

First Gig

Damn! Damn! Damn! I mashed my finger! Who'd have thought pushing the old piano out from the music room to the back of the stage was dangerous, for crying out loud. When Hank and I went around the corner, he didn't stop pushing when I told him to stop. I have to find a Band-Aid. I've got blood on my clean white shirt cuff. I'll be the only guy in the band with my sleeves rolled up.

And like I was telling Hank, I don't know how the hell we're supposed to look like a rock and roll band if we're wearing Perry Como sweaters. And Mike certainly needs to look older. We're all 15 and sixteen, but he looks like he's 12 in that sweater.

Earlier today the five of us piled into Jimmy's mother's brand new '58 Chevy and drove out to the new shopping center ... the one they built on our old ball field, for crap's sake ... to buy outfits for our first gig tonight. We all have black chinos, so we needed some kind of shirt and jacket. But Mike talked us into this sleeveless sweater thing that has only a couple of buttons on the front at the bottom. And white shirts. No tie, thank goodness. But to be funny I suggested we get bow ties. If the crowd didn't like our rock and roll music, we could switch to Barbershop.

I know what Mike was thinking about ... girls. I wanted us to buy the orange colored jackets. But it's too warm to wear coats in school this time of year. The Principal wouldn't let us wear 'em anyway, but Mike probably figured we could wear the red sweaters and impress the girls. They would ask, "Hey, why are you guys all dressed alike?" And we'd have to answer, "Got an early gig tonight. Hittin' the highway right after school." In other words, "Aren't you impressed?"

The girl I've been dating, Mary Ellen, doesn't believe I'm a rock and roll musician. She says I'm just a teenager. Well, so are Dionne and Fabian, I tell her. "They've got talent," she

says. But she hasn't heard me sing *For Your Love* yet. If she comes to the dance tonight, she'll change her mind when she hears my terrific rendition of the song.

To tell the truth, I don't feel like a rocker. I don't have much of a beard yet and I don't play the piano all that well. And the DJ who hired us for tonight doesn't like me. He goes by the name of Mr. Personality on the radio. He heard me call him Mr. Puke under my breath when we met him last month and he told me to get a haircut. I suppose I should be grateful he asked us to come along to the dance and play a few songs, especially since no one has hired us yet.

Hopefully, this gig will get us some attention and we'll get better paying jobs every weekend. We can save the money for more professional outfits, like those orange tuxedos, or the blue plaid dinner jackets worn by bands like Red Rovero and the Rockin' Pneumonias. Jimmy doesn't like the orange tuxes and says we'll be mistaken for a baseball team from Florida. But I'd feel more like a real musician in a tux with a gold cummerbund.

We're setting up the drums and amplifiers behind the curtain on the stage of the school auditorium and we're laughing nervously as we get closer to that dreaded moment when Mr. Puke will announce us. I've got butterflies leaping around in my stomach and I am not feeling like a lead singer at this moment. I'll admit it: I'm just a 15 year old kid who plays mediocre piano and has trouble singing high notes. I can't remember why I agreed to sing to an audience of kids who know me and will probably laugh their asses off.

I listen to the DJ out in front of the curtain and am amazed how friendly his voice sounds. He's a bully, but does a good job covering it up. He orders us around like he owns us. We thought we were invited to be a major part of the show. I'll bet he opens the curtain for us to play and then closes it after one song. The last time he came back while a record was spinning he began to tell us how to play our music and threatened to not let us go on. Screw him.

I hear another record begin and Mr. Puke comes behind the curtain again. I wish he'd just stay out front and do his job and leave us alone.

"You guys ready?" he asks

"Get ready to hear the next national sound sensation ... The Bel Airs!" shouts Jimmy.

Thank God for Jimmy's bullshit. He lives life pushing against the wind. Jimmy will go chest to chest with anyone who stands in his way. If he hadn't talked me into this ... well, I'd be sitting home with Gunsmoke playing on the TV, I guess. Being a rock and roll musician has gotta be more fun than watching Marshall Dillon look down the front of that old broad's dress. Kitty's got more spots on her face than a Dalmation..

I'll be OK if I don't sing off key or forget the chords and riffs I practiced on the piano over and over all week. I hope I get the feeling back in my finger and the Band-Aid doesn't get in the way.

I don't play the piano when I sing *For Your Love*. I'll be up in front singing into the mike.

Between records I can hear the crowd getting larger as more teenagers arrive at the dance. I take deep breaths to keep my hands from shaking.

"Davey, give me a B flat," says Lowell, our sax, wanting to get us tuned up together.

I tap the key on the old piano and a searing pain shoots up my finger. It's not getting any better.

"That's not a B flat," says Lowell.

"Lowell," I say, "I'm on the brink of becoming an international rock and roll star, and I would never forget where the B Flats are on the keyboard."

"Then we're in trouble," says Lowell.

It's me who's in trouble, not the rest of the band. Mike has his little blow-through guitar tuner and we quickly conclude the piano is about a mile and a half away from standard scale. The songs I play in E will tonight have to be in A-flat. A-flat? Who the hell can play a piano in A-flat? I can transpose quickly enough, but the riffs and runs I've practiced all week are out the window. Holy Crap! A-freaking-flat!

"You're on at the end of this record." shouts Mr. Puke as his head pops through the curtain. We all glance at each other as if we've just been found guilty of a major crime.

"Dave," Mr. Puke calls to me, "when I announce you guys, pull the rope and open the curtain. Then come out and join the band."

