

Long Live Rock And Roll

1) ZigZag – Been a Long Time....

The lights go out and the crowd goes nuts. Not “NUTS, nuts”, but just “really happy to be here” nuts. Roadies with flashlights begin to patrol the stage. The crowd roars again. Band members begin to station themselves behind the sheer stage curtain. As the backlighting begins to show the silhouettes of the five band members in their positions on the stage there’s another spike in volume, especially near the front of the stage. Then the reality of the moment sets in and the entirety of the arena is engulfed in a solid, sustained roar. The backlighting fades out and for an instant the crowd is near silent, as if time were suspended. A lone guitar begins a familiar Jimmy Page lick at a nearly unbearable volume. Accentuating the entrance of the bass and drums, confetti cannons on both sides of the stage explode and shiny cream and crimson streamers are projected over the first thirty rows of the floor. The sheer curtain falls to the floor as I turn to face the audience and begin to belt out the resolute and familiar refrain:

“It’s been a long time since I’ve rock and rolled.
It’s been a long time since I did that stroll.
Open your arms, open your arms, open your arms,
And baby let my love come runnin’.
It’s been a long time, been a long time,
Been a long lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely time.”¹

We’ve started dozens of shows over the years with what has become more or less our “battle cry”. It was our way of formally announcing that we were there and that it was time to party. There have been other opening songs throughout the years, but this one just seemed to be the right song to get everyone ready for the evening. It created a vibe on stage that would set the tone for the next couple of hour’s worth of music. It got the crowd where we wanted them: energized, excited, and emotionally engaged. We could take them anywhere we wanted from there. It got the crew focused quickly. Technical issues at the beginning of the show were few and far between. We’d done it the same, or very nearly the same way many, many times. It also seemed to get everyone focused on the same goal at the same time – “Showtime”.

One of the things we all had in common in the beginning was a love for Led Zeppelin. Although we all had our favorite bands and favorite sounds for numerous different reasons, Zep was always a source of agreement and reverence. We were never going to be that band – in the first place, I can’t sing most of their stuff. But we all had great appreciation for the mix of strengths within the unit; the power of Bonham and the steadiness of J.P. Jones underneath the layers of virtuosity that Page was spinning counterbalanced by the sheer raucousness of Robert Plant’s vocals and harmonica. This was a band’s band. Perhaps the best “Rock and Roll” band ever. We were certainly paying homage to that notion.

Long Live Rock And Roll

The performance the crowd saw at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Indiana that Friday evening in October of 1996 was the result of a well oiled machine. With nearly twenty years in the business, three quarters of that with more or less the same band personnel, I was a musical pirate staring forty years of age right in the eye. And loving every minute of it. We'd come a long way from the days of endless practices in hot, damp, nondescript warehouses and playing for the door on Tuesday night. A long, long, way. Everything was bigger, newer, more organized, and there was much more money. But the old days really weren't so bad, either.

I've been doing this thing I do for a long time. Started by singing with a glee club when I was eight years old. Been playing some instrument or another since the 7th grade. Started writing my own songs when I was seventeen. Haven't had a day job since 1980. I've lived and sweated and cried and agonized with every second of this journey. And I've had a lot of fun. A whole lot of fun. I have a nice house in Topanga Canyon, an apartment on Central Park, and a couple of really fast cars. I have ten times more guitars than I have children. Somehow this adventure has landed the band seven Grammy awards, a couple of Oscars, and induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. To quote Jerry Garcia (actually Robert Hunter) "what a long strange trip it's been".²

My first remembrances of music are two fold. There was church – with its hymns and bad piano playing. And there was country. Specifically I remember Midwestern Hayride, a show that aired in Cincinnati. We didn't get it at home, but it was on at my grandparents. Although there was an occasional "national" guest, most of the talent was local stars from the "tri-state" (Ohio-Kentucky-Indiana) area. I think the first forty-five I owned was Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire". Saw the Beatle's live on Sullivan. Saw a man walk on the moon. Saw a man get killed on a hotel balcony and another in a California victory celebration. Saw a lot in my first few years of existence. Rock and Roll was either a reaction to the experiences of my youth or a revolt due to them.

My siblings and I used to pretend we were the Jackson Five, the Osmond's or the Partridge Family. We were singing whatever was on the radio. We used to pour through the Sears catalog, looking at the guitars and drum kits. Someday, we kept telling ourselves, someday. I sang with the Boys' Club Singers and in the children's choir at church. I was almost a teenager, the eldest of five children, and ready to have some space of my own.

I distinctly remember the very first album that I bought with my own money was Jimi Hendrix "In the West". It was loud, it was vulgar, and I knew my parents would disdain it. Exactly what you want when you are thirteen years old. I loved the passion that Jimi brought to the party. After all these years, I realize that I started my discovery of the art form with a man who set the bar very, very high. One good taste of "Voodoo Chile" and my opinion of guitars and guitar players changed forever. Alice Cooper "Killer" was the next purchase, and I think Grand

Long Live Rock And Roll

Funk Railroad after that. I didn't really know what kind of music I liked the most yet, but I knew that I liked a lot of what I was hearing.

In the summer of 1971, we moved and with that went a change in schools. So I had to find a new set of friends. Boy did I get lucky. Mostly, it was kids from band class. I played percussion in junior high school; several of my new friends did as well. It seems like drummers have always hung out together. In an interesting geographic sort of thing, my two closest friends in junior high, Dave and Diane, played French horn and bassoon respectively and sat in the row directly in front of the percussion section. We were neighbors. Dave and I became band mates. Diane was my girlfriend.

One day early in the fall, Dave invited several of us to his house after school to listen to records and hang out. His parents lived only three blocks from the junior high school. Someone's mom agreed to drop me off at home sometime before dinner. My mom was good with the idea. We were set. I spent the best part of the next three years in Ron and Marsh Brubaker's basement.

I think the idea of "forming a band" came from a percussion friend named Rudy. He kept talking about these older guys he knew that were in a band and how we should start one. He had different people picked out for instruments. Jim the trumpet player owned a guitar and an amp – he was in. Brubaker might sing. Rudy was, of course, going to be the drummer. I fit into the equation somewhere. There was talk of having two singers at one point, and somebody needed to learn bass. Brubaker was good with the idea, as were Jim and another trumpet player named Marty, who could also play piano. The problem was Rudy.

First of all, Rudy didn't own a drum kit. In fact, the only one we knew who did have a set of drums was a kid named Ken. Ken was number one chair in band class, and studied percussion with a private teacher in Lexington. Ken (or perhaps his parents) wasn't interested in being in any "rock and roll" band. Secondly, Rudy wasn't that good. Ken was number one chair. I was number three. Rudy was somewhat further down the list. He had also gained a reputation as a screw up in class. Nobody wanted any of that in "our" band. But Rudy did know a guy who had a used Whitehall drum kit for sale, although Rudy also didn't have any cash. So since I had the money in savings and Rudy knew the guy, we cut a deal. That day I plunked down one hundred and twenty five hard earned paperboy dollars and became the band's drummer. Rudy agreed to be our manager. And then we got our bass player. He was a doctor's son who went to school with us but lived out by the country club. His name was Greg Townsend.

Dave's parents bought him a small amp and a microphone and we were ready to go. More importantly, Ron and Marsha allowed us the privilege of making God awful noise down in their basement. At all hours of the day and night. While they were trying to have dinner conversation or watch prime time TV. But they knew where we were, and what we were doing (for the most part), and they were

Long Live Rock And Roll

good with that. I'm sure there is a special spot in "Rock 'n Roll Heaven" for parents who tolerate and encourage junior high school "garage band" musicians. I know that the Brubaker's, and many other parents, deserve a special seat in that room. I bet it's awfully quiet there.

I learned how to play the guitar one summer in high school. My background as a drummer drove me to the rhythm of the instrument and the science revealed my love for discovering and playing chord progressions. The other guitar players wanted me around because I could play "All Along the Watchtower" and those same three chords for extended periods of time so they could play lead. I never needed that spotlight. This is probably a good thing as I am just an average guitarist.

