



THE PESSIMAL REFRAIN

A NaNoWriMo Novel
By Darrin Snider

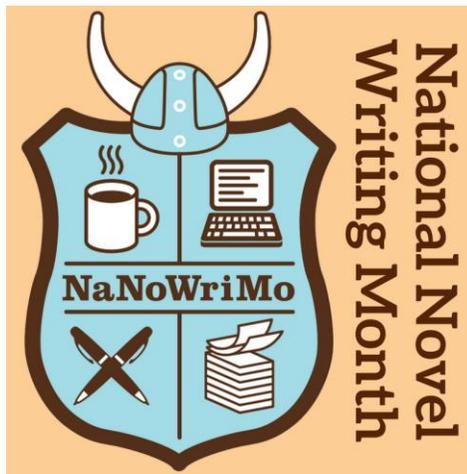


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Revision History

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Prologue

It is the twenty-first morning of September and somewhere, not far from the lights and glitter of the big city, the tiny tourist trap of Weaver Bay is trying not to wake up. A pristine brown beach stretches from the marina up the coast as far as the eye can see in both directions -- which is only about 300 yards before it turns into a giant concrete partition marking the back wall of the Quad Cove Fairgrounds. On the horizon, the sun is fiery red, which any local resident will tell you means a storm is coming. I slowly open my eyes and spit the sand and seaweed out of my teeth. There's a throbbing in my head and my tinnitus is screaming on overload this morning. I fumble around in the sand and find the brown bag my bottle had been in the night before. There's no sign of the bottle. I look around and see that Bud Cockrell, now going by the name JR, has emptied it and is using it as a makeshift slide. That was a perfectly good waste of \$1.79 worth of Night Train. At least this explains the throbbing and the tinnitus, however: who the hell plays bottleneck bass?!

Bud and his jamming chum, Mark Andes, are the last two standing in the very popular "bass circle" that plays all-night, every night on this particular slab of beach – a tasteful foil to the more-conventional drum circle that regularly sets up just a few dozen yards away. The tradition was originally started by a few of the locals back in the 90s as a way to keep hippies from taking up residence on the beach and opening up veggie burrito stands whenever Phish wasn't touring. It had been mostly successful until a passing Stefan Lassard tweeted about it one day and subsequently filled the beaches with "fire dancers." Believe me, fire dances on your beach are worse than raccoons in your attic, and not as pleasant smelling. This was when the city council, in emergency session, passed Weaver Bay's most famous and most beloved law:

Title XIII, Section 159.01 Dave Matthews Band Music Prohibited

(A) It shall be unlawful for any person to perform, play, sing, hum, or cast from the mouth any portion of or complete song, phrase, melody, yodel, or guttural noise derived

from any song written by -- or performed in the style of -- Dave Matthews, the Dave Matthews Band, Dave Matthews and Tim Reynolds, Dave Matthews & Friends, Dave Matthews & Loose Acquaintances, or Tribe of Heaven within the corporate limits of the city.

(B) Any person convicted shall be fined and pay the costs of prosecution.

I struggle to my feet and pick up my trash, signaling to Mark that he can keep the bottle. Both bassists smile and nod to me as I make my way up the beach back towards the boardwalk, which is only barely coming to life at sunrise.

"Hey, Monty," a lifeguard calls down from atop his white-painted perch, "Some guy was lookin' for ya earlier. Says he was a reporter. I saw you were passed out, so told him I haven't seen you in years."

"Klosterman?" I ask hopefully.

"Nah, his facial hair wasn't nearly that lush. I forget what he said his name was. Said he was writing a book though. I told him he wasn't going to get you to talk about it, but he said he'd come a long way. You'll probably want to lay low for a while."

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath. "Okay, thanks, Brad," I say as I swing a leg over the concrete barrier that separates the parking lot from the beach. I scan the row of buildings across the street for strangers. Fortunately, music journalists, especially ones writing books, stick out like sore thumbs in Weaver Bay, and all children are trained from a very young age to spot and avoid them, even if offered candy.

It's a three-minute walk through Hong Circle, across Geppart Memorial Parkway, to the "Secret Starbucks" -- the best-kept secret and go-to coffee joint for all local residents. Unlike the other seventeen Starbucks located on what is affectionately called the "Moist Mile" of Weaver Bay's Boardwalk, the owners of THIS franchise pay good money to stay off the tourist maps and Starbucks' corporate radar. As such, the "Secret Starbucks" is a no-frills/no-frap coffee establishment that serves up drinks the way patrons REALLY want them -- no foam, no whip, no lactose-free frappaloser stuff here; just double-caffinated Folgers classic roast in three sizes: small, medium, and large. The last frewak

who tried to order a "Venti" anything here was pantsed, locked in a room, and forced to listen to Anthony Kiedis sing about dancing like Iggy Pop with another go in the parking lot on a loop for six hours straight.

Mike McDonald is standing in front of me in line as I wait to place my order. Spotting me, he turns around and raises a finger, "Hey, Burly, there's a reporter lookin' for you."

"Yeah, I heard. Did you get a name?"

