

# *Comfortably Dumb*

*The Only Band Ever That Never Got Better*

*A lot of great music has been written and performed in human history. This isn't about that.*

**THIS JOURNAL BELONGS TO:**

CARSON WADE

## M I S S I O N   S T A T E M E N T

My mission is to hunt down gumption in its purest form, tie it to a chair, and ask it all the good questions. I'll start this journal at the bottom, in a town where no pesky music industry is marbled into the scene. My journey begins in the backwoods of Mississippi, home to many talented folks birthing music for the rest of us.

Inspiration, without the gumption to do something about it, can be that lonely tree that fell in the woods. Some call it a brave thing, putting yourself out there, but *brave* is just a word fearful people use. It's gumption that makes the difference.

A friend of a friend of a friend's cousin knows a girl who briefly dated a guy who recently joined a newly-formed band. They have no songs, no following, and no experience. After defining the word *embedment* for them, this band has agreed to let me document their journey. I catch a southbound plane tomorrow.

**October 13, 1996**

Upon stepping off a plane, the first Southern greeting you'll receive is the humidity getting up in your business. You can accept that it's in your crevices to stay or you can chase the air-conditioning. Admit defeat early; the humidity will win.

Southern towns are bereft of the amenities of larger places, but they're full of kind people. You've never heard the phrase "Northern charm" and there's a reason; Southerners nabbed it all.

A slew of colloquialisms fills the Southern vernacular, and the letter *G* would almost be extinct down here if it wasn't used at the beginnings of words too. Everyone here is *fixin'* to do *somethin'*...like offer you the sweetest tea you've ever had.

I meet the band tomorrow.

**October 14**

The members of the band are Dale, Randy, Chip, The Bass Player (who refuses to release his name), and Harley.

The Bass Player is exceedingly quiet around me. If he's keeping me at "arm's length," then he may have a leg in there too. He's of average size, but all of his clothes are way too big. He's a grown man, but he looks like a child drowning in his father's cotton.

The frontman, Harley, is a gangly fellow who can't decide what to do with his hair. It looks like he was in a bar fight and combed it with a pinecone afterwards. The hair identity crisis extends to his face. He said he started growing a mustache last week to, "try it out and see." Right now it looks like Mother Nature's scraggiest caterpillar. This thing will never become a butterfly. I ultimately don't care about Harley's appearance, but even I want this abomination under his nose to go the way of the blade.

Chip, a guitar player, is ironically missing a bit of a front tooth. If this chip missing from his tooth were at least sizable enough to service a drinking straw, then the gap would serve some novel purpose. Right now it's the only distraction from his otherwise forgettable facial features.

Chip wants to be a lead guitarist, but that's not surprising. Every guitarist on the planet wants to play lead. He seems to be rhythm guitar at this point. I overheard Chip complaining to The Bass Player, "I play the same damn thing over and over and over again!"

Randy, who claims the coveted lead guitarist position, is a short, athletic type. By the looks of the oversized class ring he still wears, I'd say he's holding onto his glory days. He almost always has some sort of cap on his head. It's definitely not a "thinking cap." He usually has a blank look on his face, with eyes wide open like a nocturnal animal. It's interesting how constantly keeping the eyebrows lifted affects one's expression.

Last of all there's Dale, the drummer. He's not overweight, but he's not under it either. I get the feeling he chose to play drums because he thought being able to sit down and play an instrument would be easier. It doesn't help that he's always got a Twinkie on hand. The way they appear out of nowhere, you'd swear he had a holster for them. I'm no doctor, but I see one in his future.

Summing up, this band gets no points whatsoever in the sex appeal category, so the music better be great. These guys aren't at all what I expected.

### **October 21**

After pretending to be completely uninteresting this past week, I have become all but invisible to the band. Most social groups follow certain patterns of behavior. Here are some notable observations from my first week on the project: so far I recall this band overusing the word *instrument*, such as, "Hey, Bob, can you hand me my instrument?" and "Dale, you know where my instrument is?" It may not sound egregious now, but hear it all day and you tell me. Late at night they go to a place called Huddle House where they argue endlessly about how they can sound more like the recordings of their favorite songs. Last week the guitar players, Randy and Chip, thought they had figured out why they were always out of tune from one another; they decided it was because each of them has a different brand of guitar tuner. The other members have talks with the drummer, Dale, about his lack of playing confidence, but they've told him three times already that he's too loud during practice. "It's mostly the kick

drum," they say. The lead singer, Harley, has gone so far as to mandate volume levels because according to him *he can't hear his damn self*; I'm paraphrasing, of course. The band paid for a photographer to take them downtown and take "snaps," or at least that's what the photographer called them. The amount of headroom on these pictures easily allows for an Eiffel Tower that isn't there. They all agreed these were the best band snaps they had, and it only cost them one hundred dollars and the wasted time of everyone involved. Far too often the band takes smoke breaks during practices and complains about the women in their lives...or the lack thereof. They all smoke even though everyone in the band knows Harley has been trying to quit smoking *real hard*; they feel guilty about it, but they smoke anyway.

It's clear so far that this newly-formed band has aspirations of being famous and playing music...and definitely in that order.

### **October 23**

Randy idly threatened this week to leave the band if Chip ever went into the solo with him again. Chip claimed he didn't know he was the rhythm guitar player. Randy thought it was obvious.

The Bass Player is usually quiet, but even he had, "had it up to here!" because Randy is always arriving late to band practice due to his bowling league. The Bass Player has since mellowed out, though, seeing as they practice in the smallest room of Randy's double-wide trailer.

It will take forever to name the band. A lot of early talk at the Huddle House was mostly about their band name and how that should be represented on the large kick drum, which was still so loud at practice it was *killing them*. Their Huddle House sessions never landed them a band title, so they took the opposite approach and called themselves Just Whatever until something better struck them. "It's more about the music," said all of them.

As Dale plays, the drums travel *all over the damn place* in the practice room. One time the bass amplifier, which is actually a regular guitar amp The Bass Player is blowing out, was pinned against the wall by the drums. You have to really watch everything in the room when they're playing, not to mention trying to avoid the two holes in the floor you can feel through the moldy carpet.

Their biggest argument so far was not about music at all but, "Who stole Harley's cigarettes? They were just right there!"

### **October 31**

The band members each *love music so damn much* that it drives their passion to mimic their idols, but only in the effort to recreate the end result of a song and not so much in executing the intricacies that song is comprised of; my words, not theirs.

An extremely short-lived groupie of the band once said that Just Whatever's music wasn't the worst thing she'd ever heard, but her example of what was, wasn't music at all.

One time at practice it *sounded all kinds of wrong* because they were all playing in different keys from one another. They agreed not to do it again, not having understood what caused it in the first place.

### **November 02**

While the rest of the band was on break today, Harley, who really only sings but does know three guitar chords, tried to play the guitar and sing at the same time. It sounded like two trains smashing into one another, somehow backing up, and then crashing back into one another until the rails were destroyed as well. Once he was done demolishing the relationship between guitar and man, he joined the group, who had been listening outside the whole time. No one acknowledged it. Though he'd finally quit smoking, even Harley lit up a cigarette.

Most Saturday afternoons they go to the two sketchy-looking pawn shops in town. Both owners of the pawn shops have handguns clipped to their belts and seem to be wearing as much jewelry on their persons as is in the display cases. Oddly, both owners wear bolos, which are supposed to take the place of a professional-looking tie, but they don't. One time Chip got a Peavey Tracer guitar for just \$50 bucks. Three frets were missing from the neck but he said he *doesn't play down there anyway*.

### **November 03**

Chip's uncle has a four-track recorder he let them borrow a couple of weeks ago. A four-track recorder is a device that

allows you to record four overlaying tracks of audio onto a cassette tape. Unfortunately, Chip's uncle angrily repossessed it a few days ago, citing irresponsibility. The band hasn't forgiven him and even disparages him in the most casual of conversations. Yesterday Dale described someone he dislikes by saying they reminded him of Chip's uncle. Any such casual slight brings the matter back up for discussion, the most common phrase being, "And we had JUST got the drums laid down!"

#### **November 04**

Before Just Whatever even played a gig or officially decided on the band's name, they had T-shirts made up with their band logo on them. The minimum order count for the T-shirts was one hundred. That's a good thing since the logo starts peeling after just two washes. They'll need plenty.

The Bass Player bought a tape recorder to record their practices, but he set it right next to the loud kick drum and afterward called the new recorder, "a piece of shit."

Disputes among them don't last very long, except for one fight that seemingly began before any of them was ever born and may never be resolved. That ongoing fight involves a girl, and the group grumbles like it still involves the girl even though that girl left town ages ago. The tension is palpable with the mere mention of her name, which is spelled S-U-S-S-Y but pronounced as *Susie*. Her story, I deduce, is a rabbit hole even Alice wouldn't go down.

## November 05

Today the word count for the word *gig* was well above 200. But the word *manager* is closing the gap from second place.

Not in the band—but wishing he was—is Bob, a pudgy older man with one pierced ear, a permanent "fanny pack," and a "soul patch" gracing his bottom lip. Soul Patch, I was forced to know, was the name of the band he was in during college; and a fanny pack, I was forced to ponder, is a useful yet terrible appendage that only accentuates Bob's already unflattering midriff.

In his early days, Bob wanted to be a musician, then later decided to be a sound mixer; but since Sonny is the band's sound mixer, Bob is a roadie. He's the sidekick to the entire band, but no one orders him around as much as Sonny does. Sonny knows Bob would take his job if he could, so he's mentioned on many occasions that Bob's *ears are shit*. Sonny is a tall and skinny outspoken man who always wears sunglasses—even indoors and at night. Sonny yells the word *sibilance* into every microphone during soundchecks, but he also yells, "Sing-song-soundcheck-susie!" He doesn't appear to understand why the band tries to leave the room while he's working, or why fights about Sussy pop up so soon afterwards.