After graduating from high school, I spent the next two years at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Although I did OK in college (the only A's I got were in music classes), my heart was never really into the whole academic thing. But in those four semesters at the University of Kentucky I got a great social and musical education. And at least in the beginning, it was more about listening than playing. There were really only two major activities in the dorms at UK – partying and the stereo. The two tended to overlap. Almost everyone either had drugs, wanted drugs, or knew someone who had drugs for sale. Anything and everything. Pot, hash, coke, acid, speed, downers... you name it, someone knew someone who could find it. It was both an insane and exhilarating experience. And of course, the other key ingredient to the college campus party was the stereo. We wandered the musical landscape from rock to blues to jazz to country and beyond. The "newness" of it all was so overwhelming to me. Hearing artists like J.J. Cale, Mississippi John Hurt, and Little Feat for the very first time. Delving into the mystery of Dylan, the great "middleworks" of the Beatles and Stones ("Revolver", "Rubber Soul", "12x5" and "Green Grass and High Tides"), and moving well off the beaten path with bands like the New York Dolls and Willie Nelson. The records I remember being the most popular at the time included The Eagles "Hotel California", Billy Joel's "Piano Man", "Songs in the Key of Life" by Stevie Wonder, and "Frampton Comes Alive".

My guitar playing took on two distinctly separate avenues during those years. First, I spent an enormous amount of time (when I probably should have been studying) sitting alone and playing. Experimenting with new chords and progressions, finger picking and alternate tunings, finding melodies and building the backing structures – more or less romancing the instrument. Playing the same progressions, like "Blackbird" or "Little Wing" over and over until I had them down cold. The second part of the guitar playing exercise in those days was "The Jam". These sessions were usually more about getting stoned and making noise than actual edification of the art form. At least three guys in our quad had drum kits set up in their rooms. We could usually dig up some one with a bass rig, and there were tons of guys with electric guitars and small Fender Champ sized amps. The players were more or less interchangeable, some more talented than others,

Long Live Rock And Roll

and each with their own unique approach to the instruments. At the time, the only guitar I owned was a six string Alvarez acoustic. Although from time to time I would use someone else's electric, more often than not I was content to sit in the corner and just play along on the acoustic. The "jam sessions" cemented two precepts in my mind: I really enjoyed playing rhythm guitar, and at least to me, music is three minute art form. I wanted only to create and play "songs".

Perhaps the greatest single event in those years was the day I found "The Gibson". I was wandering around Lexington one afternoon, probably either browsing the used record store or the head shop, and I went into a pawn shop just to look around. On the wall were an assortment of knock off Strats, low grade Japanese acoustics, and a Peavey bass I think. Down on the end was an instrument that was to become my very best friend. A 1958 Gibson ES-125 hollow bodied electric guitar. "The Gibson" as it was basically known from that day forward. I asked to play one of the acoustics. Then I asked for the Gibson. I was familiar with the body style, as my friend Glenn owned an L-5 which sounded great but was a little stiff to play. I had no such issues with this instrument. It played like melted butter. To this day, I don't believe that I have played an instrument with a finer neck. The tone was clean and pure. My next question was "Can I plug it in ???". There is one P-90 single coil pickup in the neck position on these models, with one volume control and one tone control. I turned both all the way to 10. The amp I was playing through at the store wasn't great, but I could get a pretty clean jazz like sound. A little bit of distortion and I could crunch power chords as well. I remember playing the opening progression to "Stormy Monday" and asking the final question – "How much???" I rode the bus back to campus clutching my prize, which I amazingly purchased for the grand sum for \$150 – money I had borrowed from the University to purchase a lab manual for a geology class.

In my heart I knew I was a songwriter. I've always appreciated a song with a good lyric, regardless of style. A lyric that tells a story, or emits the feeling of the moment – that is what I have always craved. Be it a boo-hoo country ballad, an exalting worship hymn, or gut wrenching blues. I learned to play guitar for only one purpose – so I could create my own music. As soon as I could reasonably navigate a few chords I started writing. The first song I ever wrote was a political consciousness piece about the government taking of private land. The whole thing is backed by only three chords – E minor, A minor and G major.

The Old Man's Hill

"Old man livin' up on a hill,
Never did nobody no ill.
Been livin' alone for oh so long,
Twenty years since his wife's been gone.
And when she went he broke down and cried.
'Cause he knew that part of him died."³

Long Live Rock And Roll

And though it's not "Stairway to Heaven" or "Blowin' in the Wind", it was a start.

I spent the best part of the next two years living at home, bouncing around from job to job, and playing guitar as much as I could. I was in and out of two or three different bands, but the same theme kept recurring. Everybody around just wanted to get together occasionally and "jam". Nobody wanted to learn and play a set list with vocals and some modicum of organization. I was frustrated.

When Mike Bennett, a guy that I met my freshman year in Lexington, graduated from UK, he decided to move to Houston, Texas. He had a fraternity brother named John who had been offered a position with Exxon. They were willing to cover his moving expenses and arranged for a moving van to pick up his belongings from his parents home near Louisville and deliver them in Houston. Mike and a couple of his fraternity brothers were going to move down with John. I was invited to join them, and whole heartedly agreed. I was tired of Kentucky winters and directionless musicians. I relished the change in scenery.

I pulled into Houston in August of 1979 in my old Ford Pinto with guitars and amps in tow on a Thursday afternoon. I started working on Monday at Hilborn Instrumentation, a thermocouple manufacturing facility in Pasadena, Texas, counting and ordering parts and supplies. The following weekend I was given an advance from the company and moved off of Mike and John's couch and into a furnished garage apartment just a few minutes from the shop. I worked from 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and then played until I needed to sleep. I made enough money to eat, pay the rent, and drink a few beers. I started making cassette records of my songs and put an ad in "The Greensheet", a local Houston newspaper dedicated to classified advertising. I needed a band and a place to practice.

R.L. Chambers was a good ole' boy for East Texas. He loved the Beatles and Pink Floyd. And of course, ZZ Top. R.L. almost never drank liquor, but consumed mass quantities of Pepsi and he smoked Marlboro Reds. He liked fast cars (especially souped up Camaro's) and he liked working over a drum kit. We were born one day apart. Other than my wife Leah, R.L. is my very best friend in the world.

When we first met I was in an almost transcendental, laid back mode. I was even playing the fast songs soft and slow. I had met a number of would be musicians since moving to Pasadena and putting the ad in the paper. Nothing seemed to be clicking, and I was depressed. R.L. had a friend named "Bird" with him the night we met who actually had to talk R.L. into trying to "rock" these dirgeful tunes. The following weekend we found a warehouse to rent, and began pounding through brutal versions of some of my songs and a few covers as well. It was evident very early on that Bird (who espoused to play bass) couldn't keep up with us musically (and he drank way too much). I tolerated it as long as it was just the

Long Live Rock And Roll

three of us; truthfully, I needed some reps in a “plugged in” environment to adjust my mindset and playing. It was also fun just having a rhythm section behind me. But when we talked about direction and the future, R.L. and I had those discussions alone. Once Eric joined us, Bird’s future was determined quickly. He needed to go, and we needed a real bass player. That took us a while.

To meet R.L. is to play the “Buck” name game. He takes joy using this little “joke” in almost any gathering when there is someone new in the room. He calmly announces that we were about to commence the “Name Game” and he begins assigning roles. R.L. was always “Buck Buchanan” – Hall of Fame defensive lineman who played for the Kansas City Chiefs in the 60’s and 70’s. I was usually “Buck Owens” – the country artist and “Hee Haw” host referenced in lyrics by John Fogerty and Creedence Clearwater Revival. Someone would be “Buck Rogers” and someone else “Buck Henry”. Eventually, R.L. would point to the new face and say “and you’re Buck HEAD”. We’d all laugh for his benefit, though most of us had heard the gag dozens of times before. I’ve seen him do it to studio execs, big name Hollywood stars, and even the Vice-President of the United States.

Although there have been rocky days, and many late nights soul searching about “where the band is headed” and “why are we doing that”, R.L. and I are, were, and always will be in this together. We truly BELIEVE in each other. That belief, along with a lot of work and a little bit of talent, got us to the top of the mountain.