Mike furrows his brow for a moment. "Cam somethin'-or-other. Says he was writing a book? Asked me a lot of questions about you: What I knew about it, was I ever involved with any of it, was anyone else here involved with it? I told him I barely knew you, had only seen you around the Mud Cove arcade a couple of times and didn't even think you lived here anymore."

"Nice," I smiled. Nobody of any importance had been to Mud Cove since the 90s, but knowing its significance, this reporter might just fall for that bluff and spend the next couple of days combing those muddy slums looking for me. "You think he bought it?"

"What a fool believes—" Mike shrugs. "Better lay low though. Don't worry, if anyone else like that asks, I don't know you, but you're still my brother."

I thank him, take my coffee, and head back out to the street. I make my way a few short blocks to Handsy McShane's establishment. Handsy, an immigrant from Dunoon, runs a mostly reputable Scottish massage parlor -- the perfect place to lay low for an extended period of time, as Handsy is the keeper of many of the town's biggest secrets, mostly owing to the fact that even if he wanted to spill his guts and tell all, nobody would understand a word he said.

I enter from the street into a darkened lobby that smells of sheep urine, peat, and stale lager. A bagpipe quartet plays soft, relaxing music over concealed speakers. A kilted man hidden behind a large, flowing red beard steps through a beaded curtain and regards me with squinty eyes that seem two sizes too small for his face. Finally, he screams at me in a shrill, almost effeminate voice. "Achboorlay! Hayedan! Ye look dawnrait paly wally! Comin tae get da rook ta yer napper?" I'm not sure if his tone is angry, frustrated, or aroused. Possibly all three.

"Uh, fine ... thanks," is about all I can muster, then pointing at the large list of services written on the board behind the counter, "Can I get a number six?" I have no idea what the difference between any of the numbers is. In fact, I've never even had a Scottish massage in the whole time Handsy's been open. I only know Handsy himself from a few chance encounters at the local gluten shop. For the most part, we've always run around in different circles -- I tend to hang out mostly with my fellow rockers on the boardwalk, while Handsy is usually found tottering around Manogi I'a Cove, which has a much more Polynesian bent to its entertainment options. Frankly, I only chose the number six because it was a moderately-priced \$59.99, and the description (in Gaelic) was lengthy, which suggests I can hide out for a few hours in what I hope would be blissful serenity.

"Ich nae da barnetude wif den kinna linkeh blinkeh skoochin ye ar ye?" He asks, this time with a concerned tone.

"What?"

"Da hakket journo, laddie! E was all skoosie boosie inking about da plaz."

"Oh, the reporter!" I said, assuming I understood about half of what he was saying. "Yeah, I'm trying to avoid him until he leaves town. That's ... well ... part of why I'm here."

"Aye, soh, dinna ye wook ta bootin wif de bahpoi an mat aress ta baplunh wif ye?"

"Okay ... that would be ... fine?" I say slowly, completely lost again.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm lying completely naked on a table, arse to heaven, listening to a bagpipe orchestra, and sipping Tennents through a straw while Handsy slowly, rolls a large, heavy pine log over my back.

I know what you're thinking, but it's surprisingly relaxing.

"Mr. Montanna," an authoritative voice comes from the doorway behind me, interrupting my zen-like trance. I can't turn to see who it is, but there's little doubt in my mind it's that cursed reporter. Frankly, I'm just surprised anyone but my proctologist could recognize me from his particular angle of view. Hell, people don't usually recognize me when they're staring me in the face these days. "I'm Cam Clark, I write for Squelch magazine?" he continues, punctuating the sentence as if I am supposed to

recognize the name and be impressed. "I'm writing a book," he says somewhat nervously, "About Maanthaung? About the scene?"

I've heard this elevator pitch many times over the past decade, so I complete the sentence for him, ".. and you want me to finally tell the story of what happened."

"It's time people knew the truth."

I take a long sip of Tennents, "It's not that simple, son. Some truths can bring down empires."

Cam clears his throat, apparently summoning courage. Finally, he says, "I've already talked to Jordi, Dexter, and Bryan M. They've all agreed to do it. It won't be difficult at all. We can all meet up at the lodge for a long weekend. You guys tell me all the stories while I record them, and then I'll go back and turn it into a book, as sort of your ghostwriter. You'll all get author credits and twenty percent each off the profits--"

"Not interested," I cut him off. He sounded too excited for his own good.

"There's a ton of money to be made here," Cam protests.

"Got plenty of that," I tell the little upstart.

"The ladies will love it."

"Trying to buy me off with sex? Who do you think you're dealing with, Marie Osmond?"

Slowly, with purpose, Cam finally lays his ace. Quietly, he says, "I have a source in Kingston, Jamaica."

Shit. This kid has done his research. My hands started to tremble. "Go on," I finally say.

"I can get the exotic stuff. In quantities."

"Absolutely not! I've been clean for ten years now."

"Have you really? My sources say otherwise."

Shit. This is not a conversation you want to have while an insane Scotsman is rolling a pine log over your bare ass. I eye Handsy to see if he's paying attention. He says nothing but continues to work my upper thighs with a satisfying "crunching" sound. For a minute there, I almost forget where I am, remembering those days of serene addiction before I hit rock bottom.

Before my cholesterol hit 260.