What the hell! We planned to start playing as the curtain opened. I'll be running on stage after they start our first song, a Duane Eddy instrumental called *Raunchy*. I'll look like hired help or a fill-in who isn't really part of the band.

Jimmy steps toward the DJ and says, "We're changing our first song. We'll let Dave do *For Your Love* first.

"I think the Duane Eddy is a better opening," says Mr. Puke.

"Nope," says Jimmy, "For Your Love's got a long intro and that'll give Dave time to get out here to the mike."

Mr. Puke rolls his eyes and his face disappears back through the curtain.

"Are you kidding?" I say. "I'm gonna pull on the freaking curtain ropes, then run on stage and start singing?"

"We'll do a big build up to give you time," says Jimmy. "While you're coming on stage, I'll introduce you. "And now, directly from the Men's Room at the Waldorf Astoria ... Deadly Dave!" He breaks up laughing.

Buddy Holly's "Oh Boy" ends and we all look at each other like we're about to be shot. I turn and run to the side of the stage and pull on the curtain rope. Jimmy plays two chords from *Raunchy*, realizes his error, and not too smoothly slides over to the opening chords of *For Your Love*. I keep pulling down on the rope and the curtain slowly separates. My hands are so sweaty they slip. I imagine the kids down on the floor watching the curtain open in spurts, stopping and starting, as if the stage isn't sure it wants to be part of this disaster.

The curtains are only halfway apart when the music stops and Jimmy speaks into the mike. He glances over his shoulder at me. Then he waves "c'mon" and launches into an impromptu monologue.

"Our piano player has arrived from his hospital bed," he says. "But he insisted on singing that fabulous hit song, "For Your Love," in honor of the pack of elves he killed when he came around a turn too fast on the Frankfort Gorge road in his father's Buick and swept them all into the creek and drowned a dozen of them."

No one is laughing. The kids might believe him.

I let go of the rope when the curtain is most of the way open and take off for the front of the

stage. The band laughs wildly, but the kids in the audience sense something is going wrong and have that deer-in-the-headlights look on their faces.

Rounding the Hi Hat cymbals, I jump over the cables and reach the front of the stage terrifically out of breath, hardly prepared to sing my first song in public. Jimmy gives me the chord. I grab the mike-stand and pull it toward me. The worst feedback I ever heard in my life erupts from the speakers, squealing like a pig with distemper. Jimmy and I back away from each other and I begin to sing.

The key ... whatever the hell key we settled on using Mike's guitar tuner ... is a little too high for my voice. I don't think I can hit the high notes when I get there.

A few couples down on the floor attempt to dance, but since the audience is mostly junior high kids, many stand around in groups whispering, girls looking over at the boys. I hit the first high note square and with volume, then drop down two notes to huff out a low note, just like Brook Benton, just like I practiced it at home in the bathroom while my younger brother lurked outside the door and answered with animal sounds, laughing at my efforts. I long for the old days when I punched him and he stayed punched. One good one on his shoulder and he'd run and hide under his bed. But now he's bigger and he hits back.

When I push out the second high note, a girl screams. She is probably testing out her vocal chords to get them greased up for a future of teenage rock concerts. Or maybe she spotted a rat running across the floor.

Or ... damn! Maybe she smells smoke and the school is on fire! I can't sniff the air as I sing "more foolish I grow," but I wonder if the band has to stay until everyone gets out of the burning building, like the orchestra on the Titanic. I don't think I want to remain behind while the other kids escape the fire. Do I need to? After all, I'm not really a professional musician. I haven't even joined the union yet.

More girls scream. For me, I guess, but they're twelve years old and I feel completely silly.

I don't see Mary Ellen and I hope she hasn't taken this opportunity to go to the girls' room with half of her classmates. I'll never

understand why girls go to the bathroom in packs. It seems odd the entire group of young women are all on the same fluids regimen and bathroom schedule. They must start synchronizing themselves in the afternoon before the dance, calling each other up on the phone and announcing, "OK, we're all going to try to go potty at 4 o'clock, and only one glass of water with supper."

Oh, here she is! Shoot! She missed the parts of the song I do best.

For Your Love is soon over, but not before we do the tune's hallmark ending where the accompaniment stops and the singer croons a final "For-or-or-or-or ... Your-or-or-or-or ... Luh-uv. I can never get the ending right. Sometimes I put in an extra "or" and this throws the rest of the band off. Instead of one final crash of all the instruments on the last note, when I get the number of syllables wrong the drums and rhythm guitar and sax dribble in separately like weary travelers. This time I count the beats on my fingers and get it right. But there's a pause after "For-or-or-or" while I breathe before "Your Love." As I inhale, Jimmy loudly hiccups. Hank and Mike and Lowell laugh and I stand there looking stupid.

The audience applauds anyway, maybe enthusiastically. The young girls are still screaming, but now their classmates tell them to shut up.

Hey! I feel pretty good about my performance. In no time I'll be sharing the stage with Frankie Avalon. I might get asked by Dion to join the Belmonts as a backup singer!

Back to the piano for the rest of our set, I still can't figure out what key everyone is in, so I lightly tap on the keys and smile without playing a single note. Hank says I'm at my best when I fake it and no sound comes out of the piano.

When someone ... I don't know who ... closes the curtain, we all whoop and slap each other on the back. Mr. Personality says to us, "That was terrific! I mean the introduction of Deadly Dave. And the hiccup! Jimmy, you were born for the stage!"

He never mentions my singing. I got upstaged by a hiccup.

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