For a moment, Bob tried to assert himself as the manager of the group. But on the gig night where they *missed the damn exit* by about thirty of them, he was fired from that position over a hot meal at a Huddle House far, far away. Sonny has added Roadie Bob's sense of direction to his list of things that are shit.

## November 08

Harley gets to pick the cover songs they play because, "I'm the one riskin' it all out there," he claims. The songs he chooses come mostly from one particular decade and then become decidedly sporadic from there.

Each member has strong opinions about music, but none more so than Randy and Harley. Randy and Harley started the band and have been friends ever since the day Harley asked Randy, "You ever been in a band?" The inception story of the band grows more and more romantic with each telling.

Dale, the drummer, was the last member to join because he only secretly played drums in his garage when no one was home...which rarely happened because he lives with his grandparents. Dale stays vigilantly on the offensive about others not playing his drums without asking him first. One time The Bass Player, in front of everyone, asked to play Dale's drums. It was allowed, but it was the last time anyone ever asked. Dale's also a middle child, so there's that.

## November 11

There's a lot of talk about equipment and brand names and *if they only had a damn this or that*. Their hard-line opinions about music are only equaled by two other things: their opinions about other local bands and the quality of the musical products they themselves do not own.

The group spends a considerable amount of energy asking each other about the placement and positioning of things such as, "You put this here?" and "Who moved this?" This line of questioning also extends to, "You turn this knob?" or "D'you unplug this?" and, finally, the always rhetorical, "Hey, man, did I leave this that way?"

#### **November 17**

The sound mixer, Sonny, got the band a gig today, but it's at his stepmother's Thanksgiving party in the middle of nowhere. Nonetheless, the band is excited.

#### **November 18**

As the drummer, Dale is supposed to be the musical backbone of the band, but he obviously doesn't own one in real life. Like the other day, the band tried to play with a "click track," otherwise known as a metronome. In reality, none of them was able to keep accurate time with the click, but they unanimously agreed that Dale was the weak link in the incident. Sadly, it was unanimous in that Dale agreed with them. Dale confided to me that, "trying to keep time with that damn thing was like trying to catch a squirrel covered in Crisco." He elaborated, "You catch up to it, you overshoot, you grab it, it slips, you fall behind, but you almost catch up again, and before you know it the damn song's over!"

## November 20

Randy brought the first original song to practice this evening, but it was really just two disparate parts of a song. The rest of the band didn't care for it. Later in the evening Randy informed them that he'd had a cancerous mole removed from his back today but that everything is cool now. Not long after that announcement they all agreed to work on Randy's original song, but they didn't actually make any attempts at it tonight. It has about a million metric tons of work left to be done on it to be called a real song, but I can say it's their best original track...insomuch as it's their only.

## November 21

Harley mostly reads off lyric sheets when singing. Sometimes during a song he exchanges nods with someone else but at no particular moment of interest, presumably to acknowledge that the song has, in fact, continued. He sometimes presses near his ear with two fingers but doesn't actually press his ear closed. He says it helps him focus.

Harley is guilty of ignoring the rhythm and cadence of the lyrics when singing. Other members poorly attempt to mouth the words along with Harley as best they can, but they are equally busy staring intently at their fingers. They each seem distracted in their own personal way. Chip has bad eyesight and refuses to wear glasses or contacts, so his face has to be pretty close to his fingers. To accomplish this he wears his guitar strap quite

high up. If his eyesight becomes much worse, that guitar will be up to his neck before you know it.

With all the pedals and gizmos around the practice room there's always a need to change a 9-volt battery. The refusal to spend the extra money on the "overpriced" batteries that actually last longer, makes this not only a regular occurrence but sometimes the interruption to a song. This happened during gigs Number Two and Four. Both times were Chip. Randy now secretly changes Chip's batteries before every show. Chip secretly knows this and saves money on batteries.

Randy works at a local guitar shop and wants to move into giving lessons. His boss won't let him, so Randy pretty much restrings guitars all day. The irony of it all is that Randy refuses to teach Chip any guitar techniques; presumably this is to secure his own position in the band. So, yeah, Chip gladly takes those batteries. I'd say there's actually a high probability Randy is "lifting" them from work to spite his boss, so it seems the situation is working for both of them on some level.

### **November 22**

Dale's countdown at the head of each song, which goes like, "ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR!" has someone starting on three, someone else on four, and then someone else the beat after four. The ill beginning shifts and meanders throughout the song, never quite matching up, sometimes creating complex syncopations lasting a brief moment before dissolving into a clear accident. None of

them taps their feet or rhythmically pulsates their bodies during a song to help them keep time, like you often see with musicians. Sometimes Harley stops songs in the middle, angry and without the words to articulate his displeasure; usually it involves the term *horseshit*. During these outbursts Randy always assumes Harley is only complaining about the other members. This assumption is true. To Harley, Randy can unhang the moon anytime he wants. When Randy complains about the calluses on his fingers, caused from *bending those strings all over the damn place*, Harley is the only sympathizer. He reminds Randy that that's the eternal burden of the lead guitarist. They will then replay the song. It sounds much the same as before, but they will all agree they were "feeling it" that time.

### November 23

Sonny dips tobacco. The cups he spits into end up randomly around the practice room, on the mixing board, and at gigs, a murky surprise that rallies the band in disgust against him. I've seen The Bass Player intentionally knock over one of these cups and demand Sonny clean it up. Sonny will huff and puff about it, dipping tobacco and spitting as he cleans. After these incidents the band then blames Sonny for intentionally *screwing with the sound* out of spite. Harley holds Sonny responsible for his singing sounding *flat as hell* or *sharp as shit*, and Harley is usually one of those. I'm not certain Harley understands Sonny's job as the mixer; there aren't enough knobs in the world to fix some of the things Harley does vocally.

## November 24

The Best Cover Band In Town is Just Whatever's biggest rival...in their minds anyway. The Best Cover Band In Town doesn't know this because they didn't come super early to a show that they themselves were headlining, so they missed seeing Just Whatever's opening performance. This is what started the whole thing. While Randy nodded in agreement, Chip announced emphatically, "Well, they missed the next big thing in this tiny ass town!" The local talent competition being held soon is where Randy says *they'll show their asses what's what*. It isn't known yet if The Best Cover Band In Town will even be in competition.

## November 25

The guys have started playing regularly at a bar and seafood joint. It's a great place to cut their teeth, but right now they're just chipping them. The owner, Ray Ray, appears to know a couple of the members of the band and wants to help them. Ray Ray is very...patient.

The first real gigs felt just like practices. Just Whatever stopped in the middle of songs to make a change, and then started over from the top of the song. The most notable was when Randy accidentally went into a solo belonging to a totally different song. I've never seen a man beat himself up so badly in front of so many people, but he demanded they start completely over; penance for what he'd done, I suppose. Randy's self doubt was palpable and transferred to everyone in the establishment. The audience seemed entangled in a bit of a quagmire because if

anyone left the room for any reason the entire band stopped staring at their hands to watch that person leave. From the perspective of the audience it must've been like watching a barometer measure the pressure of a room.

None of them owns a truck or a van, so everything had to be "origamied" into coupes and sedans after the gig. As the band pulled out of the parking lot, a drunken man yelled out that Harley was tone deaf. Harley couldn't hear that either.

### **THANKSGIVING '96**

Thanksgiving was a "disastrophy." I had to make up a word to fit what happened. Although it was hard to keep track, it felt like six to seven half-broken families congregated on this day. The word *step* preceded many introductions.

The moment an eighteen-wheeler trucked a flatbed trailer into the backyard was the moment the chaos truly began, and it didn't end until later that evening when it backed out, crushing many beloved flower beds. Since it rained this morning, the deep tire tracks from the truck ruined what was previously a beautiful landscaping project. A "Yard of the Week" sign was plucked from the front of the house; it was no longer appropriate.

Sonny's soundcheck that evening was never more thorough. He took to his duty with a fervor. His stepsister remarked that she'd never seen this side of him and that she couldn't tell if what he was doing was impressive or not. After Sonny methodically

beat each and every drum diligently for nearly fifteen repetitions, she eventually chose to be unimpressed.

The band was eager to play, and I don't recall any of them eating anything. After getting situated on the flatbed stage, the first of many tunings began. Many of the elders were instantly against what they thought was happening to their Thanksgiving. The tuning was exacerbated by what is called *feedback*, which is loud and piercing and sounds like a thousand burning angels screaming out in agony. When asked to explain feedback to me, Chip furrowed his brow and stared at the ground before saying, "It's when you turn a certain way and get too close to somethin' else." Chip's solution was to keep moving and turning until it stopped. Feedback issues happen less frequently than tuning, but an ounce of feedback weighs more than a pound of tuning.

Three songs into the set and Sonny's stepmother "lost her shit." Sonny leapt headlong into an altercation with her. It was no holds barred and ended with Sonny's being slapped for yelling, "Everyone should just move back if it's too loud!" I think the incident may have been the last straw in their blatantly broken relationship. Sonny was quiet the rest of the night, but the ruddy handprint on his cheek said enough.

Hopefully the band can put this event behind them quickly and move on, but I've never seen them do that before so I'm inclined to just try and ignore it all by myself.

### November 30

Today Randy played a version of "Blight of the Wounded Fumblebee," which is what I renamed the song because his rendition was so slow and sloppy that no one recognized it.

### December 04

Randy has an uncle-in-law who has a homemade recording studio and is willing to work with them. The timing couldn't be better because the word *demo* is fast replacing the word *manager*. There have been many band meetings, which usually start instantaneously by someone yelling, "Band meeting!" even if they've been together for hours already. One band meeting resulted in a faux democratic pissing match over which three cover songs to commit to the demo tape because, as Randy put it, "You can't just throw cautious to the wind and record just any ol' crap hit song!"

Randy's uncle-in-law, who wishes not to be named, sat in on a practice. After playing one song, everyone looked to him for approval. He got up quietly and walked outside, so everyone took a smoke break. Uncle-in-law still said nothing. When asked directly, he only said, "Be right back." He did come back and this time he had a six pack of beer with him. He downed an entire beer, sighed heavily, and reluctantly said, "Play that shit one more time." They go into the studio soon.