"How exotic are we talking?" I finally ask, my voice trembling.

"Whatever you want. He can get it here in 48 hours."

"The goat?"

"Mmmmmm," Cam offers, nodding with pride, "the goat ... the pork, the shrimp, lobster, ackee ... any of it."

Shit, for the third time. The kid was right though. Despite months of therapy and being clean for almost a decade, in a moment of weakness, I did hit a food truck in the city two years ago, which led to a weekend lying on the cold tile of a cheap hotel room shower, strung out on Jamaican patties, listening to Jimmy Cliff albums until I wept like a jilted 16-year-old girl whose daddy bought her a pony instead of the acoustic guitar she'd asked for. I had until now assumed nobody saw any of what had transpired. What can I say? The Rastas had me by the balls.

"One condition," I say at last.

"Name it."

"You can ghostwrite those other three hacks, but I'm telling my story my way."

(Lime Jell-O Seafood) Salad Days

My name is Burlington Montana – “Burly” to my friends from my heyday as an international celebrity musician, and “Monty” to the local residents who have long since grown numb from having former celebrities in their midst every day. Among other things, I am -- according to my Wikipedia page - - famously known as the lead singer and keyboard player of the wildly successful fakabilly swing band, Maanthaung, the inventor of the fakabilly swing movement, and the man – some would say “evil genius” -- who cracked "the code" and eventually took down the music industry. Of course, not everybody knows about that last bit, until now.

Of course, I know most of you are out there thinking, "I've never heard of you, or fakabilly swing, and the last time I checked, the music industry was a very healthy 14-billion-dollar-per-year industry that made dozens of people very rich by having both its customers and its artists by the balls." This is, of course, your perception, based on everything you're seeing, hearing, and reading about from people like our erstwhile POV character, Cam Clark (who is at this moment sitting across the table from me, scowling and chewing on his fourth fried plantain as I type this). Cam, himself, is but one innocent, yet significant, aspect of your elaborate misconception of the broader world around you -- a music journalist. Put simply, Cam's job is to program the general public's tastes through writing, consisting mostly of an unqualified opinion and click-bait pictures of Taylor Swift to imply music has an influence on everything from fashion to politics to social interaction. For the people who think they already know about music, he uses tactics, like irrelevant, out-of-context, retrospective looks at classic albums, or the dreaded "Top 50 of All Time" lists in order to retcon musical history and correct people's misconceptions about who really sold more albums, the Beatles or Eminem.

My point is, your reality is subjective, fluid, and entirely based on your perception, which is based on what you see, hear, and read, hence the power idiots like him wield. Actual reality -- which is much weirder than you would think -- gives less a shit about your perception than it gives about the real and tangible threat of an Ace of Base reunion and 30'th Anniversary Remastered Platinum Edition of "Happy Nation."

So, how did I come by the remarkable insights that allowed me to see through the veils to the heart of the machine, and then subsequently use the inner workings of those inter-woven gears and levers to affect my own successes? More importantly, what went wrong that eventually left me back

where I started, in my hometown, forgotten and alone, except to certain insidious agents the system, such as Mr. Clark, that the system occasionally sends around to ensure that I remain here in my own private Elba? Can anyone obtain this dark knowledge on their own? Would the resulting powers allow them to replicate my results?

The answer is: not bloody likely. Allow me to explain the unlikely chain of events that became my life.

My story begins and mostly ends, with the Quad-Coves of Weaver Bay, a small tourist trap of a town originally settled in the 17th century by a shipwrecked crew of Funfutian sea merchants and their cargo of forty-five escaped “mast straighteners,” who fled a boatwright’s shop in a small New England town seeking to evade from conviction, and eventual execution, as witches. After accidentally clearing the land of the indigenous population, this unlikely culmination of cultures formed the bedrock of a new Euro-Polynesian colony, which is now populated mostly by the descendants of the original indigenous population -- who, it turns out, were not actually cleared out and returned the following Spring to massacre and eat the starving shipwreck survivors.

Over the next three centuries, Weaver Bay became a suburb of a much larger city, and a major center of its tourism, owing to lax rules about public decency and business practices aimed and relieving visitors of their hard-earned vacation dollars. Meanwhile, the northern areas of the town were hubs of industry, owing to vague laws pertaining to worker safety, a lack of concern about environmental impact, and the fact that Rico laws would not be passed for another four or five decades. One such industry was that of processed grain production. In fact, Weaver Bay at one point in the post-war years boasted control of no less than 65% of all North America’s wheat and bran-based breakfast cereals.

Weaver Bay and its industries thrived until the mid-1960s when an upstart company in Battle Creek, Michigan discovered that recycled carpet glue from the nearby auto plants of Detroit could be used to form a pastry-like substance, which when combined with copious amounts of gelatinous sugar filling and caked sugar frosting, would make a passable breakfast food that was not only faster and easier to prepare than a bowl of breakfast cereal but also allowed “Pop Tarts” to keep for decades before falling into the legal gray area of “unfit for human consumption.” It was even said that, when wrapped back-to-back in a layer of tin foil, they were mostly impervious to the radiation from what, at the time, was impending nuclear war with Russia over missiles in Cuba.

