the noise too. A wall of overdriven guitar, heavy drums and bass, and screaming vocals pulverized the entire block, rattling walls and shaking windows. I found out later that the group was called Suplecs, a local band who pedaled a brand of alternative metal sometimes known as sludge rock, stoner rock or just plain noise.

The crowd spilled out into the street. Skateboarders whizzed around, launching jumps and dodging pedestrians. Cars continued to pass slowly as groups of tattooed twenty-somethings, holding red party cups full of beer, mingled in the street. In the parking lot directly across the street, pickup trucks with their tailgates down provided additional viewing areas for the spillover crowd. Members of the homeless camp had made their way over too and were sprawled out on the cement. I passed through the lot, stepping around the dark masses on the ground. I noticed the pirate guy reclined back on one arm, one leg sticking out, one bent in, and hand clutching a 32-ounce can of Steel Reserve. He nodded and swung his head from side to side, blissfully enjoying the free concert, which at that moment seemed to me to be given solely for his benefit. He noticed me as I stepped over his outstretched leg, flashed me a crooked grin and hoisted his beer in fine, pirate “cheers” form.

The next day, Mr. Frank was less than thrilled with the previous night’s events.

“These motherfuckers out here makin’ that noise ‘til all hours of the night. They out there in the streets, holdin’ up traffic, ridin’ them goddamn skateboards all over the fuckin’ place. Somebody’s gonna get killed.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to find some common ground, “they were out there a bit late.” The concert had gone on until around ten o’clock, which, I did think, was odd considering the level of noise put out by the metal band.

“I swear to god I’m gonna’ shut that motherfuckin’ tattoo shop down. Motherfuckers bringing all this shit around the neighborhood we just don’t need.”

“It was a bit too much,” I said, not fully prepared to wholeheartedly condemn the entire tattoo shop and everybody associated with that scene. After all, I was still

somewhat young myself, and while the adult in me desired a nice clean, quiet neighborhood, the kid in me still liked tattoos, skateboards and free metal concerts.

Mr. Frank continued. “And they got them homeless from over there all hanging out, sittin’ around drinkin’ beer, carryin’ on and everything else.”

“Yeah, it was quite a scene.”

“Tell you what. We’re gonna get them homeless motherfuckers outta there, then we’re gonna go after that damn tattoo shop.”

“All right, Mr. Frank. Take care.”

Late in the summer, while in Atlanta, I had the opportunity to visit an old friend, Dan Hall, drummer for longtime garage-rock stalwarts, and ruffled shirt enthusiasts, The Woggles. I knew Dan from our shared time in the small-town music scene of Tuscaloosa, Alabama in the early 1990s. Dan played in bands. I played in bands. We played the same places and knew many of the same people. He went on to join The Woggles some time around 1994 and had been with them since.

However, Dan was not originally from Tuscaloosa. He was from Greensboro, Alabama, about fifty miles south of Tuscaloosa, located in Hale County, one of the poorest counties in the state and in fact in the country. Dan’s family ran a catfish farm, and he joined the family business. Speaking with him that night, I was surprised to learn that Dan had never relocated to Georgia for the band, and that he still lived in Greensboro, still ran the farm, and commuted to Atlanta for rehearsals, recordings and shows.

“Why?” I asked.

“Well, when I first joined The Woggles, they lived in Athens,” he explained in his thick southern drawl. “I thought, ‘Hooray, I’m movin’ to Athens.’ But then when I got to Athens, they were like ‘We’re movin’ to Atlanta,’ and I thought ‘Well, hell. I don’t want to live in Atlanta and pay like a thousand bucks a month rent, when I was payin’ two hundred in Tuscaloosa before that.’”

Made sense. I then asked him how he liked living in Greensboro.

“Did you know,” he replied, “that about ten percent of the population of Hale County does not have indoor plumbing?”

“Really? That’s hard to believe.”

“Not only that,” he continued, “but most of them don’t want it.”

“How come?”

“Don’t believe in it. Old customs.”

Dan did not count himself among the ten percent, but there was no derision or scorn in his explanation. Those were his people, his neighbors, and he was simply explaining to me how they lived. He was of Hale County, just as much so as those without plumbing, or even those without homes.

Dan excused himself to go put on his red velvet ruffles, and as I waited in the crowd for the show to start, the d.j. cued up “Doe Ray Me” by Ernie K. Doe. A mysterious feeling overcame me. The song instantly transported my mind to New Orleans and I felt a swelling burst of love and pride for the city, perhaps brought on from being too far away, perhaps from being too close. The soul of New Orleans was etched

deep into the grooves of that old 45, and as it spun, New Orleans became as present and as alive in that Atlanta barroom as it would be if one stood in front of the St. Louis Cathedral on Mardi Gras Day.

I looked around at the crowd. Atlanta was a nice enough city: quality visual and performing art scenes were happening—top notch music, theater and dance. Beautiful old neighborhoods were carved out of the woods, creating vibrant little pocket communities hidden from the high-rises of Peachtree Street. Plenty of youthful energy abounded. But still it lacked. What song would instantly send Atlantans into a full-sensory flash of their hometown? What piece of art, music or architecture would capture the essence of Atlanta? What was the essence of Atlanta?

Sure, New Orleans was broken in more ways than one. City councilman Oliver Thomas became the latest in a seemingly endless string of corrupt politicians, when he got busted for accepting kickbacks for French Quarter parking contracts. He reportedly took several payments, most of which were as small as five grand. Five grand? He threw away an entire twenty-plus year career as a respected community leader for a measly twenty grand total. Hell, even the school board officials took more than that.

A string of recent articles revealed that New Orleans' storm-damaged sewer system, already old and leaky before the storm, was in serious danger of collapsing and backing up sewage in residential areas and contaminating the water supply. Great. It seemed as if New Orleans teetered continually on the edge of complete collapse—a ceasing to exist as an entity. But then again, it seemed as if the whole country might collapse. If a mine could collapse in Utah, burying people so deep that they can never be found, and if a bridge could collapse in Minnesota, sending people hurtling to their deaths

into the Mississippi River, the same river that flowed less than a mile from my door, then maybe New Orleans wasn't any worse off than any other place.

Driving into my neighborhood on my return trip, I slowed to allow a homeless man to make his way across the street. He moved slowly, gangly arms slung low, eyes fixed straight ahead: somewhere definite to go and plenty of time to get there. The homeless residents of a city are no less a part of the city than any homeowner; they are a part of our communities and to deny them is to deny a part of us. In the driveway, a plump rat, freshly dead, slumped on the hot cement.

Vita

Jeremy Tuman was born in New Orleans and grew up in New Orleans, Los Angeles, Morgantown, West Virginia, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He graduated from Central High School of Tuscaloosa in 1989 and remained in Tuscaloosa to attend the University of Alabama, from which he graduated in 1994 with B.A. in English and American Studies. From 1995 to 2005, he lived in New York City and in San Francisco where he pursued a career as a performing musician. In 2005 he returned to his hometown of New Orleans to pursue a degree in Creative Writing at the University of New Orleans. This collection represents his ten years spent playing music as well as his three years in UNO's Creative Writing Workshop.