## December 06

Practice has become quite volatile. Dale gets physically exhausted from all the drumming and has taken to candy bars for more energy. Like everyone else in the band, he was already hopped up on the sugar-bomb that is Mountain Dew. There's a small fortune to be had in recycling all the cans they throw away, but recycling them would more than likely ruin their "rocker" image.

Randy's been on edge. After calling a band meeting he voiced the ominous question, "Is there anywhere else we can practice?" Everyone mumbled that there's *no way this* and *no way that*, so in the end they all agreed against Randy that there is, in fact, no better place. It's clear Randy thinks there should be a better place.

## December 09

Money among them is a mixed bag. Mostly it is exchanged reluctantly and requested back repeatedly.

Before, band members bought gear only for themselves; now the group sometimes splits equally the cost of *stuff they need*. But some of the purchases Harley has made have been questioned. For instance, he bought a wireless microphone system. Harley claims it was, "too cheap to pass up." It was definitely cheap enough to create a persistent interference between the wireless system and their cell phones, forcing the entire band to turn off their phones during practice. On the positive side, that's ushered in an era where they're more focused on the music rather

than fiddling with their phones all the time. Another upside is Harley now trips far less on his mic cord. Harley's tripping all the time used to add a certain flair to his singing that won't be missed. Harley is already laying down the groundwork for his next purchase, a vocal echo device, so he won't have to manually recreate the effect himself.

### **December 12**

Dale has gotten himself a girlfriend, Della, who works at a cupcake store in town. Dale thinks Della may be "the one," and he's exhibited much excitement about the possibility of marrying her. The other band members do not share his excitement. Harley stated that he's had a ton of "the one's," and said, "A marriage right now could compromise the band dynamic." Dale has agreed to hold off popping the big question, but only until the demo is done and they have a manager.

### **December 17**

The band finally agreed on three cover songs and headed into Uncle-in-law's studio. I've seen pictures of studios before, but there's no need for a camera here. Cardboard was flattened and stapled to the walls from head to toe. Covering the concrete floor is a series of irregular carpet pieces, each belonging to a different decade and suffering from heinous stains. One section may actually be a bath mat. The patchwork on the walls and floors, combined with the buzzing and flickering fluorescent bulbs, compete for your attention to dizzying effect. It's

exhausting. Uncle-in-law promised that the audible buzzing from the lights would be negligible to the recordings. No one seemed to believe this, but no one said anything because they don't know anyone else with a studio.

Uncle-in-law has an "8-track recorder" that records to cassette tapes. Layering the individual tracks was an interesting process in which each band member's part was completed separately and the final result compared to the song they were mimicking. It sounded like you'd expect: the cover song sounded great, but their recreation of the song sounded...different. In defense, it was a laborious process. One cassette tape went through so many retakes that it broke into pieces and clogged up the 8-track. I don't know how it happened or how it was fixed, but Uncle-in-law said that the tapes must have been shit.

### **December 18**

Back in the studio today and I've now witnessed my first adult pillow fight. Evidently, Dale placed a pillow in his kick drum to help with the sound, but the recording process brought out many issues that don't come up at practices. Randy, Chip, and Sonny had a massive fight about what kind of pillow should be in there. Dale didn't seem to have an opinion either way, but the other three cared greatly. Cotton versus down feathers was the crux of the debate. The other major argument was about the buzzing fluorescent lights, but this only surfaced when Uncle-in-law left for a bit to get even more beer. The argument ended quietly upon Uncle-in-law's return and hasn't been mentioned

again. Uncle-in-law is a highly-functional drunk. It's impressive.

### **December 19**

Today was the last day in the studio. Uncle-in-law told them everything was done and to just come pick up their equipment later. "Just go," he said. Before they left, however, Uncle-in-law mentioned two things: one was that he was taking a very long break from recording music, and the other was that the band should probably get a website on the "innernet." Harley asked Uncle-in-law if they could just borrow his. Uncle-in-law quietly walked inside and shut the door. He may need some time to himself.

The band left with one cassette tape of the finished tracks and a reinvigoration. They listened repeatedly to those three songs on the long ride home. Everyone at some point said, "That's what I'm talkin' 'bout!" The recording sounded so low and quiet that the car's stereo had to be turned all the way up to be audible. This produced a hissing sound from the speakers that added to the buzzing of the fluorescent bulbs clearly present in the mix. During the recording process the fluorescent buzzing became louder and louder as they added more and more tracks. No one mentioned it, though. Why ruin the mood?

**December 20**

PERSONAL ENTRY:

Starting at the bottom of anything is daunting. I try to keep that in mind not only for the band but for myself, because I am definitely starting at the bottom here. On a personal note, I've resisted the urge to drink. I haven't struggled so hard in my entire life. Usually it's the good music that makes me want to drink, but this is different. The days are long, and as with any type of documenting, it hasn't gone as planned. Despite the infighting, despite the strain on those around them, and despite how far they still have ahead of them, it's somewhat inspiring to see the energy and excitement the band has for all that they do.

**December 23**

The band is trying to get a paying gig for Christmas Eve to put some money toward the unexpected invoice they got from Randy's uncle-in-law. They assumed the studio time was free. It may have been free at the beginning, but something obviously changed Uncle-in-law's mind. I didn't know the man before all this and even I could tell the experience had changed him.

There are now demo tapes everywhere. The guys have competitive conversations about which speakers they heard it on, which speakers sounded best, and which EQ settings to use for each song. The Bass Player went so far as to type up a guide for the best way to listen to the tape, and he's been attaching the guide to every tape. One bar owner they gave a tape to said, "If a tape needs a guide then somethin's wrong with it."

Chip brought up the band name again. He thought it would be clever to call themselves Leonard Skeonard; that's right-spelled L-E-O-N-A-R-D and *Skeonard* spelled similarly. The rest of the members thought it was a bad idea until Chip wrote it out on a piece of paper so they could see how clever it was. The Bass Player said, "Well, it does SOUND good at least." Ultimately, though, they decided it was too confusing to spell, which made it a fantastic password for the "innernet."

#### **December 24**

##### **PERSONAL ENTRY:**

The guys tried and failed to book a gig this Christmas Eve, so they spent it with their families instead. They weren't happy about it.

I went out to a local dive by myself. The Best Cover Band In Town was playing there. Were they better than Just Whatever? Definitely. Were they the best? Probably in this town, but also probably not anywhere outside of this town. They mentioned they were booked on a tour that was coming up soon. This would infuriate Harley and the gang to know they were succeeding in some fashion, but at least The Best Cover Band In Town won't be competing in the Battle of the Bands. I'll keep this information to myself.

**January 01, 1997**

It's a new year and there are a lot of resolutions going around. Harley has sworn off cigarettes again. No one's holding their smoky breath on that one. To show he's a changed man, Harley finally shaved off that grotesque attempt at a mustache. His experiment had ended up looking like a molting animal had laid down to die on his lip.

For New Year's Randy bought Chip fifty guitar picks and made a resolution for Chip that he *shouldn't steal Randy's picks anymore.*

Someone's sister knows a fifteen-year-old whiz kid who was able to make them a website on something called Geofire. The first time Harley pulled up the work-in-progress website on a friend's computer he jumped up from the chair and started singing the praises of technology and the future. This was short-lived when someone pointed out that the animation of a stick figure digging a ditch was not part of the presentation but simply stating the site was under construction.

The fifteen-year-old kid explained to the band that they need some new thing called an *MP3*. The kid said that an MP3 is like having a demo tape in cyberspace where people can make their own copies. Randy told the kid that when he grows up he'll realize how stupid he sounds right now. Harley's suggestion was to put on the website that people can *just come by and get a copy.*

January 05

As we waited around outside Randy's trailer for him to get home from bowling practice, The Bass Player had all his car doors open, blasting the demo tape. If I never hear that tape again that'd be great because now I can't listen to the original songs without being reminded of these versions. Three classic songs have been reduced to rubble.

Randy came home and slammed his car door behind him. He told them either they find another place to practice or he'd quit the band *for real*. After Randy's announcement, everyone looked at Harley, whose face had turned a shade of blueish white.

We'd never seen Harley and Randy fight, so no one was sure it was really happening until Harley had Randy pinned against a riding lawn mower. Then Randy kicked him in the shin so hard that Harley fell back and rolled down into and through the vinyl skirt around the base of the trailer. It took Harley a few minutes to crawl out from under there, but when he did he slammed Randy against a rusted out El Camino resting on cinder blocks and held him there. They never punched one another, but there were some hard and sloppy man-slaps happening. It wouldn't win any awards for brute force, but it sounded like it stung. They were yelling half sentences at each other that even in context didn't make sense. Harley was more emotional than I'd ever seen him before. Both of their faces had changed color so many times they looked like mood rings.

Thirty minutes later Randy and Harley were hugging and laughing as if nothing had happened. The Bass Player piped up and

said he had an idea about a place to practice. Randy got pissy again and told him it *was real awesome to have this idea and never bring it up*. The Bass Player said forebodingly, "Well, I'm bringin' it up now, but you ain't gone thank me later."

#### **January 14**

Dale showed up to practice wearing pleather pants today. *Pleather* is plastic that wishes it were leather. They weren't even into the middle of one song before he was sweating so badly that it took two guys to peel him free from those pants. He acted like he had a boa constrictor around his legs as he begged for help. He finished the practice in his tighty-whities. No one had ever seen Dale's legs before and now everyone knows why. It's pretty clear they were never meant to be seen. These pale excuses for legs are blindingly white, appearing almost translucent. It was gross to look at, so I spent most of the night looking at them.