Nearly overnight, the great breakfast cereal cabals left Weaver Bay, along with at least half of the town's jobs. Those that couldn't find respectable work as waiters, golf caddies, and black-market street vendors were forced to take to less-than-reputable means of making a living -- becoming prostitutes, yacht pirates, and local musicians. The once-proud factories of the north shore, where present-day Mud Cove sits, fell into disrepair – nothing more than abandoned shells that served as urban spelunking sites, movie sets for low-budget post-apocalyptic B-films, and playgrounds for misbehaving children who refused to listen when their parents told them to stay away from abandoned industrial waste pits.

One such child was a certain Burlington "Burly" Montana, the son of Abraham Montana, a winemaker and beekeeper from the southwest mountainous region of France, and Ludvika Dvibluznies, a Lithuanian astrophysicist from the ritzy suburbs of Kaunas. By the time my father found out that I was regularly playing with my school chums in and around the old, abandoned factories, I was ten years old, and the doctors from the local university who examined me determined that I had already absorbed residual Riboflavin equivalent to consuming four boxes of Raisin Bran in one sitting every day for three years. As a result, my damaged pituitary gland and pristinely clean colon caused me to grow to a height of six foot two by the time I was ten which, and my inhuman, 16-inch finger span instantly put me on a fast track to fame as either a star basketball player or the inventor of a wild new form of music. Unfortunately, Weaver Bay has no youth basketball league, and so, over my family's objections, I took up the piano.

The ability to span nearly two full octaves with one extremely dexterous set of fingers meant that, after a bit of practice, I could play most of the popular lounge hits of the day -- Mustang Sally, Brown-Eyed Girl, and Stairway to Heaven -- with only my left hand. Unfortunately, this also meant that my right hand was free to engage in any kind of recreational activity that interested me while I played. This would, at various times, include nose-picking, making rude gestures at the audience, and more often than not, drinking beer. My unruly behavior in even the most benign of settings quickly earned me a reputation as the "bad boy of the synthesizer" around town.

This was the late 70's. I was twelve years old and already falling into a fast crowd of local musicians. Worse, I was completely without morals. In those days, I would lend my services to any band that would shun over-played Steppenwolf and Deep Purple covers and embraces hedonistic debauchery -- which at the time was the music of the Bee Gees, Olivia Newton-John, and Harold Melvin and the Blue

Notes. The leather jackets and switchblades of my youthful innocence were being replaced by silk shirts open to the navel, gold chains, and polyester pants so tight you could divine my father's religion. All of this came to a head in 1979, at the age of twelve, when my latest group of degenerate friends, a pop quintet going by the name Hell's Half-Hemorrhoid, was employed by a young Slick Madoff, proprietor of Weaver Bay's twelve Howard Johnson franchises. I was already something of a legend in the local scene, and my biggest trick at the time was playing all nineteen horn parts to "Boogie Soes," -- the popular dance hit of that Spring -- using only my left hand while eating a giant basket of French fries with my right.

Now, Slick was something of a saucer in those days -- he would later give the booze up in favor of coffee when his HoJo empire folded, and he channeled all his money into his current Starbucks empire. On our third of twenty-seven scheduled nights at the hotel bar, Slick had completely forgotten paragraph seven of the band's rider, stipulating that the fries should be ready and on top of my piano by the second verse of No More Tears. So naturally -- as any pubescent male does in the third set, after consuming two gallons of Tab cola over the prior two hours -- I suppose I got a bit grabby with some of the ladies in the front row (never missing a note of that sublime Barbara Streisand/Donna Summer duet, by the way). When the rest of the band caught on somewhere in the ninth minute of the song, I had already violated most of the groupies who were leaning on my stage-left monitor, hanging on my every note.

Unfortunately, I was to later learn, on this particular night, those groupies happened to include the mayor's wife and mother-in-law.

Even though many of our fans testified in my defense, some witnesses even claiming to have seen the women in question grabbing my prodigious digits and pulling them towards them, the honor of Howard Johnson had to be upheld, and so I was fired from the band and run out of town by the local constabulary, who were deeply in debt to the mayor and his cronies at the local board of tourism. There was little I could do. My mother had a prestigious job at the University, and my father, an old-world apiculturist, was at a crucial point in obtaining funding for some sort of breeding program to develop what the government had dubbed an "Asian murder hornet." I could not bring my shame back to the family, so as is tradition, I became another washed-up local musician, living in a cardboard box before I was thirteen years old.

Bonzo and Me

Of course, life on the streets for a hormonal 13-year-old who is already known as a wildly popular local musician really isn't all that rough. I spent the first couple of weeks sleeping on the beach with co-eds who had come to visit for the summer. Once school started, and the goodwill of tourists ran out, I found myself migrating back to the Mud Cove area where I had spent so much of my youth. As previously indicated, Mud Cove was a tough neighborhood. Drugs, crime, prostitution, and all of the minor vices had long since been run out of the area with the arrival of Organized Ski-ball. I will admit, against my better judgment, the allure of making fast money from playing a "ring hustler" sucked me in repeatedly, like Jerry Shirley forming yet another version of Humble Pie. Within months I was in over my head with a shadowy arcade owner named Jimmy Miles.