Eric Anderson is a true northerner that headed to Texas in 1979 to find a better life and a warmer climate. I actually met Eric at Hilborn. We were both doing what we needed in order to eat; he as a machinist assistant, and me in inventory control. These were the last “real” jobs either one of us would have. Eric was from northern Pennsylvania, near the New York state line. A simple place with moderately poor people content on keeping things simple. This was not the place for Eric. After a couple of semesters as nearby Wilkes College, he packed his belongings and headed south. Among them were a Roland Jupiter-4 keyboard and a Yamaha acoustic guitar. Eric’s mother, a strong German disciplinarian, had forced Eric to start piano lessons at an early age. In high school he discovered modern jazz from the New York radio stations, Bill Payne from Little Feat, and Greg Hawkes of the Cars. He could move from a beer barrel polka to the latest from Jan Hammer with ease and has this knack for always coming up with “that something” to make a strong song complete. I invited Eric to join us one night to “check it out” at practice, the next night he asked to come back with his gear. We had both a keyboard player and a group antagonist from that day forward.

When something works, you just “know” it. Scott McNaughton and I have a sound together that works. No different that Jaeger and Richards, Petty and Campbell, Plant and Page, Tyler and Perry, and Clapton and whoever he is playing with (although I’m very hesitant to put my name in any list with these

Long Live Rock And Roll

fellas). There is just something there that can't be explained, described, or even verified. It just IS.

Scott and his dad built his first electric guitar when he was 10 years old and living near the beach just outside Daytona, Florida. When his parents divorced, Scott moved to northwest Houston with his mother. Dislocated from his home and his roots, the electric guitar became Scotty's only pal. He spent hour after hour learning solos off of records and the radio. By the time he got to high school, Scott was already playing with a much older group of musicians doing social club events around town and frat parties at the University of Houston. He could play any cover tune anybody wanted to hear. He was a cocky, handsome kid. And boy did he have a way with the ladies. I didn't give him the nickname "Naughty Scotty" because he colored on the wall with a crayon. He was also the baby in the band by a few years and we never let him forget that fact. Today he is married to an Italian actress (about half his age). Scotty played a black Les Paul Custom guitar through an old Fender Twin Reverb amp. And he could make it cry and sing. With my rhythm style leaving lots of holes for fills and runs, Scott just slid his tone and attitude into the mix like a hand in a glove. We practiced with Scotty for about two weeks, and we were ready to take it out to the world.

As I mentioned earlier, it took us a while to find a permanent bass player. After Bird departed we went through three or four other guys in about a year. The most memorable was a guy named Steve. Not so much because of his playing or his personality (although neither were bad), but primarily because of his younger sister Monique. About two weeks after Steve joined us, Monique moved in with Scotty. I wrote "Weak For Monique" in his honor. She was still around long after Steve and the band parted company. When we were offered the contract money to underwrite production of our first record, a guy named Charlie was playing bass with us at the time. Charlie could play real well, but he was older than all of us by several years and still trying to live in the '60's. While Scotty and I were wearing leather pants and brightly colored sports jackets respectively, Charlie was still into tie dyed t-shirts and bell bottoms. He liked to drop acid before gigs. Even my mom, who saw us at a bar while visiting Houston on vacation, told me that Charlie didn't "fit" with the rest of us.

I went home for a few days at Christmas that year. While at a party one night, I ran into my old junior high band mate Greg Townsend. He had graduated from Austin Peay with a degree in chemical engineering and was working for Monsanto in Wheeling, West Virginia. We talked about the old days, and I told him about the band. And our issues with bass players. He called me two days later and asked if he could "audition" for the band. Greg had no problem landing a "day job" in Houston, the oil business was booming.

Greg was and is the "king" of television theme songs. He can play them all. I don't even think he "knows" any of them. His ear is so good that he can hear it in his head and have it come out his fingers. The themes from "The Munster's" and

Long Live Rock And Roll

“Barney Miller” were among his favorites. His fluid bass lines and his dry wit fit right in. He also added a strong third voice behind myself and Scott. Greg’s younger brother Todd moved down with Greg and began running sound for us. We finally had a band.

All of us play the guitar. There is never one more than a few feet away when we are in the same room together. RL mostly plays first position chords, and Eric plays upside down and backwards (the only people I have ever met who play in this fashion are primarily keyboard players where guitar is a secondary instrument). Greg could also play the six string well, and being a bass player was very strong with runs and transitions. Although technically I write most of the songs (Scotty has written a few over the years), everyone gets their opportunity to give input. That usually happens while we are sitting around in a hotel room or backstage with acoustic guitars in our laps.

The whole “naming of the band” process was quite an interesting series of events. We banged around names for a month or so, and could never come to a consensus. We were already booked into a battle of the bands at Fitzgerald’s in Houston as “Pasadena Taxi”, but R.L. in particular wasn’t much fond of that name. So we came up with a democratic process. At the time there were four of us: me, R.L., Scotty, and a bass player named Chuck. Chuck could play well, wrote some nice songs, and fit in with us culturally. But Chuck was more into glam and Iggy Pop stuff, and left us after only a few months to start his own band. The four of us each came up with three suggestions for the name. So we started with twelve possibilities. I don’t remember most of them, and Chuck specifically had some off the wall ideas. The concept was simple – each of us chose our favorite from each other’s lists. Any names that had two or more “votes” moved on to the next round. I think there were three that survived the initial process. We kicked these around for a couple of weeks, discussing the pros and cons of each. Then we each had a “yes or no” vote on each of the three. You had to vote yes for at least one, and you couldn’t say yes to all three. It took another week of doing this almost every day before “ZigZag” became the consensus. And although on the surface we were naming ourselves after a brand of rolling papers, the conversations the week previous to the decision brought out a number of points regarding the name. We believed (or rationalized) that the term was a response to our stylings, running the gamut from pop to blues to rock to reggae. There was also an idea we kicked around about how the illusion of what we did was akin to a magic trick called the “ZigZag Box”. Lastly, there was a “tip of the cap” to that “little ole band from Texas” – ZZ Top. We knew that in order to separate ourselves from the “ZigZag Man” we were going to need a distinctive, recognizable logo. That process proved to be even more difficult than this one, but that’s a story for later on.

We came to being in Houston quite a few years after Billy Gibbons patrolled the local music scene with his band The Moving Sidewalk. But the music environment was very much the same. There were a number of clubs that catered

Long Live Rock And Roll

to live music, especially in and around a near northwest neighborhood known as “The Heights”, but by and large for a city the size of Houston, it was not a good live music town. The musical heritage in Houston is both deep and rich, but that didn’t equate into a good scene for live music. We started there, and then began to spread our wings.

After the “Battle of the Bands” appearance at Fitzgerald’s (where we finished second, but were obviously the management’s favorite), we became regulars there. We probably played there at least once a month for the next year and a half. Fitzgerald’s is a Houston landmark. They have been serving up live music and cold beer in that building since the late ‘70’s. We started out playing downstairs in a room that has had several names over the years. For a time while we were playing there I think it was called “Zelda’s”, I guess after F. Scott Fitzgerald’s wife. Occasionally we would get a backup spot upstairs on the main stage. We were about to depart for Europe before they invited us to headline on a Friday night upstairs.

The best club in town was Rockefeller’s. Located in an the old Heights State Bank building on Washington Street, “The Rock” as it was known catered primarily to touring acts. There was little room on the bill, even on a week night, for local talent. We got our foot in the door by offering to be part of a benefit show. Then they asked us back to open for Marcia Ball on a Thursday night. We pulled our crowd from Fitzgerald’s with us that night and the place was packed. The establishment loved that; I’m sure more than they loved us. Sometimes that’s just how this business works. They asked us if we would like to be the opening act the following Friday night – for Stevie Ray Vaughn and Double Trouble. Duh...

Let me start this little segue way by stating that I never got the opportunity to meet Stevie Ray Vaughn. We opened for him at Rockefeller’s in June of 1980, but I never even saw him that night. Being third on the bill, we had played, torn down, packed up, and left the building before SRV even arrived.

There were other small venues in and around Houston, but most are forgettable. For a time we played them all. But we weren’t making any money and spinning though the same clubs over and over again wasn’t doing anything to increase our audience base or name recognition. We wanted to be “bad, and nation-wide” – as the Reverend Willie G. would say.