#### **January 17**

We went downtown this evening to meet with Tony, a very large man who was The Bass Player's connection for a practice room rental. His last name of Bologna is supposed to be pronounced phonetically [BO-LAWG-NUH], but between his weight problem and his name looking like a deli meat, he ended up with the nickname Big Baloney. Harley and the gang just called him Tony and you could tell it was spoiling Tony's fun. This guy used to be enormously overweight, but claims to've lost all the pounds

eating only boiled peanuts. This isn't to say that he's not still a huge hulk of a man, because he is. Elephants do not tire of peanuts.

Big Baloney is a slick businessman, and by that I mean he has ulterior motives for everything. He agreed not only to let them practice downtown, but said they can have it for free if they let his son, Joffrey Bologna, be in the band. Randy yelled, "Band meeting!" in Baloney's face.

After a quick deliberation the band agreed to the terms. Big Baloney promptly added to those terms that he'd prefer to oversee some of the decisions made by the band. Chip asked, "Like a manager?" Baloney shrugged innocently and said, "Sure." The Bass Player yelled, "Band meeting!" They couldn't tell if denying him this half of the deal would spoil the other, so they unenthusiastically consented. After Tony left, Chip said, "Well hell, we didn't throw out the baby, but it looks like we kept the nasty bathwater too." How true.

So now Just Whatever had a demo, they had a new place to practice, and they had themselves an unexperienced manager. Feeling the time was right, Dale promptly made a phone call to ask his cupcake-making girlfriend, Della, to marry him. You've heard of a frown turning upside-down, but we all watched the opposite happen to Dale's face as Della dumped him like a trash can. Let's just say that when Dale got off that extremely short phone call, he now shared the same lack of excitement about her as the band always had. Maybe she had finally seen Dale's legs?

## January 20

After being embedded with a band, I've noticed one thing in particular that is universal to all musicians: the word *shit* cannot be removed from their vernacular. It's used in every possible way, much like early American Indians used the buffalo.

## January 21

Tonight was the first practice Big Baloney's son, Joffrey, sat in with Just Whatever. Joffrey's father fortunately wasn't present for the awkwardness that ensued. Joffrey may not have been homeschooled, but whatever happened in lieu of that didn't help socially. He doesn't quite fit with the group other than the fact that he, too, wants to play music. Joffrey was an extraneous guitar player. He played neither rhythm nor lead but performed what I'll coin as "limbo lead," which is a mindless meandering of single notes. He only used his middle finger to play, so in more ways than one the act was offensive.

Just Whatever didn't wait for Joffrey to tune his guitar, which made the practice exceptionally interesting. In Joffrey's defense they hadn't given him a setlist to prepare from. Here's how it went: the band would start a song and Joffrey would look down somewhere. He'd adjust a knob, look back up, look at his playing finger, then at Chip's fingers, then back at his own finger. Chip would angle away, not making it easy for Joffrey to follow him. Joffrey would then look to Randy, but Randy was playing as many solos as possible. I guess he was letting Joffrey know who the Guitar Boss was. Chip and Randy do look rather

advanced by comparison, like guitar players from the far future; it'd be similar to showing a caveman a Bic lighter with a naked lady on it. When everyone else was smoking on break, Joffrey just played a handheld gaming device called a Game Boy.

Harley has already broken his "no smoking" resolution. He reasons that January is a transitional month. His shared wisdom was, "You don't go 'round quittin' things cold turkey-like." True words.

### January 23

#### PERSONAL ENTRY:

Everybody is entitled to their own opinion, and that's the problem. What is good? What is bad? Why do talented people go unnoticed while less talented folks prosper despite it? What is talent? Is it some personal perception that's based on your inability to match or exceed a feat of some kind? It gives me a headache thinking about it, and I'm now picturing that symbol of a snake that's eating its own tail. It think it's called *ouroboros*. I never say that word out loud because I always mispronounce it.

Just Whatever has a long way to go. The guys sure have the heart, but I don't think their perception of themselves quite matches what other people witness. I see grimaces. I hear snarky remarks. I catch people leaning into friend's ears for quick one-liners. Either these people are too cowardly to put themselves out there on stage, or perhaps perceive themselves to be more talented than the poor suckers they're mocking. Then there's the

possibility they just know better than to embarrass themselves by trying. But regardless, there are people who won't be impressed no matter what you do; you could show them the Great Wall of China and they'd say without hesitation, "You call that a wall?" even though they couldn't see the end of it.

### January 26

There have been a lot of band meetings about Joffrey...in front of Joffrey. He's such a quiet guy that you almost forget he's in the room. It goes like this most of the time: Chip will say that he can't get into a groove with Joffrey there, even though Joffrey's volume on his amp has been taped down so that it doesn't move from a two out of ten possibilities. Then The Bass Player will say, "The vibe's just different than before Joffrey," as if it marked a biblical time in their history. Next, Randy will use the word *bullshit* in a sentence. Randy was the one who kept adjusting Joffrey's amp little by little; Sonny just made it official by taping it down. What's strange is that Joffrey hasn't seemed to notice the tape. He's still chicken-pecking at notes in a random fashion. It occurred to me today that Joffrey Bologna may be deaf by legal definitions. If factual, and I feel it's true, then telling him he's not in the band anymore will have to be yelled at him from close range.

### January 31

Randy, beaming with pride, announced to the band that he's getting married. Harley gave him a brotherly hug, while others

threw a bevy of obligatory congratulations Randy's way. But Dale was tuning a drumhead at that moment and, upon hearing the announcement, tightened the head so hard he may never get it off.

Randy's marriage explains why they had to stop practicing at his place. His fiancé's name is Whitney Dandy. Between the two of them, she wears the pants that allow you to call all the shots regardless of what's fair. The only battle I've heard of him winning is when she asked Randy to take her last name. Randy would never take her last name or himself seriously if he did. No one should ever be named Randy Dandy. Ever. At least he put his foot down; I sure hope he knows what he's stepped in, though.

### **February 01**

Some practices begin with a fight, but all practices end with having had one. It's not just music causing the unrest. Also to blame is their broken barter system of "bumming" cigarettes and beer from one another. It feels like some sort of prison currency. Every time they sit down for a meal at a restaurant at least one of them will request that someone else pay for their food because of the number of cigarettes he's lent them. It's their version of saying grace.

The emotional wear and tear from all this fighting has made certain people hypersensitive to what would otherwise go unnoticed. A perfect example happened tonight.

Randy became furious that someone had moved his guitar. The guitar wasn't moved per se but was, "put in the stand all crack-

eyed." Not knowing what he meant, I went and looked for myself, and I must admit it looked rather *cattywampus*. He tore outside to the parking lot and confronted the first person he ran into. That person was The Bass Player, who was confounded when Randy shouted out, "Why the hell you touch my guitar and can't even put it back the way you found it!?" Even though The Bass Player was the only one around to receive Randy's wrath, it wasn't completely ill-placed because he does tinker with other people's gear without asking. Randy then blurted something else unintelligible about leaning guitars and bending wood. But probably the most perplexing aspect of any Randy explosion is that he never looks you in the eye when he gets angry. He can't do it. When upset, he'll talk to his own hands or at a wall or his favorite, the floor. What made this oddity stand out even more was that Randy was now pointing directly at The Bass Player's face, but not looking at him by any definition of the word.

The Bass Player, his bewildered face all scrunched up, retaliated instantly, a standard response to the way in which he was approached. He came back with, "I don't touch your damn shit, and if I did you'd never even know about it!" He may have thought that would clear his besmirched name, but it only escalated Randy's imagination of all those times he suspected things had been moved. Randy's voice cracked when he yelled out, "I KNEW IT!" The exclamation echoed down the street. A window on a nearby building thought about shattering...but saved itself the hassle.

About then Harley's Camaro Z28, an automobile made specifically for Southerners, pulled into the parking lot blaring their demo tape. Harley stepped out as did Joffrey and Dale, who was struggling with six bags of greasy fast food while Joffrey

wrestled with six of the largest styrofoam cups I've ever seen. I feared Joffrey would break his little arms if he wasn't careful. When Harley asked Randy what all the "ruckus" was about, Randy turned to him, pointed at The Bass Player, looked up at the moon, and said he was, "this close to kicking in his junk!"

Dale cried out, "We only been gone twenty minutes!" like he thought they should all be present for fights. The Bass Player reiterated his innocence in The Case of the Mysteriously Cattywampus Guitar. Then Joffrey spoke. At first no one heard it. But then Harley asked everyone but Joffrey if Joffrey had, in fact, said something. Joffrey spoke yet again, to which Dale asked, "Huh?" Joffrey strained to speak over the volume of the traffic half a mile away. The general consensus was that it was the word *sorry*. Apparently, while passing Randy's guitar, Joffrey had accidentally nudged it crooked in its stand. The boy's as skinny as a twig so how he'd ever bump into anything is beyond me.

Randy stepped up to Joffrey like you would home plate before hitting a home run and told him that if he *ever, ever touched his shit again that he was out of the band*. Even though Randy was pointing slightly past him while looking off elsewhere, Joffrey knew the threat was directed at him. Joffrey promptly fainted, fumbling the six large drinks in slow motion. We all watched them fall to the ground like liquid sugar bombs. When the drinks hit the concrete it reminded me of that old scary movie where those elevator doors open and blood rushes forward, filling an entire hallway. Randy's sneakers were soaked in green liquid.

## February 07

Randy threw away the shoes Joffrey ruined last week. We were all glad to see him give them up because the sticking sound as he walked never went away, even on dirt. The other news is that Joffrey's father got the band a gig at his church. After defining the word *secular* for the guys, Big Baloney asked that they at least learn how to play one hymn. When Chip asked, "Like what?" Baloney replied, "Like 'Old Rugged Cross.'" Harley asked which band that was.