Jimmy owned "Miles of Madness," an air hockey, pinball, and ski-ball emporium. He even had a half-dozen of the old "King of Swat" coin-op baseball machines -- specifically for those people who were hooked on the harder stuff and needed a quick bump. Within two weeks I was into Jimmy for twenty big ones, and believe me, at the age of thirteen, coming up with twenty bucks is no easy feat. Jimmy was a big music fan, though, and must have taken a liking to me from the old days. He gave me a job playing an old Wurlitzer organ up in his marquee three nights a week to work off my debt. This was where I first developed my extensive vocabulary and love for fifties doo-wop music and the so-called "Brill Building sound," which I'm sure, as a studied fan of mine, you will realize was the first of the four tent-poles that formed the basis of what would one-day become fakabilly swing.

In the evenings, after work at the arcade, Jimmy would let me pour a Tab cola from the fountain if I complained enough about the heat up in the marquee, and I had become quite adept at stealing Marathon bars out of the concession counter. Obviously, there were advantages to having oversized limbs, and Marathon bars were guaranteed to last almost the entire evening -- a veritable feast for someone my age. Most nights after work I would make my way up to the Mud Cove Drive-In, which had one of the best views of the inlet, where pleasure boats of all kinds sailed in and out, usually owing to bad charts or defective compasses, because let's face it, aside from "Miles of Madness" or the chance to catch a blurry, 60-foot-high Lisa DeLeeuw double-feature, there was absolutely no reason for anyone to sail into Mud Cove. The marina was no longer open to the public and had subsequently become the home base for the infamous Yacht Pirates of Weaver Bay. More on them later.

In the fall of 1980, having spent nearly a year living with these dregs, I spied a likely mark entering the Mile of Madness. He was a tall, slightly frumpy, unkempt Englishman wearing checked trousers and a well-faded “Supertramp” t-shirt. I made friendly with him for a few minutes, lost two games of air hockey – the second, just barely – and then suggested we settle things once and for all with a high-stakes game of ski ball. This was my go-to hustle, and after a year of practice, it worked almost two-thirds of the time. I felt I really had the upper hand with this guy, however. After all, they didn’t have ski ball in England, did they?

I intentionally sluffed off the first two games, losing seventy-five cents and two Marathon bars to the tourist, who had introduced himself by this point only as “John.” He seemed unusually fixated on the candy, however, expressing his fondness for the chocolate and caramel mixture on more than one occasion during our third game. Unfortunately, it was apparently also providing something of a motivating factor, because as I began to gradually up my game intentionally, he was upping his even faster. Suddenly I was out two bucks and was stealing Snickers and Milk Duds to keep him satiated. We were on a slow descent towards the Reece’s Peanut Butter Cups and madness.

Finally, apparently bored with ski-ball, but enamored with my company and our discussion of the vital importance of Ellie Greenwich on contemporary music, John invited me for a night on the town as his treat. We were just leaving the fourth of Mud Cove’s four roller rinks when I finally caught John's full name: John Henry Bonham.

Oh, my god. Bonzo himself? The legendary drummer from the Merseybeat master, Jimmy Stevens’, Paid My Dues album (as produced by the divine hand of Maurice Gibb)?! The master thespian who played the drummer in Harry Nilsson’s band in the cult classic movie “Son of Dracula?!” What was a man of this caliber doing in Weaver Bay roller skating and eating what by now were inhuman quantities of cheap candy with a thirteen-year-old kid?!

The answer turned out to be less sinister than one would think. Yes, of course, we’d heard of Led Zeppelin in Weaver Bay, but as a journeyman synthesizer player in a small tourist trap town at the height of the disco revolution, I had to admit, they weren’t exactly heavily requested and certainly not in rotation on any of the cooler radio stations. However, because the legendary hard-rock band had never really penetrated the Quad Cove region, which was known for its particularly good late-season mud

shark fishing, Weaver Bay served as the ideal place to visit and wind down between tours. The band had taken up residence at the Motel 5 right there in Mud Cove two nights earlier.

Bonham, himself, had just kicked heroin, as well as drinking, and was on his sixth month being clean and sober, though still looking for something to fulfill the huge vacancy that excessive substance abuse leaves in one's life when you abandon it. As such, he had spent his first 48 hours exploring Mud Cove, sampling the cuisine, meeting the people, and most of all exploring the local music, which he told me was unlike any he had ever encountered in his worldly travels. He was so excited his hands were shaking as he said this – or possibly it was the Big Gulp Mr. Pibb he had just snorted through a straw. When I inquired as to how he could never have encountered Leo Sayre impersonators and Chic/Wild Cherry cover bands, he simply looked at me as if I was insane and directed me to follow him.

It was 3 AM by the time we arrived at Putting Pete's Miniature Golf Course, a tourist trap so obvious that even the Yacht Pirates kept a wide berth from its bunker-laden concrete fairways and evil, grinning giant clown heads. We sauntered through the first 22 holes, me protesting at each tee that I didn't understand what wisdom was to be found on a road lined with orange bricks, and Bonzo shushing me like the adolescent upstart I was.

Finally, on the 23rd hole, Bonham stopped and pointed at a cheap speaker affixed to a rustly post, teetering in the ocean breeze.