For a place that was so important to the beginning of our careers, I don’t think the band liked Austin all that much. First, there were so many bands and so many clubs on 6th Street that no one ever makes any money. Second, we never thought that the crowds were all that good. There was, and still is, a lot of wandering from club to club that goes on in Austin on a Friday or Saturday night - a very unstable environment from a musician’s point of view. Scotty seemed to manage a few coed rendezvous, but right now I can’t remember any really good stories

Long Live Rock And Roll

from our times in “Lone Star Heaven”. Third, and probably of most import, was the fact that all I really wanted to do in Austin was hang out at Antoine’s, drink beer, and listen to the blues. I probably should have been out snoozing with club owners and promoters, but that’s not what happened.

As indifferent as I was about Austin, I liked Dallas even less. First of all, I grew up a Green Bay Packers fan and I HATE the Dallas Cowboys. Secondly, but more to the point, it was a long drive to Dallas. Most of the time just to do one show on a weeknight and then turn around and drive back to Houston. Even if we got a decent payout (most unlikely) it still cost us more to go than what we made. The town just gave me a bad vibe.

On the other hand, Louisiana was very good to us. Although like Dallas, New Orleans was too far for a weekend. But we made really good money in Baton Rouge. And we had a really good time in Lake Charles.

Johnny “The Tater” Ribenaux is a died-in-the-wool coon ass through and through. He got his nickname, which was later shortened to just “Tate”, because Johnny was the original “couch potato”. Tate has two speeds – full blast and dead stop. He liked his whiskey (Johnnie Walker Green Label) 15 years old and his girls about the same age. Tate drove the bread truck (that we bought for almost nothing and had the engine rebuilt in twice) which carried the band’s equipment and occasionally band members and their “guests”. Johnny really is a good driver, he just drives very fast.

Tate’s primary vehicle was a Ford Econoline work van. I have a couple of “war injuries” from riding with Johnny in his Econoline. The first was from a trip to the beach in Galveston, Texas. I have no idea what possessed me to tag along with Tate and Scotty - I don’t even like the beach, or swimming in the ocean unless it is bathwater warm and tidy-bowl blue. In fact, my perfect use for the ocean is to sail on top of it.

The accident happened on the way home from the beach. We had just come across the big bridge on I-45 going north, and were about to cross the smaller bridge at Tiki Island. We were probably going 85-90 miles an hour at the time. A Galveston County patrol car was sitting on the shoulder just the other side of the overpass. Tate slammed on the breaks as soon as he saw the patrol car. I was sitting precariously on a huge pillow in the rear of the van between and behind the two standard seats. When Tate hit the brakes, he launched me toward the windshield. My forehead took out the rear view mirror. I somehow got my arms above my head and my forearms took the biggest part of the blow. I had a cut above my right eyebrow. The cop never even pulled us over.

The second injury was self inflicted, but still involved Tate. We were playing at a small club on Washington Street down a few blocks from Rockefeller’s. We had been there once before and hated the place. It was crowded, cold, and the patrons

Long Live Rock And Roll

were there primarily to drink and play pool. Most would have been happy with a stereo blasting the local “classic rock” station KLOL. I had taken the day off from work for some reason, and decided to “help” Johnny with the gear. The first stop we made was the liquor store. It all went downhill from there. We got to the club to find that we were the second act on the bill, sandwiched between two other bands. The headliner had already set all of their equipment, and management wanted to know if it would be OK for us to use their gear. The other guys weren’t happy to be sharing their stuff, and we certainly were upset about having to use “strange” equipment.

Normally, I don’t drink hard liquor. For whatever reason, I decided to honor this occasion with a pint of Jim Beam. I broke the seal and started to partake shortly after arriving at the club. When R.L. got there to get his drum kit ready to go and saw that it was still in the van he was furious. He was ready to blow off the whole thing. I drank some more Beam. After we talked him down off the cliff (we could pull out, but the club owners in the Heights were a tight knit group. If we walked out on one, we might struggle to get bookings from any of them) there was nothing else to do but wait. R.L. had a beer, and then another. I threw back a couple more swigs. By the time we were to go onstage both of us were drunk. To no one’s surprise, we sounded like shit that night. At the end of our set R.L. kicked over the other band’s bass drum. A fight nearly ensued. Then to add fuel to the fire, I fell on the way out the door and ripped my arm open on a street sign post. Blood everywhere. Tate rushed me to the closest hospital. You can just imagine how he was driving in an emergency situation. Six stitches later we were headed back to the warehouse. Everybody was pissed at everybody. We never asked to play in that club again.

Tate was both the most loved and most harassed member of the crew. Johnny even got a line in **“Nothin’ Much You Can Do”**

“You can’t be naughty,
With a sixteen year old body,
Unless you want trouble to come lookin’ for you.”⁴

But that’s a long story, and the statute of limits probably hasn’t run out – so I’ll leave that one alone.

Louisiana State University is located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Scotty’s sister Stacey was dating a guy named Cole, who was a junior at LSU. He came to hear us one weekend in Houston, and went back to tell his fraternity brothers that he had found the perfect band for their next party. We were hired, and had a really good night. They loved us. Word spread around campus that ZigZag was the real deal. We went back and played a couple more parties. Pretty soon the local club owners were calling as well.

Long Live Rock And Roll

Baton Rouge was good to us, but we loved Lake Charles, Louisiana. “Lake Chuck” holds some special memories for me. It’s where I first met Pee-Tee, it’s the first place I spent time with Leah on the road, and the crowds there were always good. And then there was the food. Particularly, there is a place called Steamboat Bill’s that is right off Interstate 10 just as you crossed the bridge into Lake Charles. I think they opened sometime between our first and second trip to play there. I may well have been one of the first customers. They serve a crawfish pistolette that is to die for.

I really don’t remember the first time I met “Pee-Tee” Brown. I mean I REALLY don’t remember. We were just starting to get a little press in Houston, had been invited back to Lake Charles for the third or fourth time, and this trip we were the top billed act at the biggest club in town. We made a mistake that trip that we didn’t make again for quite some time – we showed up in Lake Charles on Thursday, the day before the show. Big mistake. Big, big Mistake.

We spent Thursday night painting the town. Dinner at a Japanese steak house with plenty of sake, followed by wandering through three or four different places (where for the first time we experienced the phenomenon that you could buy a beer or drink in one club, carry it out the door with you, and into another club) and finally around 11:30 we stopped for a “nightcap” at a little place near the motel. There were only four or five of us still in the group by this point. Someone suggested Frangelico, but after an evening of rice wine and several beers that just sounded too sweet tasting – so we “settled” on tequila. Our nightcap went three or four rounds. I don’t remember exactly. At some point I fell off the bar stool and passed out on the floor. That’s the moment I was introduced to Pee-Tee.

Edward “Pee-Tee” Brown is a six foot two inch, two hundred and twenty five pound African-American from just outside Norcross, Georgia. He’s a former all-state wide receiver who went to a small state school, blew out a knee, finished his degree in Criminal Justice, and became a Georgia State Trooper. When one of his wife’s relatives in Louisiana died he had the opportunity to buy into a couple of family businesses. One of them was a little bar on the east side of Lake Charles. It wasn’t normal for him to visit the bar at this time of night. Usually, Pee-Tee was there by mid morning to make the bank deposit from the night before, place the liquor and food orders, and receive the daily shipments. Everything was done with cash. Employees got their “cut” daily; the beer man got a mountain of twenty dollar bills, even the state inspection fees were paid in cash. Pee-Tee carried a receipt book and a calculator everywhere he went. By early afternoon he was ready to drop off the deposit and the paperwork with the “accountant”, grab a bite of lunch, and either head for the golf course or home for a nap.

On the evening in question, some mail had been delivered to the bar that Pee-Tee needed at home. He had only been there a few minutes when I made my swan song onto the bar room floor. That’s when Pee-Tee and I were informally

Long Live Rock And Roll

introduced. From the recounts I was given by others, Pee-Tee carried me out to the SUV and laid me in the back, drove us all to the motel, and delivered me onto the bed in one of the rooms.

I learned later that Pee-Tee was briefly at one of the shows that weekend. He doesn't remember which night or which club, although we now think it was a smaller place on Saturday night. I always hoped it was that show and not Friday. Friday night we sucked. I was hung over, weak, and overall not in the mood. Scotty had hooked up with a local girl, did a bunch of coke, got little sleep Thursday night/Friday morning, and was in a mental vacuum for most of the show. Musically we weren't terrible, but there was no energy on the stage or much in the room that night. Like I said previously, that was the last time we went over to Louisiana a day early.