## February 09

It's Sunday. Just Whatever had an early morning gig at a Methodist church. I sat on the very back pew, but was wishing there was something further back. Tony had asked that they start with the hymn. The Reverend Deacon James introduced the band in a forced fashion, much like the band was about to play. From the very top of the song it sounded like a round peg in a square hole. The congregation stopped trying to sing along within the first minute. Not one person in the building was comfortable with what was transpiring, and I'm sure if Jesus returned this morning he'd have to put a stop to this song first, before he did anything else. This rendition of *Old Rugged Cross* only worsened as they flailed into a bridge jam session that lasted six minutes. Randy's never-ending solo felt blasphemous. If you unplugged all the appliances in your home and sat quietly for six minutes, you'd go less crazy from the deafening silence than you would from this one bridge alone.

In a way, Jesus did stop the song because a vicious storm whipped up around the church. The deluge of lightning lasted only long enough to knock the power out, ushering in some much needed quiet. The congregation seemed more relieved by the storm than afraid of it, as if they had prayed for it themselves. So Reverend Deacon James gave a sermon in the dark on praising the Lord with your time and talents, but he also mentioned that sometimes enough was enough and that talent is very subjective. The sermon was unconventional.

### **February 09**

#### **PERSONAL ENTRY:**

The difference between fact and fiction and the perception of those two concepts can vary greatly. The fact of the matter is that Just Whatever has only seen a modicum of improvement. That is my humble perception. The fiction of the matter resides in their minds. It is a fictional world that only they inhabit and are the sole rulers of. But I'll be damned if I don't envy this band's tenacity to stick with their pursuit, despite the train-wrecked faces that watch them perform.

To be fair, they've gotten better at some of the songs from earlier setlists. But, on a scale from one to ten, the amount of *better* they have become would have to start with a decimal.

## February 12

Harley is enraged today because he found out Big Baloney isn't going to pay them for the church gig. Harley decried that it was an act of God that led to their not being able to finish. Baloney calmly stated that he never mentioned money for the gig in the first place. Fictionally this means that God didn't want to see the show even if it was a freebie. Realistically it means that the band will need to be more attentive to words, the usage of them, and the omission of them when it comes to Tony.

Tony Baloney is one of those fellows you meet who is surfing on his own bullshit in every situation; poor whoever he's married to. You'll watch his feats of "bullshittery," waiting for someone to call him out on it, but when that doesn't happen you accept that not only you but everyone else is letting him get away with it. It's a silent and apathetic agreement between Tony Baloney and the whole of society.

## February 15

The core of the band wants Joffrey out of it so badly that this topic dominates their conversations. The manner in which they speak about it makes you think they're going to have Joffrey "bumped off" in a mafia-esque blaze of glory, but I know the talk is just talk because I once witnessed all of them scared to kill a small cockroach during band practice. I would have offered to kill it myself, but watching each of them try to make it through their setlist while keeping a constant eye on the roach's location was about the most entertaining thing I've seen them do.

## February 16

The website for the band is done. Not being terribly familiar with the internet myself, I'm impressed. If you look past the busy-as-hell background image that sits under the purest rendering of bright green text I've seen to date, the site has everything they need right there in one difficult-to-decipher place. Their gig dates are there. A sample of their music is there. You can click on an animated cassette tape to hear their demo. It's high-tech stuff. The only problem is that there's a soulless computerized song playing in the background when the site loads. The kid who made the site mentioned proudly that the background music was something called *MIDI*. I'm not sure why there was pride involved, because it makes the website feel like being trapped in an elevator or a supermarket. There's no way to stop it and it seems to loop forever. It doesn't care how long you peruse the site; it always assumes you are interested in it, even when you've clicked to hear the demo. The result of the two pieces of music playing at once is, to put it mildly, undesirable; to put it not so mildly, it's mind numbing. Maybe it will be fixed, but for now they're just relieved that the page finally *loaded over the 28.8 modem*, whatever that means. I assume it means every page will take four minutes to finally show up on the screen.

The guys can't believe they have a website. Dale, especially, seems a little too enthralled with this new technology. The band wants to put their web address on everything, but it's far too long an address to fit on anything without using illegible font sizes. But, all things considered, it's pretty cool. Although, Roadie Bob did mention that the text

was hard to read against the background image. Sonny has now added Bob's eyesight to his growing list of what's shitty about Bob.

### **February 20**

The Battle of the Bands is to take place in eight days at a Ramada Inn. It looks like they will be entering the competition officially as Just Whatever. What began as a cynical jest many months ago, considered a stopgap measure to curb creative frustration, is now a hardened fixture in their vernacular. You should be careful what you creatively throw against a wall to see if it sticks.

### **February 21**

#### **PERSONAL ENTRY:**

I've never eaten so much fast food, fried food, or fried fast food in my life. It's tastes wonderful, but I feel like a burlap sack of lard after having eaten it. I don't know how the guys do it day in and day out. I look forward to acclimating to the push and pull of these massive blood-sugar spikes. In between these metabolic hills and valleys are copious amounts of good old-fashioned coffee just to keep me going. An observation about the band's coffee habits: they use so much cream and sugar in their coffee that it might as well be sold as condensed milk.

## February 22

Dale is the most single out of the guys in the band. The other members have girls come and go from time to time, but Dale is going through a *damn dry spell*. At this point he looks absolutely parched. Girls he would have previously pointed out as not being that pretty, are starting to garner his attention, comments, and gaping stares. Time has not been kind to Dale's self worth; neither has the band, for that matter.

Dale confided in me a most personal chapter in his life. It began with one Shalondra Maye Gray, who apparently was for Dale, "the first one-night stand that stuck." They dated seriously for three years, have been separated for just as many, and the fact that I'm privy to any of this means he's not over it. Shalondra basically cheated on Dale with every cousin he had until she had claimed most of his extended family as her own. So in an awkward turn of events, she ended up in quite a few of Dale's family photos over the years. A picture from his family reunion tells the story all too clearly—Shalondra on a cousin's lap and Dale's dejected stare from across the picture. After she dumped him, Dale remained single for quite a while until he finally mustered the courage to ask Della, the cupcake girlfriend, out on a date. Dale is the guy who finally asks a girl out, she says yes, and he runs off and tells all his friends he's in love...before the date has even happened. Dale doesn't want the rest of the band to know, but he told me that Della, too, had cheated on him. According to Dale, in the end *she was sleeping with everyone but him*. Every time he approached the subject of sex she would say she was tired. From the exhaustive detail he went into about her

sex life, I'm sure she was absolutely tuckered out at the end of every day.

So Dale decided to try something called an online dating service. Interestingly, these dating sites let you put in a lot of vulnerable information about yourself and they match those vulnerabilities up with other people's vulnerabilities and give you a list of people who are a good match. They search through thousands and thousands of candidates to find matches. You couldn't do that in your whole lifetime! It sounds like the future. But Dale wasn't helpful in answering my questions about the service. This was because, coincidentally, he had received only one result that was a perfect match and, according to him, "it was the whore that broke me." These were the harsh words he chose to articulate the crushing disappointment of having an omnipotent technology tell you that the only person it knows you're compatible with is your first one-night stand. Dale had been matched up with Shalondra Maye Gray, a tried and true breaker of hearts. The meager solace I had to offer him was that, since she too had signed up for the site, she apparently was miserable as well.

### **February 23**

There's less than a week until the Battle of the Bands. I finally told them The Best Cover Band In Town isn't going to be there, but that didn't stop them from asking everyone they knew about it. Word travels like wildfire in these small towns, sometimes taking out entire neighborhoods before you find out the wildfire was false.

The Battle of the Bands competition rules allow only one song to be played, and they still haven't chosen it. Most days I think someone just needs to take charge. I can't decide which best suits their pursuit, a democratic band or a band with a benevolent dictator.

### **February 24**

We had terrible weather this evening, so much so that the band had to stop their practice and unplug everything. But when the storm passed, it left us with a fine breeze and a wondrous fog to blanket the quiet further. It was so pleasant that it brought out the fireflies. Fireflies are small bugs that have butts that light up bright yellowish-green in a dim-witted blink. You never believe the first one you see. It looks like a mistake your eye has made. Once the fireflies properly congregate they have quite the charming effect.

We all sat outside the practice room and enjoyed the ambiance. There were a couple of semi-deep conversations that took place when Harley pondered aloud, "Y'all ever think about what'd'it be like to travel to space and never come back to the South?" This spawned a series of non sequitur remarks, and a few of the guys seemed to get ailing thoughts off their chests. It was a calming and cathartic moment that appeared to unite them. Maybe they too are still susceptible to the charms of the firefly.

The storm long gone, they headed up to the practice room and plugged back in. While setting up, something strange happened in

the room. The guys started talking to each other like regular people talk. I thought it was my imagination at first, but then realized this was for real. It was odd because the statements were sincere, without any hints of sarcasm. For the first time, they seemed willing to agree on a song for the competition.

What happened next was shocking. What preceded it wasn't special. Nothing portended it. It just happened. I'll do my best to paint the scene....

Joffrey Bologna was standing there with his glittery guitar strapped on and ready, when Randy asked for his help. Randy was hot so he asked Joffrey if he wouldn't mind holding his guitar while he took off his shirt. Joffrey had his left hand on the neck of his own guitar, grasping the strings, and when he reached for Randy's guitar, he grabbed it by the neck as well. In that split second, Hell broke loose. It broke so loose all over everything in Joffrey's immediate vicinity that the rest of us turned to stone, unable to move or look away. Joffrey became possessed with sudden violent violations of movement. He thrashed and kicked and shook. He writhed back and forth, to and fro, shaking endlessly and without regard to his own well-being or to the well-being of his surroundings. He caught a guitar cord with his foot and yanked it clean out of an amp, which then slammed forward and crashed to the floor. The head of Joffrey's guitar wildly smashed up and down again and again on Dale's cymbals. Dale instinctively tried to grab his cymbals but could not compete with Joffrey's speed and determination to smash them.

Randy jumped back, knocking Harley to the floor with him, and they landed squarely on The Bass Player's foot pedals. The

Bass Player had stepped aside to allow room for their landing and, in doing so, he knocked over a floor lamp, casting the room in eerie shadows.