"That," he said, triumphantly.

The song was one we all learned in the playground at school called "Te Foe," I explained. Years later, I learned it was a actually traditional Tuvaluan dance that probably dated back to the original Funfutian merchant marines that settled Weaver Bay. I spent the next three hours singing as many of these schoolyard chants as I could remember to an increasingly hyper and excited John Bonham, who sat, godlike, atop a windmill on the dogleg of hole 23, egging me on continually for more such music as he stuffed his face with M&M's.

Then suddenly as the sun was just beginning to rise over the tiki hut that served as the cashier stand, he held up a hand to stop me. A strange smile came over his face, and he quite gently collapsed, falling to the fairway beneath him with a gentle "thunk." I ran to his side. His breathing was shallow and

rapid, and his heart was racing at what must have been 200 BPM. I tried desperately to wake him, but nothing I did seemed to get even the slightest response.

Suddenly, two black limousines appeared in the parking lot and at least eight men dressed in black suits with dark sunglasses emerged. Two of them ran to the park entrance, obviously intending to keep anyone from entering. The other six ran across the parking lot towards me as I frantically waved and pointed, assuming they were bodyguards or some sort of trained medical personnel.

The first two to arrive grabbed me, one under each arm, and carried me to the other side of the course. They interrogated me, firmly, but not violently, asking for the details of everything that had happened that evening. What had Bonham consumed? Had I seen him taking any other substances? What did we talk about? What was the last thing he said to me? I was beginning to get very frightened when I saw two of the others grab Bonzo and carry him to one of the waiting Limousines. He still wasn't moving and everyone was beginning to look very concerned.

Before they left, the two who had been interrogating me made me swear that I would never speak of what had happened that night. To ensure my silence, I was given fifty dollars, a tour poster, and an autographed copy of "In Through the Out Door." In exchange, I could never tell another soul about meeting Bonzo, Zeppelin being in Weaver Bay, or the existence of the mysterious men in black suits. Most importantly, I could never reveal what I knew about Bonzo being clean and sober and dying from a sugar overdose on a miniature golf course.

Two days later, a story hit the paper that John "Bonzo" Bonham had died the "perfect rock star death" in a mansion, in bed with a groupie, choking on his own vomit after consuming copious amounts of alcohol. I knew the truth though, and it is a secret that I have kept for more than 40 years. I only reveal it now because I no longer have any fear of what the shadowy "rock police" may do to me, because I can't bear to think about how they must have dragged his comatose body to the studio and spent hours injecting a half-gallon of vodka into his bloodstream, but mostly because, aside from Track 1, "In Through the Out Door" was a really crummy album.

High Seas and low C's

The winter of '80 was enlightening to me. Following the death of Bonzo, I had something of an awakening regarding the nature of celebrity and the mysterious forces that helped to maintain the mystique. The next month, Steve Took of T-Rex died choking on a cocktail onion, though the music press – no doubt via the influence of the mysterious men in black, the rock police, the fame cops, or whatever you wish to call them -- attempted to characterize it as a drug overdose. These claims were quickly and definitively disputed by the police coroner and his published autopsy findings. By the time John Lennon bought the farm six weeks later -- no, literally, he bought a farm in Idaho and now lives there in a Winnebago raising chickens, but out of respect, I've never tried to track him down -- I was completely obsessed and knew better than to trust anything I read in the music press. I knew, in order to expose this fraud, I would have to understand it, and to understand it, I would need to become a part of the mainstream music business. To do this, I would need to study those who had successfully entered this shadow realm. The obvious place -- to start was with my old friend, Bonzo.

I desperately needed to know more about that magnificent man and how his mind worked. Not being a notorious drummer from the north of England in a multi-Platinum-selling rock band, meant the easiest means would be to crack the code that so engrossed him and drew him to the native music of my hometown. Of course, this meant leaving the relative safety of "Miles of Madness." Fortunately, I'd long since paid off my gambling debts to Jimmy, and had taken Wurlitzer-centric Doo Wop about as far as it would go, so my departure, while not easy by any stretch of the imagination, was at least not a surprise to either of us. Jimmy knew my musical horizons needed to be expanded and so pointed me toward Mud Cove Marina, the hideaway of the infamous Yacht Pirates. There – like all men of a certain age – I was to be instructed in the ways of Led Zeppelin and what, at the time, was called "Heavy Metal."

Yes, I understand now that to you kids this is a very generic term that encompasses 63 different, more-specific genres such as "Death Metal," "Hardcore," "Grindcore," "Funeral Metal," "Doom Metal," and "Klezmer Metal," none of which even remotely resemble the band Led Zeppelin. I imagine this is much the same aggression I feel when people started forming "Speed Fakabilly," "Progressive Gothic Fakabilly," and "Melodic Power Fakabilly" bands. I will explain how the great splintering of Metal came about, along with my role in it, later in this book. Suffice to say, prior to 1990, "Heavy Metal," meant

anything sung with a raised voice, distorted guitar, and a guitarist who wore an unusual and out of place, hat – such as Slash’s top hat, Angus Young’s schoolboy flat-cap, Rick Neilson’s beanie, CC DeVille’s fedora, or Richie Sambora’s buffalo nickel Stetson.