The next time we were in town, I stopped by the bar and left a business card with a hundred dollar bill attached for Pee-Tee. He called me less than a week later. The following trip to Lake Charles he took me to eat at one of the family's Creole restaurants. Within six months after we were signed by Capitol, Pee-Tee was the head of security for our tour staff. He's been keeping an eye on me ever since.

One of the club owners in Baton Rouge was a man named Wendell Fontenot. Wendell was a construction manager by trade, and was born and raised in a little town called Denham Springs – about ten miles east of Baton Rouge. Wendell grew tired of the construction game, took the money from the sale of his business and the money he had been saving for retirement and opened the Tiger Beat just south of the LSU campus. He was the master of the gimmick, and soon had co-ed's flocking to the place for "titties drink free" nights, the frat boys drinking the Tiger Shot of the week (colored to represent that Saturday's football foe), and forced some poor house band on Wednesday nights to play "name that tune". From the first time we played at Wendell's club he was after me for product. When I told him we didn't have anything, he went out the next day and had "ZigZag to the Tiger Beat" t-shirts made up. What he really wanted was a record. He could sell them at the bar and we'd both make out. Only one problem – we didn't have anything recorded (except for home demos) and no financial way to make it happen. Wendell had the solution. It wasn't a great deal for the band – in fact we never saw a dime out of the entire process. Wendell offered to put up the money for studio time and production. He also got to keep 100% of the profits until his advance amount was repaid. Then we would split the profits 50-50. He also insisted that we make at least one appearance in his club every month until the recording was complete. We knew we were getting screwed, but we wanted more than anything to get into the recording studio. It really was a win-win situation. He wrote SugarHill Studios in Houston a \$10,000 check, and we were headed for the studio. That was also the day Eric and I tenured our resignations at Hilborn.

Long Live Rock And Roll

Her name was LaVonda Butler, but for twenty-seven years now I've called her Leah. I fell in love with her the first time I saw her, and with all the madness that has been interwoven into my life since, that fact still hasn't changed. She can "light up a room", still has a great ass (even after having three kids), and truth be told is the brains behind the entire operation. Without Leah, I wouldn't be me.

How we met it both totally ridiculous and totally 70's. I had just moved into an apartment with a pool just outside my front door on the north side of Houston. Most days the view was quite outstanding. We had just "signed" the contract with Wendell Fontenot for production of our first album, and everyone but Greg had quit their day jobs. There were two brothers living in the apartment upstairs, and they were a couple of players. They had a great cocaine connection, and used it to their advantage with the ladies. There were almost always a few women around. Free cocaine tends to make that happen. I wasn't there much on the weekends, as we were mostly moving back and forth between the studio in Houston during the week and Friday and Saturday night gigs in Lake Charles or Baton Rouge. A typical day consisted of sleeping until late morning, eating eggs and toast after a long, hot shower and then heading to the south side of town and Sugar Hill studio. Normally I got back to the apartment around two the next morning. I spend most of the day alone in the semi darkness of my apartment working on material and arrangements for the album we were working on.

One day I ran into one of the brothers, Chris, as I was returning from the mailboxes at the front of the apartment complex. He asked how the new album was progressing, when we would be playing in town next, and if I ever thought about how it would feel to be really, really famous. He also mentioned that his friend "Dewey" was dropping by that afternoon and I should come upstairs and hang out later. Dewey was the coke connection – although I suspect that was not his real name. I had met him a couple of times before, and he was an interesting guy. Invested the money he made dealing into the restoration of antique cars and trucks. I think he liked me because he had hoped I could make some connections for him within the band and in the local music scene. I never told him this, but I wasn't about to let that happen. There was enough craziness going on already, I certainly didn't need to fuel the fire.

When I walked into Chris's apartment that afternoon, there were about 10 people in the room. Four of them were women. One of them was Leah. They were doing "blasts" from Dewey's coke vile and talking about the topless bar where the "new girls" were currently working. I was quickly introduced to the girls; Julie, Stephanie and LeVonda (the forth girl was there with Dewey and was not introduced). Stephanie was Julie's cousin from Lufkin, Texas. LeVonda was a mutual friend of both girls. She was from Lufkin as well.

Julie was probably closer to my age than the other two girls. She looked like life had worn on her a little more than she would have preferred, and I had no problem believing that she was a dancer. The other two were much younger. Stephanie

Long Live Rock And Roll

had a great body. Nice firm breasts and a tight little behind. She certainly had the features to please the clientele in a topless club. Her only issue was her face. She wasn't ugly, but she wasn't pretty either. Mostly, it was Stephanie's uncanny resemblance to Rod Stewart that I just could never get past. Leah was small and very feminine. I didn't see her as having the potential for a success in the skin game. She was pretty enough, but didn't have the edge that most of the girls in that business needed to survive. Leah was "staying" with Chris.

Over the next several weeks, I saw the girls a few times. At the pool, or leaving with Julie (who wasn't staying with Chris and Marty and had the only car) in the middle of the afternoon to go to "work". We were still in the studio and booked to play weekends mostly in Louisiana, so my existence in the apartment was pretty minimal at best. We had just gotten a local booking at a place called Wunsche Brothers Café in Spring, Texas for two weeks from that Saturday night when I ran into Chris and Marty one afternoon. I let them know about the show, and that I could make sure they got in and had a seat. Chris asked if they could bring the girls and I said yes.

I didn't think any more about that show until the day of the engagement arrived. We were just about done with the first record, and with a little regional success our management thought we might be about to catch on as opening act for at least a portion of a U.S. tour. I was so self absorbed with the band and the music that I really didn't have time for anything else. That all changed with one "simple twist of fate".

There were nine people in Chris and Marty's group when they arrived. I had only held a table for eight. There was room for the additional person to sit at a table closer to the stage with R.L.'s sister Kelly and her husband Jerry. Leah immediately volunteered. I glanced at Chris, who gave me this "whatever" look, and I pointed Leah in the direction of Kelly's table. The show we did that night was mostly a preview of material being considered for the album. We were looking for feedback from a room that was filled mostly with family and friends. Like Bob Seger says, the toughest decisions are "what to leave in, what to leave out."⁵ We started at 8:30 and were done before 11:00. I was ready to head back to the apartment, have a couple of beers, catch a buzz and unwind – as there wasn't anything on the schedule until the following Tuesday afternoon.

As I was packing up my guitar, I saw that Kelly was talking with Leah and Chris. Stephanie was also there. Chris came over to me and said that the girls wanted to go with Jerry and Kelly to another club and he and his brothers had plans to go elsewhere. He wanted to know what I was going to do, and if I wanted to go with them. I said no, that I thought I'd head back to the apartment. I got the sense that Chris was tiring of Leah and Steph and was trying to dump them, at least for one night. That's when Kelly jumped in. She just insisted that I go with them and have "one drink". You had to know Kelly to know that she wasn't going to take "no" for an answer. So I acquiesced, and said OK. The next thing I knew, the

Long Live Rock And Roll

girls were going to ride with me. We went to a dance club on FM 1960 not far from the apartment, and I had a couple of Shiner's and talked with Jerry. But the girls wanted to dance.

Now one of the primary benefits of being in a band was that you didn't have to dance. You made the music, and other people danced. I don't hate to dance, although I'm not about to make it one of my hobbies either. But I was also beginning to think that I might get lucky. It only took about five minutes on the dance floor to see where things were headed, and prove my initial assessment correct. Stephanie made her intentions quite clear – she was all over me and flat out said she wanted to have sex with me. Leah was a little less overt, but she was giving signs that she might be interested as well. Two songs later we were headed out the door, and back to the apartment. Was I about to have my first three way ???

We stopped at a convenience store and I bought a bottle of wine and a six pack of Michelob Light. As soon as we got back to my place, I pulled out the Rolling Stones "Some Girls" album and opened the wine for the girls. Then I made a startling announcement. As Chris and I were walking out to the vehicles, he handed me a small plastic envelope and simply said "a present from Dewey." I first asked the girls if they were interested and they both said yes. Then I made my decree – "guests in my apartment must be totally naked in order to partake in the festivities". I found the razor blade and laid out three nice lines of cocaine on the kitchen table. By the time I turned back around both girls were standing next to piles of clothing on the living room floor. Let the games begin.