Chip had the instinct in that moment to jerk Joffrey's power plug from the wall, and like a marionette whose strings were cut, Joffrey hit the ground hard at gravity's behest. It was complete cacophony and confusion, and it was over before you could believe it happened. Hell had been contained. But not a second later, Joffrey shot up from the ground like an electrified geyser and promptly threw both guitars, indiscriminate of direction. Joffrey's glittery guitar flew across the room and whacked The Bass Player in the knee. The Bass Player appropriately screamed, "Gaaawwwww!!!" Meanwhile, Randy's guitar had been thrown towards Dale, and it bounced and banged loudly like a pinball before wedging itself tightly between two drums; good luck getting that sucker out of there. Then Joffrey took off. No one had ever seen him run before and now here he was, shooting out of the room in a blur. He jumped down a flight of stairs and kept running through the rest of the building. We followed the echolocation of his little feet from one side of the room, back to the other, then a few small circles, ending finally with an enormous blow to the heavy metal door leading outside. It sounded like Joffrey had somehow kicked it open with both feet.

We crowded the one window in the practice room. Down below we saw tiny Joffrey Bologna running at an impossible speed—not for a human, but certainly for Joffrey. He obviously had limited control of direction because no person would choose to jump clear over the hood of a car, but that's what he did. He flew over Harley's Z28 and kept on running with reckless abandon. He tore

through a row of waist-high bushes and slid forward on his feet in the wet grass, landing on his back, and clenching the earth tightly with his little hands. He lay there, gasping for air.

Randy left to go get Joffrey while we surveyed the damage. Nothing surrounding ground zero escaped Joffrey's wrath. It wasn't just the misdemeanors of dents and scratches; there was real damage. The conclusion was that the practice room's wiring wasn't grounded. Joffrey's little wafer of a body became the ground the moment he made contact with the strings from both guitars. He'll never grab anything that tightly again in his life.

The rest of the story is as told by Randy, the only one who shared the moment with Joffrey outside. It was an unfortunate time to kick Joffrey out of the band, but Randy had already warned him if he ever touched his guitar again then "that was that," and Randy is nothing if not principled. Joffrey didn't respond. He clutched at the grass, let the fog float over him, and stared up at the sky. That was fine because Randy probably wasn't looking him in the eyes anyway.

For Joffrey, the electrocution was a global attack. He bore scratches and dings from head to toe. These crimson marks made their way into odd crevices that normally escape such things. Randy sat with Joffrey and the fireflies for a good five minutes before bringing the shaken boy inside. Since Joffrey had used up all of his gripping ability for some time to come, he was unable to huff and puff and blow the band off by driving away in a storm of defiant dust. No, sadly, he couldn't even grab the steering wheel tightly enough to drive himself home. He had to suffer the

fate of being kicked out of the band and being driven home by the same people. A night that had previously been a turning point for the band had now become a set back. The arguing amongst them returned with a vengeance when they had to decide who would take Joffrey Bologna home to Tony Baloney.

### February 25

Joffrey is fine, but he won't be able to play in the band for awhile. No one told his father, their landlord, that they kicked his son out of the band. If they're lucky Joffrey won't ask to come back.

I was officially invited to Randy's wedding, which is coming up pretty soon, and Randy has hired himself to play at it. I've never met his fiancé, Whitney. She never comes to practices or to gigs.

The Battle of the Bands is in three days. Sonny is furious after contacting the director of the Battle about running the mixing board and finding out he won't be. He's been in a foul mood, feeling like he isn't competing in this thing; that feeling is called *reality*. He burst into the room today—wearing his sunglasses inside again—and interrupted an ongoing conversation by yelling, "Well, that's it! You're screwed! They're runnin' sound!" Then he quickly turned and ran into a wall.

Dale lifted everyone's spirits, though. For his large kick drum, he had a custom drumhead made up with "JUST WHATEVER" scrawled on it in bright green text. Below that was the longest

web address known to man. It was in a tiny font, but that didn't stop it from requiring two line breaks to get it all on there.

### February 26

If the band's ability to agree on something was an omelet, then you'd be picking out eggshells the entire meal. Breaking a few eggs to get something done is one thing, but you should be able to eat that omelette afterwards. They still haven't agreed on a song and the competition is in two days.

### February 28

Finally, the Battle is on. It's being held in a shoddy hotel conference room filled with crappy metal chairs. The acoustics of this room have already been said to be shit.

Come to find out, this is not just for bands, but rather it's a catch-all talent competition that's just poorly named. It costs money to enter so surely there's some racketeering going on somewhere. It's been broken up into categories and the bands go last. Just Whatever has set up outside in the parking lot to give away free merch. *Merch* is a shortening of the word *merchandise*, because saying the whole word is sometimes just too much trouble.

Dale showed up last. He stepped out of his vehicle wearing the same pleather pants that took two people to free him of just last month. He is also wearing eyeliner, also known as "guyliner" or "manscara" in this case. Of course he's wearing a Just

Whatever T-shirt; this is the only way in which he matches the rest of the band. The guys had plenty to say about all of this, and in true fashion none of them was supportive of Dale's decisions today. He looks a hot ass mess, and to simply say he's sweating isn't enough to convey what his body is doing rather profusely. Those pants don't breathe. We may need the Jaws of Life this time.

After sitting through an hour of what is considered to be local talent, I would have welcomed a coma of some type. Not a long coma, just a small one. There were some truly low-rent excuses for talent on display. Considering you have to pay to be a part of the competition, I imagine those judging it have to remind themselves they are being paid to sit through it. Otherwise, how would you not have them excusing themselves to the bathrooms frequently and for extended periods? I envisioned judges passing out Valiums in the bathroom before each competition. This isn't to say there were none with talent in attendance, but if every town were a haystack, then on average you'd have to visit a whole state to find the needle. But to be fair, I personally wouldn't have the courage in the first place to get up in front of all these people to do much of anything, much less to unknowingly embarrass myself.

With the first portion of the competition over, it was time for the bands to play. What I now know is that Roadie Bob slipped a crisp fifty dollar bill to the assistant who assigns the order in which bands play so that Just Whatever would, in his mind, headline. *Headlining* is the term for the final performance, usually associated with the reason everyone congregated in the first place. Bob was quite pleased with himself.

Just Whatever came inside to sit and watch the bands they've been trashing for months. They exchanged glaring looks throughout the other bands' performances. Randy mostly stared at the ceiling in anger, anxiously bouncing a leg. In the middle of the performances, we noticed The Best Cover Band In Town slip in quietly and sign up for the competition. Harley, Randy, The Bass Player, Chip, and Dale were each turned fully around in their seats, watching as The Best Cover Band In Town knocked the wheels off their dreams. It must've been awkward for the row of people behind us.

All in all, I found no correlation between the bands that played today and the fiction Harley and the gang have been fabricating about them for months now. These local bands had obviously been playing together for quite awhile and some of them weren't lacking talent at all. It doesn't take much imagination to guess what these other bands must say about Just Whatever, and if raw talent is the barometer by which slander against less talented people is deemed factual then their claims against Just Whatever may just be warranted. I'm here to root for my home team, though, and that's what I did. But there are snowballs and there's Hell, and there's the chance those two will meet today.

Second to last to play was The Best Cover Band In Town. By the crowd's reaction you could tell they had Local Legend status. I knew better than to clap. Harley gave them a solitary let's-get-on-with-it hand clap that broke no sound barriers. Just Whatever were squirming in their seats, constantly altering their postures to try and find the perfect pose of casual disinterest. The Best Cover Band In Town then showed us why that title follows

them. When done with their song, ending on a very tightly crafted moment, they humbly thanked the crowd and left the scene.

What The Best Cover Band In Town left behind was a vacuum of excitement. To attempt to fill that vacuum would be daunting. It would take one's best effort, on their best day, and they'd still need that elusive element of luck to fill it.

Just Whatever took the small stage, which was only about eight inches off the floor. Calling it a stage and not just "a small step to nowhere" really oversells it. Dale looked even more ridiculous in his pleather pants and guyliner because he was now visibly shaking, his nerves having gotten the best of him. Randy simply did not know where to look. The audience? The judges? The other band members? The floor? He chose the floor. Harley, having the least prep before playing, performed the most thorough inspection of the microphone it's probably ever had, including from the manufacturer. The Bass Player appeared calm, but I knew this couldn't be the case because they were about to perform one of the songs he completely fumbles through. Chip started nervously tuning his guitar, going back and forth past being tuned a few times before settling. I was getting anxious for them and starting to sweat, but then I noticed Dale was now sweating something fierce. He was soaked. His guyliner was running down his face, staining his shirt. Dale was sweating so much, in fact, that my body tried to stop sweating for the both of us. I almost suggested to the staff that they preemptively call an ambulance for him. He had drunk three cups of his condensed milk coffee before sitting behind those drums. He looked absolutely explosive.

Small patches of the audience had slipped out of the conference room, but Just Whatever was finally ready to play. Upon counting down the song aloud like Dale usually does, his voiced cracked on the *one*, the *two*, and the *four*; and they were off. I'll clarify by saying that they were "off" in the sense that the song indeed began but as usual no one started on time with one another. It didn't take long before a kind of sea sickness happening on land hit everyone in the room.

Tony Baloney slipped into the back of the room at some point. Just Whatever was flailing up there on "the step to nowhere," and it looked as though the judges' Valiums were wearing off. Then the train came off the rails. It started with Randy, who was staggering a bit as if he'd been K.O.'d and had just gotten up. That's when he lost it, "it" being composure and restraint. He wanted so desperately to impress everyone that he went off script and slipped into a sloppy solo where Harley should be singing. I've never heard a solo start so abruptly, be so off time, and blatantly bludgeon the lead vocal. It was an obnoxious display of about a million high-speed notes that didn't go together. One of Randy's strings broke in the midst of the chaos, but it didn't slow him down one bit. Randy's manic machine gun playing caught the other band members off guard. They tried their best to make it look intentional, to save Randy the embarrassment of trying way too hard, for way too long, but now it was just too late. Harley stopped singing and cleared his throat loudly into the microphone. He was dazed. Dale sped up his drumming to try and catch up to Randy, but this threw off The Bass Player who was already screwing up the bridge anyway. Chip stopped playing altogether. He stared at the rest of his band not

knowing who to follow, where it was going, or when the insanity would end.