I arrived at the marina bar on a gray afternoon in late October of 1980, wet behind the ears and smelling of the sea. I presented my credentials to the Pirate leader, who went by the name Captain Rainier Blackfire. The Captain’s real name was Vance Von Braun, the son of German immigrants who later made a name for himself selling knock-off Irish beer on the upper west coast, and then became a multi-millionaire when he sold out to the Coors Beverage Company after Seattle temporarily became the center of the musical world in the early ’90s. I probably will not get around to explaining how this came about, or my role in it, during the course of this book.

Blackfire asked me only one question, “Why do you want to become a Yacht Pirate?”

“I need to learn more about Led Zeppelin,” I explained. “For example, which album should I get?”

Blackfire and his crew chuckled to themselves as if sharing an inside joke. “You don’t understand, boy. You get them all. Preferably, you steal them.”

Later that night, I shipped out with the captain and his crew on our first voyage. It was also on this fateful night, that I met my lifelong musical partner, Ryan Mollego Birchwood – who later, owing to a dispute with a similarly named singer/songwriter, changed his name to Bryan and began abbreviating his middle name to M. When I first saw him, I was seriously wrecked with sea sickness and was heaving my breakfast of Milky Way bars and Fanta into what my crewmates told me at the time was a velvet-lined spittoon. I later learned this was actually Bryan M's guitar case, and apparently a rite of passage that all fresh recruits availed themselves of on their NUB voyage. Bryan M. was his usually good-natured self about the little prank, took his revenge on his crewmates by playing and singing a selection of songs he had been working on for the remainder of the voyage, and by the end of the night everyone had all taken a turn filling "the spittoon."

For the next year, the entire bay region lived in fear of the long fingers of the Dread Pirate Rainier, and our band of buccaneers held no quarter against rich tourists who sought a weekend of fun and frolicking in Weaver Bay. In a typical raid, our fearsome vessel, the "Shotgun Rider"—a refurbished

33-foot Carver Mariner 1976 painted matte black with a Bachman Turner Overdrive gear logo on each aft quarter -- would overtake any leisure vessel entering from the open sea the entire crew on deck singing the ever-popular hit, "Give Me Your Money, Please," in the style of a sea shanty. Within an average of seven minutes, our band of ruffians would have already boarded the vessel, clogged all the toilets, raided the refrigerator, and stolen all of the good mixers from the wet bar – most of us were under-age at the time, and there were very strict laws about drinking and boating, you understand. Meanwhile, Bryan M. and I would raid the unlucky victim's cassette collection and pilfer all of their best music, along with any good mixtapes they may have had on hand. Then, before anyone could raise an alarm, we would disappear into the night back to our hideaway at the Mud Cove Marina.

Within the first few months, I had completed my collection of the entire Led Zeppelin catalog -- along with a few juicy bootlegs – but, my taste in music was quickly growing. Bryan M. and I, now fast friends, began to write the nucleus of an album – of course, we were then working as an acoustic piano/guitar duo, busking around local frozen churro carts under the moniker "Antonio & Bassanio," where we first put together the nuclei of such early Maanthaung standards as "Three for a Nipple," "That's What Your Sister Said," and "Sunset Dreams," which became "Thaung Up Your Crack." I will admit it's very difficult to hear some of these naïve first attempts at capturing the sound and musical direction that was in my head, particularly played without the benefit of a full band or even amplifiers, but after a while, you just sort of let the euphoria take you and you pass out from boredom.

Feeling that our music had reached a critical mass of self-servitude and boredom, we did what all rebellious youth who saw no future in piracy, larceny, robbery, and overt destruction of the benefactors of an uncaring capitalist system did: we turned our backs on stable income and the ability to support and feed ourselves, and instead became artists – well, okay, just part-time artists, after all, we had quite a hoard of wealth and treasures from yacht piracy and hadn't given up on a lucrative life of crime just yet. We started, as many do, playing open mic nights, which I saw as a means to scope out who the good players were in town, what they were doing, where they were playing, how audiences received them, and generally gauge ourselves against our peers. Sure, I'd had almost revolutionary success playing in disco cover bands for hundreds of dollars a night to adoring fans who threw underwear at me on stage during my solos, but now we were in "serious artist territory." Writing and performing our own music to a disinterested bunch of middle-aged drunks who were more interested in telling stories of their past glories in cover bands than they were listening to our "art." This was my first real challenge as an artist. This was three chords and the truth.

Now, Bryan M was completely against this approach, having never paid his dues in a successful disco cover band, he was convinced that we should be getting paid immediately. The months that we played the open mic circuit featured the same ongoing argument, repeating itself night after night, verbatim, before we took the stage for our 10 to 15 minutes, depending on how the crowd was reacting to our music that night. Bryan M would argue that we were artists, and our art had value, and that value should translate to hundreds of dollars and unending adulation.

“So, who pays us these hundreds of dollars for our fifteen-minute performances?” I would ask him.

He would then snort in that ineffable way he always did, that somehow conveyed superior intellect and a runny nose simultaneously, “Well, obviously the venue owner.”