Stephanie had beautiful breasts. Young and round and firm. She had a body built for sex. But she still looked like Rod Stewart, and even totally naked it was tough to get over that image. Then I looked at Leah. She was breathtaking. A classic feminine body, she looked like a Roman statue. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Then I suddenly realized that I was completely overdressed for the occasion. So I did my line, opened a Michelob, pointed the girls toward the mirror and headed to the bedroom. I had just enough time to set my beer on the night stand, plop down on the corner of the bed and untie my left shoe before Stephanie was on her knees in front of me, assisting with the removal of my pants. Leah came in moments later. I placed my hand on the small of her back, pulled her toward me, and kissed her hard on the mouth.

It didn't really turn out to be a "three way". I whispered to Leah and asked her to wait for me in the bed. I took Stephanie out to the couch and made love to her there, in the dark. Then I took a shower and returned to Leah.

It was two days later before she and I left the apartment again. It was magic.

A lot of things changed in a little less than forty eight hours. Chris and his brothers had an automobile accident after leaving a gentlemen's club the night of

Long Live Rock And Roll

the show. He had a broken arm and a pretty banged up face. Everyone else just had scrapes and bruises. He came back to the apartment angry and on pain pills. He was ready for the girls to leave, and I really didn't blame him. Marty already had a girlfriend, and she didn't take kindly to Leah and Steph living in that close a proximity to her man. Chris liked Leah, but didn't want her living with him. It cramped his style. I was more that happy to have Leah move downstairs with me, but I didn't want Stephanie living there too. There was a lot to sort out.

I got up the next morning and opened the front door of the apartment as I heard footsteps on the stairs. I hoped it was Leah. What I got was totally unexpected. An older lady led the precession, followed by Stephanie and Leah. None of them even glanced into my doorway. After they passed, I stuck my head out the door just as they were turning the corner at the end of the building. I heard a faint "I love you" as they moved out of sight. Just as quickly and mysteriously as Leah had come into my life, she had now left it.

Nobody knew exactly what happened. Chris and Marty weren't home at the time, only a friend named Donnie who hung out and crashed there sometimes. He said the woman asked for the girls, had words with them both, especially with Steph, and they had all left together. There was some mention of involving the sheriff's department. And I was guessing that Donnie hadn't offered up any information about his role in this little passion play. He had been banging Stephanie on a regular basis for the best part of a month.

I was depressed. I didn't have a phone number, an address, or anything. All I knew was LeVonda Butler and Stephanie (last name unknown) from around Lufkin, Texas. I was really hoping that our relationship might last at least until we went back on the road. It sure would have made the studio sessions easier to cope with. Less cooking, less cleaning, more sex.

The first good thing that happened from this experience was writing "Gotta Find That Girl". It was my near immediate reaction, and most of the lyrics just fell onto the page.

Gotta Find That Girl

"Leave the rest of the world behind,
For a face I just can't erase from my mind.
Twist of fate can be so unkind,
But I'm gonna keep lookin' 'til I go blind.

'Cause I gotta find that girl,
If it's the last thing I do.
I've gotta find that girl,
And tell her my love is so true.
I've gotta find that girl,

Long Live Rock And Roll

If I just knew where to start.
I've gotta find that girl,
Or get her out of my heart.

Now winds of change may blow so unfair,
Pray to God but he just don't care.
Empty avenues filled with despair,
Still I'd walk to the ends of the earth if I thought she was there.

'Cause I gotta find that girl,
If it's the last thing I do.
I've gotta find that girl,
And tell her my love is so true.
I've gotta find that girl,
If I just knew where to start.
I've gotta find that girl,
Or get her out of my heart.

Boy you know she's not the only woman in the world,
I can still read between the lines.
Ah but you know it's been so long,
Since I've found someone who'd suit me so fine.

Now it's not for me to sit here and mope,
Tried and tried but I'll never cope.
No use in drownin' grab hold of the rope
And I'm gonna keep searchin' while there's still hope.

'Cause I gotta find that girl,
If it's the last thing I do.
I've gotta find that girl,
And tell her my love is so true.
I've gotta find that girl,
If I just knew where to start.
I've gotta find that girl,
Or get her out of my heart.

Boy you better find that girl,
Yeah-yea, yeah-yea.
I gotta find that girl,
If it's the last thing I do.
You better find that girl,
Don't you know, don't you know.
I gotta find that girl,
And tell her my love is so true."⁶

Long Live Rock And Roll

Over the next few days the songwriting really flowed, probably three or four songs in succession that all made the first album. My heart was broken yet again, and I was wearing it on my sleeve. We took a two week break from the studio, and had an off weekend in the middle as well. Most of the band headed for Padre Island. I rented a car and headed north on US-59 toward Lufkin.

Lufkin, Texas is a town of about 30,000 people two hours northeast of Houston. It was an easy drive. That afternoon I checked into the Holiday Inn and drove around for a while. About 8:00 that evening I got a sandwich at Arby's and went back to a couple of bars that I had seen earlier in the day.

If I had thought about it in advance I would have probably come up with a better approach than to just ask total strangers (in East Texas no less) "do you know a girl named LaVonda Butler, I think she lives around here somewhere ???". I got plenty of odd looks, a lot of quick "no's" and a fair amount of indifference. A couple of girls said they thought they knew her, but they didn't know where she lived or how to get in touch with her. After a couple of hours of harassing the locals, I headed back to the motel a bit disappointed yet not really surprised. But somewhere I had hit pay dirt. Thirty minutes later there was a knock on my door. It was Leah.

I never have asked her how she found out I was there, and I don't really care. I hugged her and held her tight for what seemed like an eternity. We chatted briefly about why I had come and what she was doing. She wanted to make love to me, but that would have to wait. LaVonda needed to talk to her parents. Ask them if they wanted to meet a stoner rock and roll wannabe who just happened to be crazy about their daughter. But first, I needed to know the story behind their sudden exodus from the apartment complex.

It was Julie who had spilled the beans. She had called her mother to ask for help with her rent. She needed someone to wire her some money or she was going to get evicted. Her mother did her one better. If she could tell her Uncle Max (Stephanie's step dad) where the girls were living, her mother would pay her rent for the next three months. Max Richmond was a 20 year veteran of the Angelina County sheriff's department. He had connections all over East Texas, and plenty of friends in the Houston area as well. Within the hour, Max and his wife Shirley (Stephanie's mom) were cruising south on U.S. Highway 59 and knew exactly which apartment complex they were headed to. Max made one more phone call and had the apartment number. It was agreed that Shirley would make the first attempt to gather up the girls. Max was there to drive, and provide backup, if needed. Stephanie didn't have a choice in the matter. LaVonda did, but not really. If she refused to come home with Shirley and Max, her father would be back for her that evening. From the parent's perspective, this party was over. The girls could only do one of two things: leave peacefully with Shirley, or have Max call in the cavalry. If that happened, someone was probably going to jail.

Long Live Rock And Roll

By ignoring me, Leah had hoped to keep me out of the line of fire. I was just glad that the words “pregnant” and “minor” weren’t part of the conversation.

Jim and Janet Butler are just another middle aged, middle class couple trying to keep the ends as close together as possible. They have three children, LaVonda being the oldest. Jimmy, as he preferred to be called, was a captain with the Lufkin Fire Department. Janet taught second grade. I had to push the issue with Leah. I think she would have been content to spend the night with me at the motel and make up some lame excuse for her parents in the morning. I had come in search of something more. So Leah left my room at about 10:30 that evening to go home and have a conversation she really didn’t want to have. She knew I was right, but she was scared. After everything that had just transpired, the timing couldn’t have been worse. Leah and I would talk again in the morning.

The conversation between Leah and her parents wasn’t as awful as she had feared. And although Janet absolutely refused to consider the notion at first, Jimmy Butler could see in his daughter’s eyes how much this meant to her. At least she hadn’t just run off again. What would it hurt if he just met this guy for a beer somewhere; after all, he was leaving to head back to Houston the next day. And then this would all blow over. Janet said fine, but left a clear message – “tell him to go away.”

They had every logical argument on their side. I was 24, Leah was 19. I lived in Houston, she lived in Lufkin. I was an “unemployed” musician, and she needed to finish her commitment to cosmetology school. But there was one fact that they had no defense against – we were in “love”.