Big Baloney walked out of the room. He missed a crazed Randy kicking over his amp, causing feedback so loud it cleared the whole room, declaring the competition over. When the feedback finally stopped, there was the faint smell of smoke in the room; it may have been from Randy's amplifier, or maybe it was from their dreams crashing and burning.

#### **March 14**

#### **PERSONAL ENTRY:**

The band took a break after the "disastrophy" that was the Battle of the Bands competition. I've been back home for about a week now. I'm a little lost at sea, and professionally I'm not sure if I should go back. But the truth is that I've been missing the guys, and I wouldn't feel right about not showing up for Randy's wedding.

I can now say with certitude that Just Whatever is The Worst Band In Town. I think they proved that at the Battle For Attention, a title that's just more apropos for the event. The truth is, as I re-read my mission statement, that maybe my goal was too lofty or that I simply chose my band too quickly.

The scrutiny we hold over those closest to us can be unfair assessments of an otherwise decent human being. My guys are good guys. Inside I know I'm going back. I have to. If I'm lost at sea, then so be it. I've always got a paddle if the shit gets

deep. They may be The Worst Band In Town, but they're my band and I'm not giving up on them just yet.

### March 28

After returning to the land of humidity, the first person I saw was Sonny. He welcomed me back with large open arms. Southern hospitality is no joking matter. You won't find it anywhere else, except maybe those cultures you see in National Geographic that have never had contact with the outside world.

Sonny had been so incensed about his being unable to run sound for Just Whatever at the Battle For Attention that he boycotted it. "If I couldn't do it, I wuhn't gonna go. I showed 'em what was what," he said. I don't know who *them* was, or what they got shown, but he was resolute about it. He's convinced the band that his not being present is what led to their unfortunate mishap. I don't have one doubt that the band truly believes this, and from the moment Sonny first suggested it, the band had not one doubt that it was indeed true. It's the perfect scapegoat. I don't know, but maybe Sonny could have mitigated the snafu by turning Randy's volume down that day, letting him flail in silence until he was done with his conniption.

While I've been away they've been gigging as usual. They've even picked up three new dives to play at, but two of them feature a chicken wire fence between them and the audience. Chicken wire was invented in 1844 to protect musicians from being too chicken to perform. It saved the industry.

It's great to see the guys in good spirits. I really thought they'd be crushed by what happened at the Battle, but instead it's fueled a feeling of camaraderie among them. They've squarely placed the Battle in their collective blind spot. That blind spot must be the size of a full-on solar eclipse, but it's there and as long as it's there they are happy to ignore it.

### April 01

Today was Randy's wedding. It took place in the backyard of his new house. Randy has been more concerned with being in the band at his own wedding than being the groom. I finally met his wife-to-be, Whitney. It's hard not to notice the gap between her two front teeth or the massively bouffant mushroom cloud of hair she has. She's a firecracker, for sure, which is a euphemism for something much worse. I'd been around the two of them for less than an hour and it was already easy to see why she's taken no interest in his personal life. For all she cares, the world is still flat and it's entirely her decision to inflate it. The guys in the band have taken to calling her *Whitler*...behind closed doors, of course. Randy doesn't know that her actions have so quickly aligned her with a famous German dictator. The sentiment is hyperbolic, yes, but not unwarranted. The whole "not seeing the bride before the ceremony" thing apparently was replaced with "the bride will explode on the groom in front of everyone over the slightest infraction." I've seen happier weddings.

Harley was Randy's best man. Harley is also deathly afraid of Whitney. You can tell because whenever she comes within fifteen feet of him he instantly smiles. You could be speaking

with him about the sour subject of peace in the Middle East and he'd smile wider than the San Francisco bridge if he saw her coming.

Surprisingly, I've never seen Randy "tore-up drunk." He was drinking earlier this evening but he wasn't drunk. I had a feeling that would change, and as the wedding progressed I found him doing a steady seventy miles per hour on a highway leaving Soberton Valley. As angry as I've seen him get at practice, I realized I was just now seeing the dark side of the moon here. The upheaval Whitney brought to his face every twenty minutes was unabashed; Randy would stay still, take the abuse, and wait patiently for it to end. Whitney is brazen and bold, and you could throw in another word starting with the same letter. Not that Randy is always innocent in these situations, but when a man takes his thrashing like a child, it's embarrassing for all men watching. It's even embarrassing for Dale, who hasn't acted like a real man since we met.

During the actual ceremony there were nothing but smiles from Randy and Whitney; what a show of tolerance. It must have taken an oil tanker's worth of restraint for *Whitler* not to find something wrong with Randy's portrayal of a husband walking down the aisle. It must have taken scaffolding to keep his smile secure and believable. It very well could have been a primal fear that kept him smiling. If you run from a pack of wild dogs they will hunt you down and shred the life from you without compunction. This felt kind of like that. When the preacher asked the audience if they saw any reason that these two should not be joined in matrimony, even the birds shut up.

The ceremony over, Randy was free to drink as much as he liked. So he did that. With Soberton Valley far in his rearview, he gathered his posse and headed towards a small stage. They really went all out. It looked pretty legitimate. They rented lasers, pyrotechnics, colored lights, strobes, and a smoke machine. I was genuinely eager to see them play again. Sonny was buzzing around making last minute adjustments to the mics and his soundboard, while Bob was still getting the hang of remotely controlling the lasers and such. It was mesmerizing seeing smoke pluming, lasers sweeping, and colored lights displaying the full spectrum up on stage while the guys merely tuned their guitars. It looked like Bob was blowing his wad all on the up-front, before the show even began.

They started with pyrotechnics blasting into the air, and the first song actually sounded decent if you ignored the police scanner that Harley's wireless mic was picking up every so often. It was the best I'd heard them. I didn't get "land sickness" and, aside from some minor mistakes, I'd say there's been more practicing than fighting in my absence. The light show definitely "baffled you with bullshit," and I appreciated that.

Towards the end of the song Whitney stood front and center, waving her arms in the air. When the song was over, everyone could finally hear her yelling at the top of her lungs that *it was too effing loud and to turn it down or she was going to call the effing cops herself*. Harley had a smile the length of two Golden Gate Bridges slathered across his involuntary crazy face. Then Randy did something no one expected. He looked directly at her. He looked at her dead in the eyes. He not only looked at her, but he stared at her. He stared at her so hard that if she

had been a lesser woman, then by all laws of physics she should have been knocked to the ground. The rest of us looked at Randy, then back at *Whitler*, then back at Randy, who swaggered over to his amplifier, took a large gulp of his fruity mixed drink, and made an adjustment to his amp. Whitney smiled sarcastically and walked away.

Randy gave Dale a "bro nod," which is the nod where your head goes up a little instead of down. Dale counted off the next song with a, "ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR!" The song began with Dale laying down a steady beat. Roadie Bob pulled out all the stops with the lighting effects. The fact that a fuse didn't blow made me think that God was allowing it to continue. If you were able to see it from space I wouldn't have been surprised. Lasers went everywhere. Smoke filled the stage up to their crotches. Dale was joined by The Bass Player who started plucking the closest thing to a groove he's ever played. Chip slipped into the mix with some near-intricate rhythm guitar. Harley gave the crowd an, "Alriiight!"

It was all coming together. Randy stepped forward, out of a patch of darkness, and into a Devil's red shaft of light. He looked utterly drunk, all the way from his toes to the tips of his fingers. He was capital D-R-U-N-K drunk. The song wasn't anywhere near needing a solo, but Randy didn't care. The first note he hit cleared every vermin within a half-mile radius. It was so loud that people covered their ears as Randy's guitar harshly wept. We collectively lost a bit of hearing as he went into the most self-indulgent part of his defiance. He got to bending his strings up and down without regard to taste. He was all over the place. Then he switched to playing slide guitar with

Chip's beer bottle, but not before adding ten tons of an echo effect that sounded like all the world's crows dying in unison and taking their sweet time about it. Then it was back to the bending; my God, the never ending bending. He added to that a "wah-wah pedal," which is a pedal made famous by professionals back in the sixties. What he did with it would never make it famous. His last act of rebellion involved his "whammy bar." A whammy bar is a rod on the guitar that allows you to bend the pitch of all the strings at once, sending your inner ear into a kamikaze nosedive. The audience literally ran for the hills. There was only one soul angry enough to run towards the stage and that was Whitney. She sprang onto the stage, ears bleeding, and beat whatever Randy had stored up in his colon out of him. It was brutal. His guitar made painful squelches as he took the beating he had to know was coming.

## **April 02**

Randy went to jail last night for disturbing the peace. Before playing, no one checked to see if there was a noise ordinance, and there surely was one. It wasn't a surprise when the cops showed up; we heard them headed our way thanks to Harley's wireless mic. Randy's night in jail was probably the honeymoon he'd been wanting.

Oh, and there wasn't one April Fool's joke yesterday...if you exclude the wedding as a whole.

April 07

After obliterating their chances at the Battle For Attention—and Randy's flagrant display at his wedding—something needed to change. The band was in crisis, as was Randy's marriage. I had prepped myself to be honest with them tonight, to tell them as constructively as possible what I thought could help them progress as a band. I always thought I wouldn't interfere, that I'd be the fly on the wall, but they needed direction. I mustered up the courage to level with them, but I never got that chance.

The real change came in the form of Big Baloney sitting them down at a diner and being the proverbial bull in a China shop. I wasn't allowed at their table for the meeting, so I sat across the way, watching body language, making out sentences when I could.