“Ah,” I would always counter, using my best professorial tone to convey logic, “But why? This is a bar. They’re making money from the sales of beer. Simple entrepreneurship says that if he were to take on the additional expense of us as entertainers for, say \$200 dollars, then our entertainment should bring him at a minimum, \$201 dollars of extra business. At which point we get the \$200, and he would pocket \$1. At present, we appear to be driving patrons away when we play. We’re certainly not drawing any in.”

“So, he should market better,” Bryan would then argue.

“Ah, but his job is not to market our music – not that I would trust him to be able to do it competently – his job is to sell beer and keep our audience here and listening to us as long as possible via an incompetently slow wait staff that takes extra time adding up tabs.”

“But we’re artists!” Bryan M would exclaim. “We should be making money any time someone hears our art. Whether they enjoy it or not is their hang-up. They obviously don’t understand music.”

“Then they should get value for the money they spend. How do you justify \$200?”

“We deserve to be compensated for all of the equipment we buy, all the time we spend driving to these gigs, the time spent loading and unloading equipment, the time we spend writing and practicing music...”

Every night when our argument reaches this point, I purposely grab my drink, take a very large portion of it into my mouth, and then attempt to swallow without holding my breath. The resulting expulsion of large quantities of sugar-free soft drink that engulfs him – completely by accident as I was merely attempting to see if I had somehow evolved gills, and not intentionally spitting a drink at him – saves me from finishing the argument by explaining that, in the real world, where we live, people wrack up huge amounts of debt with universities learning how to do their jobs, and they are never compensated by the companies for their own personal purchases and commuting habits. This is valid in many schools of legal argument, as well as Roberts’ Rules of Order, and is known as the “Sorry, wrong pipe” axiom, or more colloquially, “quod erat diet-cola.”

He didn’t understand my end game, but after a few weeks on the open mic circuit, talking to the veterans, and watching the competition, I saw the light. The trick was not to get good enough that someone would pay us to play -- that was pretty much impossible. Instead, the trick was to get good enough that we could pay someone to make us famous. It was all so simple. In fact, the hardest part was going to be coming up with the money, since we certainly weren’t going to be making it off playing music, and we tended to eat and drink all the profits from our piracy adventures, discounting the stolen music collections, but then who buys second-hand music?

Meanwhile, at our day job, my appetite for metal was growing voracious during the weeks that followed. The harder stuff was an escape from the endless three-chord acoustic crap we were playing on Tuesday and Thursday nights in town, but as I was outgrowing Led Zeppelin, as any thirteen-year-old inevitably does after nine to twelve months, it was filling a primal need. Already, I was on to the likes of Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, Judas Priest, McOil, and of course, local metal gods, Precipussy. As a fun aside, many years later Precipussy would end up suing Bryan M, myself, and Maanthaung for alleged plagiarism of several songs from their third album, "Chick Filet-show." The suit was entirely frivolous, completely invented and contrived by lawyers and management, unbeknownst to the Pussies themselves, and was eventually settled in a Dairy Queen several blocks away from the nearest courtroom. Our two respective organizations have been fast friends ever since.

Eventually, even the hardest metal available to a dysfunctional youth in the early '80s (which wasn't really all that hard by the standards you kids have today, let me say) wasn't going to satiate my primal desires, and my “metal phase” drew to a close. I began to grow bored with the constant wailing and pinch harmonics of metal and sought a new direction for my musical listening. As fate would have it,

on one particular night, we were back at our pirate den, reaping the rewards of kegs filled with sour mix and tomato juice, and diving into our latest booty of music when I came across a hand-labeled cassette purporting to be the out-of-print Red Album from Brownsville Station. With great delight, I whipped the tape out and put it in the player, expecting some bone-crunching guitar riffs to pour forth, but instead was rewarded with the sweet, clean tones and smooth jazz of George Benson's Breezin'.

I was gobsmacked. There was music unlike any other I had ever heard. Sweeping melodies, effortless phrasing, delicate harmonic technique. Surely this inspiration is how Bonzo felt when he discovered Tuvaluan chants a year earlier. I knew then and there that this music was another essential building block of my musical vision, and that vision was now nearing completion.

Appendix

About the Author

Darrin Snider is an award-winning Internet radio and podcast host, cloud engineer, analytics wizard, mannequin wrangler, recovering software developer, and resident expert on the Indianapolis local music scene. His hobbies include baseball, strategy gaming, the occasional RPG, voraciously reading everything in sight, DX-ing exotic radio streams around the world, quantum physics, day trading, comic books, old-time radio, the technological singularity, biking, cooking/baking, wuxia/chop-socky flicks, cyber/technoculture, imported teas, transhumanism, dead programming languages, and speed-writing first drafts of novels (mostly to get the NaNoWriMo certificates) which he locks away as part of some grand retirement scheme should he live that long.



Afterword

These first three chapters of the "latest (not final) draft" are offered free of charge. If you enjoyed them, drop me a line, and I'll add you to a list to receive a copy of the final book and possibly some other goodies along the way. If you're a publisher, potential alpha reader, or bookworm like me that doesn't care if it's a bad draft, and you would like to see the full outline or other existing parts of this novel as a prelude to helping edit or publish it, I can probably make that happen too.

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