Jimmy Butler was a typical good ole boy from East Texas. He wore jeans and cowboy boots with a maroon Texas A&M t-shirt. He drove a Ford F-150 pickup truck. He drank Miller Lite and liked to play poker on the weekends. He had a share in a deer lease near Madisonville, Texas and there were mounts on the wall of his living room to prove it. And there was undoubtedly a loaded weapon in the cab of his truck somewhere. We met at a small ice house on the west side of town. He shook my hand and gave me this easy smile that I recognized immediately. His daughter had inherited this facial characteristic from her daddy. I ordered a burger and a Shiner. Jimmy just had a beer. Leah wanted only a glass of water. Her presence alone was victory number one. I was fearful that her father would come alone. The bar maid delivered our drinks and disappeared into the kitchen. Jimmy started the conversation casually by asking where I was from and how long I had lived in Houston. Leah said almost nothing, but had casually slid her right hand under the table and was holding my left in a death grip. I’d come into this meeting with a plan, but wasn’t sure now if it was the right tact or not. My goal here wasn’t to piss anybody off. He asked how we met, and if I had any part in the topless bar/living with strange men fiasco. Although Leah had already told her parents that I wasn’t involved in any of this, I think he wanted to hear it from me. I assured him that I had not (but I did NOT go into the details).

Long Live Rock And Roll

My burger arrived and I decided that was the perfect time to turn the conversation. Really all I wanted was a chance. I hadn't driven up there hell bent on grabbing up his daughter and heading back to the big, bad city. In a very brief period of time I had really come to CARE for Leah. She wasn't a piece of ass to me, she was a piece OF me (I didn't say it to him in exactly those words). Years later Jimmy and I joke about all of this and I still quote The Boss for him:

“Well this is his last chance,
To get his daughter in a fine romance.
'Cause the record company, Rosie,
Just gave me a big advance.”⁷

All I wanted was an opportunity to date Leah. Call her up on the phone and talk to her. Pick her up at the house and go to the movies. Just “normal” stuff. I'd be willing to go back to Houston the next day content with the knowledge that if I came back to Lufkin in a week or two that Leah and I would be able to see each other without creating anger or contention. At that point, I think Jimmy was happier with me than Leah was. I guess she thought that I was going to demand her release from captivity or something. We finished our beers and Jimmy got up to leave. He was willing to at least discuss the notion with his wife again, although he wasn't offering any guarantees. I understood. But I did say in parting that if Leah and I really wanted to be together there was nothing and no one who could keep us apart. I kissed Leah and asked her to call me. I'd be leaving the following morning.

The telephone in the motel room rang a couple of hours later. When I answered, the voice on the other end of the line was familiar, but not who I expected. It was Janet Butler, Leah's mother. She asked how I was doing. I said fine. Then she vented for the next five minutes. It was unconscionable to her that these young girls could be taken advantage of in this fashion and that someone should be held accountable. And if I had played any part in the process I should be ashamed. I just listened, and injected “yes, ma'am” every so often. She said that Jimmy thought that she should give me a chance, but she just didn't know. I was just too much older and worldlier that her daughter and only bad things could come from our relationship. LaVonda needed to find a local boy her own age. After an uncomfortable pause, I responded. Although I was disappointed, I certainly understood. We both only wanted what was best for Leah. I thanked her for her time, told her that I hoped she had a nice day, and hung up the phone. And cried. At the Butler home, World War III was about to break out.

LaVonda was leaving, with or without her parent's approval. She had the suitcases out and was packing everything she owned. She would walk, if necessary. Her mother was both crying and screaming. Her brother and sister were looking on in amazement. Jimmy was trying to sleep, and failing miserably. He had worked the night before and needed some rest. He would have had better luck in a foxhole. There was no “good side” to this argument, and he was

desperate. He got my number from the kitchen and called the motel room. He almost begged me to come over. I asked if there were any loaded weapons in the house that I should be concerned about. He just laughed and said "I hope not." He gave me directions and hung up the phone. I was in there driveway ten minutes later. Leah ran out to meet me. Her mother stood in the doorway. I gave Leah a long hug. She was trembling. I held her hand and we walked across the front yard and onto a side patio. We sat on a porch swing in silence for what seemed like an eternity. I had my arm around her and her face was buried in my shoulder. Why does young love have to be so painful??? She begged me to take her with me back to the motel. I told her that wouldn't solve the problem. Then she unleashed about her mother. It sounded a lot like the other side of a conversation I had just experienced a couple of hours earlier. I just replaced "yes ma'am" with "I know". She was inconsolable. Then the unexpected happened. Janet Butler came out the side door, lit up a Newport cigarette, and sat down across from us. I was hoping that everyone was yelled out. She took a long draw from her cigarette and exhaled slowly. Then she looked me straight in the eye. She said she was sorry about our conversation earlier. I told her not to worry about it. She said that she still had major misgivings. I said I understood. She said that she thought LaVonda should finish what she started with cosmetology school. I agreed. She said that I must have thought that they were all crazy. I said that I just saw how concerned they were for their daughter. She said that everything changed when she saw Leah run across the driveway to meet me. I asked her how? She said she had to see it to know that it was real. And now she had. And it was. If I never get anything right ever again, this would have all still been worth it.

Leah was and is that One Right Thing.

The next ten weeks were the most incredible of my life and they went by like a whirlwind. We had just completed all of the tracks for the album, and were working on the mix. Although we were officially a "signed act", it was only a one record deal and most of Wendell's money was being put up against expenses at the studio. We still had to play almost every weekend to have any cash in our pockets. I was going up to Lufkin as often as I could, and once Leah had even spent the weekend with me in Lake Charles. I think her mother was warming to the notion that I wasn't really the devil incarnate.

We were scheduled for one of the showcase events at the South By Southwest Music Festival in Austin the first week in March. We had been invited to play at SXSW the year before, but not in a showcase. It seemed the combination of studio sessions and weekend gigs had us in a pretty good place both physically and emotionally. We did a four song set, and were really, really on. We got great crowd response, and even better critical comment. Three different labels approached me after the show. We signed with Bluebonnet Records in Macon, Georgia three days later.

Long Live Rock And Roll

Bluebonnet was an independent label that also managed a booking service. They agreed to cut Wendell Fontenot a check and underwrite the final mastering and release of “ZigZag”, the self titled album that we had been working on at SugarHill. They also agreed to underwrite a second record as well. They wrote us an advance check for \$47,000. In our minds it might as well have been a million. They also promised a steady touring schedule. We had hoped for something in the States. What we got instead was six weeks in Europe.

We landed in Berlin, Germany on March 23rd, 1981. The next forty three days were like an oversized, hyperactive “lost weekend”. First of all, the only people making the trip were the five of us in the band. And we could only take one instrument and one personal bag each. No amps and no drums. They would be provided, along with a PA system and a truck to cart everything around once we got to Germany. We had to drive the truck, load and unload the equipment, do our own sound checks (without a sound man), play the gig, tear down and load everything back up, and in most cases drive a couple hundred kilometers to the next city and the next day’s show. Not to mention fixing anything that broke, including the truck. It made me feel like I was in high school again. We slept in youth hostels or sometimes in a loft apartment above the club. The food was all strange, and the languages stranger. None of us besides Greg spoke anything except English, and his German was weak to say the least. We played 31 events in those six weeks in twenty four different cities in seven different countries. Our biggest fear wasn’t that the European audiences wouldn’t like us, because we found out the first night that most of those kids craved American anything, but most of all American Rock and Roll. We were concerned that after that long a time out of the country and away from our usual circuit of clubs, they might not want us back. The greatest positive was that those long nights and days alone as strangers in a strange land made us totally dependant upon one another. We left as five individuals. We came home as one band.

Not to say that the entire trip was without its high points. We played in Oslo, Norway on a cold and rainy “spring” night. The crowd was raucous, and we were well received. After the show we were invited to an “after party” in a warehouse not too far from the club. Since we were spending a second night in Oslo before heading on into Sweden, everybody but R.L. (who was sick with a fever and congestion for the first two weeks of the tour) decided to go. We almost lost Eric that night. Her name was Birgitt, and she was a stunner. Long blonde hair and even longer, beautiful legs. Eric is of Scandinavian descent and with his blonde hair and broad shoulders he fit in well with the locals in the room. He and Birgitt hooked up, and they disappeared. When we got ready to leave the next morning, Eric was nowhere to be found. After checking with everyone we could find in Oslo and making a couple of calls back to the States, we headed to Stockholm without a keyboard player. Birgitt had convinced Eric that they could take the train together to Sweden, and he made it there about an hour before the show. We were all pissed, but didn’t want to push the issue. There was talk of them traveling together for the remainder of the tour. At some point either logic set in

Long Live Rock And Roll

or the potion wore off. Either way, when we left Stockholm, Eric was back in the truck with the rest of us.

Although it had been twenty years since the last time the Beatles played in Hamburg, there was still a “vibe” about the place. We wandered the streets and talked about what the Liverpool Lads had gone through, and tried to parallel it to our current situation. We were well received there, but at the time Hamburg was more of a metal scene.

Amsterdam is the craziest city I have ever experienced. I don’t even talk to Leah about what went on there. Before it was a popular tag line for another “sin city”, the band all agreed - what happened in Amsterdam, stayed in Amsterdam. We were there only one night, and it was either one night too many or not nearly long enough – to this day I’m still not sure which.

After returning from Europe, we went back into the studio to work on our second album. The project was tentatively named “Embrace the Reality”. We were starting to get some dates nationally at clubs in Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami. The sessions were being tracked at the FAME studios in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. I was bouncing back and forth between a hotel room there and an apartment that Leah had rented in League City, Texas – just south of Houston. We were still playing in Baton Rouge about once a month as well. On the second trip to LA, we played at the Roxy, and Marvin Heinbaugh from Capital Records was in attendance. The insanity of our stint in Europe was paying big dividends – we looked like we were in total control, and at that point I think we probably were. We had a really great night, and there were a number of “stars” in the audience, including Martin Scorsese, Robert Redford, and Stephen Stills. We headed back to Alabama, and about a week later got a call from the folks at Bluebonnet. Capital wanted to buy out our contract. They were offering a \$1.2 million dollar advance against a three record deal. We had hit the big time. They had also arranged for us to be the opening act for several of the shows on the current Tom Petty tour.

It was only four shows, and two of them were in Texas – the other two in Florida, the Heartbreaker’s home turf. The final show of the tour was in Gainesville, their hometown. They didn’t want or need an opening act in Gainesville. Those two weeks in September and October, 1981 changed our lives.

Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers had just released their fourth album, “Hard Promises”, in the spring of 1981 as a follow up to the highly successful and critically acclaimed “Damn the Torpedoes”, which included such hits as “Don’t Do Me Like That” and “Refugee”. They went back out on the road to support the current project in June of ’81. Two blocks of dates in the U.S. covering fifteen cities. “The Waiting” from the new album was climbing the charts. TP was hot, and they were rakin’ it in. We never played many covers, but one of our staples was “An American Girl”. We loved the Heartbreakers. We learned a lot from

Long Live Rock And Roll

those guys, and personally I will always be grateful to them for giving us the opportunity. Touring in the States was light years different from anything we had ever experienced. And we embraced every second of the experience.

The first time we appeared on the Late Show with David Letterman was in November of 1981. "Embrace the Reality" had just been released, and we were fresh off the Petty tour. I don't even remember who else was on the show that night. Dave had just taken to the air on NBC earlier in the month, and we were one of his very first guests. We did a sound check, went backstage, and had a bite to eat. Then we went back on in the middle of the afternoon and played one song from the new record – "Thoroughbred".

Thoroughbred

"She leaves the gate at a breakneck speed,
No man can hold her down.
A streak of light that you can barely see,
She'll rarely touch the ground.

Hittin' the circuit, beatin' the odds,
It's such a childish game.
And then you'll find after she's said goodbye,
Your life will never be the same.

'Cause she's a thoroughbred.
Don't mind your heart she's aimin' straight for your head.
She's a thoroughbred.
Race through your life boy and win what she can,
Then leave you feelin' dead.

Into the backstretch at a record pace,
Come to the right spot boy if you've been lookin' for a race.
She's got the power and she's got the will,
Best watch out boy you might be headed for a spill.

'Cause she's a thoroughbred.
Don't mind your heart she's aimin' straight for your head.
She's a thoroughbred.
Race through your life boy and win what she can,
Then leave you feelin' dead.

Comin' down the home straight you know you're fadin' fast,
Against her sorted talents few men will ever last.
Just heed this warning or lest one day you'll find,
She's wearing roses and you've been left behind.

Long Live Rock And Roll

‘Cause she’s a thoroughbred.
Don’t mind your heart she’s aimin’ straight for your head.
She’s a thoroughbred.
Race through your life boy and win what she can,
Then leave you feelin’ dead.”⁸

We jetted to New York two days later and were the musical guests on Saturday Night Live, being hosted that week by actress Lauren Hutton. We did “Thoroughbred” again in the first band segment, and finished with “Ladies of the Evening”.

I had written “Ladies” a couple of years before, shortly after I moved to Houston. It was edgy with a twist. Power chords, but in a minor key (F#m to be exact.). I wasn’t unfamiliar with the concept of prostitution (I didn’t grow up that far back in the sticks), but the whole “street walker” phenomenon had me spellbound. Only in the big city. For Houston, that meant a section on Main Street south of downtown and a place on the near north side called “Jensen Drive”. I first noticed all of the women standing along south Main Street driving home from a Houston Astros baseball game. Initially, I thought they might be waiting for a bus. Then I realized there wasn’t a bus stop within fifty yards of the parking lot they were gathering near. Mostly black, mostly overweight. I sat in the Burger King parking lot across the street one night and watched the comings and goings for the best part of an hour. I saw near fights, lots of cussing and discussing, a few dollars change hands, and a couple of “girls” who left, were gone twenty minutes, and then returned. Quickies I guess.

Jensen Drive near the corner of Quitman Street was a whole other animal. More of an intercity community area, the side streets are lined with row houses, alleyways, and small dives and eateries. It was actually a fairly controlled environment. A girl would slip to the curb, stand there no more than a few minutes, a car would pull over and she would be swept away. Another girl would almost immediately take her place. There were several of these “spots” on Jensen Drive, and all had fairly brisk business, especially on Friday and Saturday night. Checking out this scene was a little more risky. There wasn’t a good place to stop and observe, so I would drive through as slowly as possible without trying to attract too much attention – I wasn’t looking for a “date”. I did hire a girl one night, but not for the sex. I just wanted to talk, but I came off sounding too much like a cop I guess and she got scared off pretty quickly. I did get pulled over by the Houston Police one night while I was cruising around that area. I saw something that interested me (but now I don’t remember what) so I made a right hand turn and was about to make another to circle around the block. I didn’t see the One Way sign until I had nearly rounded the corner. Immediately, there were bubble gum lights in my rear view mirror. I was a little buzzed, but fortunately no open beers in the car and nothing else illegal either. I got off with a warning, and that concluded my research. I was playing with fire.

Long Live Rock And Roll

This was also one of the first few songs where I was beginning to visualize the multimedia concepts that led to Pop-Op.

Ladies of the Evening

“Find your piece of sidewalk, layin’ down the lines,
Terms too dear for the mention.
Just one directive, visions quite sublime,
Pay the man so little attention.

Ladies of the evening seldom make it right,
Put you on with looks so deceiving.
Ladies of the evening never stay the night,
Know their goal’s the one worth believing.
Those ladies of the evening.

Checkin’ for a mean one, beatin’ all the odds,
Now’s no time for a girl to get reckless.
Sortin’ out the pieces, thankin’ sultry gods,
Take a good thing to the excess.

Ladies of the evening seldom make it right,
They’re not the one’s who been grieving.
Ladies of the evening never stay the night,
What sort of web are you weaving?
Those ladies of the evening.

Ladies of the evening, they’ll show you no mercy.
Ladies of the evening they just want your cash.
Ladies of the evening don’t give you no guarantees.
Ladies of the evening won’t show you no flash,
But we’ll give you some.

Ladies of the evening seldom make it right,
Put you on with looks so deceiving.
Ladies of the evening never stay the night,
Know their goal’s the one worth believing.
Those ladies of the evening.”⁹

We had made it in New York, New York. Now we were ready to take on the rest of the world.