Tony was in the middle of a tirade when a mysterious man walked through the front door. He looked left. He looked right. Then he spotted Tony and headed in that direction. Upon the man's entrance, the restaurant had become cold and quiet. Everyone in there heard the plethora of sounds emanating from his person. From squeaking leather to metallic clinks and clanks and shifting jewelry, this guy was a walking one-man band of tiny noises. His black leather boots carried metal knick-knacks that jostled loudly with every step. His jeans had rips in inappropriate places, and both his ears were pierced, decorated with a myriad of earrings. He wore a black button-up shirt that he failed to button completely. His wrists bore a thousand bracelets, matching just as many necklaces that attempted to beautify his extremely pale and hairless chest. He had a penchant for pewter, and every

finger was adorned with rings. I'd love to see him try to use chopsticks. His long, stringy hair was pulled back into a greasy ponytail that hardly moved as he strutted towards Just Whatever's table. When he reached them, he brashly grabbed a chair from a nearby table, drug it loudly across the floor, flipped it around, and sat in it backwards. Tony exclaimed, "Slim! Glad you could make it! Meet the guys!" Slim muttered gruffly, "Yeah."

### **April 11**

Jim is the rocker's real name, Tatum is his last, and Slim is his nickname. He does it all: he sings, he plays guitar, he plays bass, and he can even play a bit of drums. He has it all: he has a terrible home life, he's a high school drop out, and he has an arrest record. He's a renegade, a no man's man. You know, the quintessential asshole.

Thanks to Big Baloney this guy was somehow now a member of the band. He threatened to kick them out of the practice room if they didn't give Slim a chance to turn things around. The facts, according to Baloney, are that the band plays cover songs that are too old and too soft and that they lost the Battle of the Bands to a harder-edged band playing hardcore rock. That's where Slim Jim Tatum came in.

Tonight was to be the first official practice with Slim. We heard him coming from blocks away. Everybody's heart stopped as his beast of a motorcycle pulled up outside the practice room. His motorcycle sounded like it breathed fire and needed to be fed twice a day. We sat and listened to Slim make his way through the

building. Slim could never go into the business of being stealthy because he clinked and squeaked and rattled and clattered all the way. There's such a thing as too much jewelry and everyone knows that but Slim.

Harley said under his breath, "Here we go." Slim pushed the door open, carrying his guitar case in one hand and smoking with the other. No one told him he couldn't smoke in the building. No one said anything. Slim put his case on the floor and opened it up to reveal a cherry red Flying V guitar. Dale gasped a little. The Flying V is that electric guitar that's in the shape of the letter V and looks like it's flying, so it's pretty well-named. It's for heavy rockers only. Slim stood up, took a drag off his cigarette, and said, "I'm gonna let 'er breathe while I go back and get my Marshall." A Marshall is a brand of amplifier. He turned to walk out, but paused and said, "Oh, and I think we should have a real band name." He pointed at his shirt and said, "Somethin' like this." His shirt read, The Wyldbillies. Yes, the word *wild* was spelled with the letter Y, which was the very question I was asking myself. Before shutting the door he mumbled, "Think about it."

The guys had plenty of time to think about it because it took Slim four more trips on his motorcycle to bring a full stack of amplifiers.

### **April 13**

The members of The Wyldbillies met in secret...that is, all of the members except Slim. I don't know why I was invited, but I

was pleased at the fact. We met at the railroad tracks in an abandoned coal tower, the one where they took those band pictures that time. The topic was Slim Jim Tatum. He is without a doubt a different breed. The cloth that guy is cut from is undoubtedly demonic black leather, while Just Whatever is more of a soft cotton kind of bunch. His predilection for goatees and pewter ornaments just don't mesh with Just Whatever's baseball caps, farmer blue jeans, and camouflage.

They helplessly spoke in circles, vacillating on their choice of action. If they had their druthers, Slim would be out of the band and Tony could go do something to himself that he wouldn't care for. There was a lull as everyone idly kicked the dirt in front of them. The Bass Player oddly took this opportunity to announce that he had proposed to his longtime girlfriend, Tammy. Randy stared off right over The Bass Player's head and said, "Are you out of your damn mind?" Dale was the only one to congratulate him. It was just bad timing on The Bass Player's part. Having bad timing is what The Bass Player's good at.

Other than that outburst Randy had been uncharacteristically quiet. Well, uncharacteristic if you didn't count before the Battle of the Bands. He's kept to himself since the debacle. Harley called him out with, "You aint gonna say nothin' about none of this?" Randy's shoulders already said it all. He was a broken man. We all knew it, but now he confirmed.

Randy quit the band.

## May 05

Today was Cinco de Mayo and white people everywhere were celebrating for some reason. Harley, Chip, Dale, The Bass Player, and I went to a bar just trying to get drunk and not have a good time. It was loud and I don't know why we went there, but we needed to commiserate, I guess. It's been weeks since Randy left and no one has heard from him, not even Harley; boy, poor Harley. The whole thing has left him a bit shaken and distracted. He forgot to shave one half of his face today and I don't even think he knew it.

## May 07

Matters have been worse than just losing Randy. Now, in his place is the tyrant Slim Jim Tatum, who has taken over the band. Harley had always been the perceived leader of the band, but he's no match for Slim. The transferral of power took less than half a practice. The guys really tried hard to be ingratiating that first practice without Randy. They wanted to remove Slim like you would any splinter, but they were down a man and now they needed him. The guys nervously pretended to be cool that day, but Slim saw straight through that as if they'd wrapped their lack of cool in cellophane.

Slim didn't know the setlist. He didn't need to know. Once he heard the first two notes of any song he was off, tearing it up this-a-way and shredding it up that-a-way. He was good. He was damn good. He must have graduated from some guitar college. This

had to intimidate the daylighters out of the guys. I was intimidated and I don't even play anything.

But I'll never forget the grimace, then the cocky grin, that ran across Slim's face the first time he heard Harley belt out a lyric. Harley tried not to watch for Slim's approval, but like a moth to a flame, Harley's eyes were glued to their corners. Slim's eyes, though, were closed the entire time he played, but he saw everything. When Dale missed a beat, Slim wrenched his neck. When The Bass Player missed a note, Slim dipped his head. You could read Slim's body language like braille yelling at you. Chip tried to go into a solo of his own but Slim's head shot up towards him. Slim never even opened his damn eyes. He just eerily shook his head "no" to the beat of the music. Chip didn't even finish the solo he started, and there was Slim to pick it right up. His solos soared. His pedal effects were enviable. Echo, delay, reverb, chorus, and something called *flange*; they all happened at different times, in different combinations, and the accumulative orchestration took the songs to new heights. Slim anticipated changes in the music with greased-lightning ease. He kept a lit cigarette wedged and ready in the spokes of his strings, daring it to give him cancer. Every so often he would bend and hold a single note that would sustain for so long that he would take a nice, extended drag off that cigarette before returning to the note. He showed that note who was boss. He exuded a natural inclination to all things musical, but he's an asshole. There's no way around that.

In casual conversation Slim swaps out common words with more interesting words like *cat* instead of *guy* as in, "Now THAT *cat* could play guitar!" He doesn't ask you if you understand something. No, he asks if you *dig* something. "Dig what I'm

sayin'?" he'll ask. But he's definitely an asshole, and it's obvious he thinks this cow town and everyone in it should have to kowtow to him and him alone.

He let the former Just Whatever group play all the songs they wanted that first practice. It was an old fashioned show and tell, but it happened at high noon, if you get my meaning. Slim learned everything he needed to know about them, and Just Whatever certainly got schooled in what Slim was capable of. Throughout his whole display of superiority, I couldn't help imagining Slim pulling a six shooter from a holster and one by one knocking down Harley [DING!], The Bass Player [DING!], Dale [DING!], and Chip [DUH-DING!] like they were sad metal ducks at a carnival booth.

The time came when normally Just Whatever would take a smoke break and decide to call it a night. That's when Slim told them that he was finally warmed up and done with the "soft porn," as he called it. You see, Slim was a heavy metal maven. He wanted, as did Tony Baloney, the band to play harder-edged material. The whole night Slim had been playing with Just Whatever, and I don't mean musically.

### **May 28**

Slim has been ruling Just Whatever with a bloody iron fist for weeks. The vibe of the band has changed. The name of the band has changed. Slim promptly saw to it that Dale's kick drum had The Wyldbillies plastered across it. Practices no longer consist of fighting. Fighting has been replaced with listening to Slim

berate and deride them at every turn. The new process reminds me of neutered circus lions being bullwhipped into balancing on striped bouncy balls. No one questions the edicts that come down from Mount Slim Jim. His word is law.

Verbal abuse is Slim's native tongue. He's quite the authoritarian and had he not dropped out of high school, I'd swear he'd been assigned the works of Ayn Rand along the way. The day he sarcastically taught Just Whatever how to count to four was a doozy: "ONE, two, three, four, ONE, two, three, four, ONE! Do I gotta hold ya hand!?" He went for jugulars that day, leaving none intact. "Why you doin' one thing and this cat here doin' another!? Why is that, bruh?" Slim barked. Slim loved rhetorical questions. The guys weren't used to them so they'd always open their mouths to try and answer, but nothing came out. The cat in this particular instance was Dale, but Slim won't learn Dale's name. Slim turned his barrels to Chip with, "And you, my man, GOT to keep steady with me. None of this mess you doin' over there, you hear me? It goes like this: duhn duhn duhn DUHN duhn, and you doin' duhn duhn DUHN duhn duhn. You dig?" Even I dug what he was saying. It wasn't a technical explanation, but it was the truth. Chip sometimes doesn't pay attention. Slim turned his dislike towards the other side of the room and declared that if The Bass Player hit one more dead note, that Slim was going to strangle him with his own E string, which is the top one that's so big. This hopefully playful threat elicited a chuckle from Harley. Slim's face didn't reflect the humor Harley found. With the cold blue eyes of an alpha wolf, Slim stared into Harley, right past his heart, and straight into his soul when he laid out, "Hey, bro, go check out a dictionary from the library, 'cause I know you ain't got one at home. Look up the word *diaphragm* and start

using it, and I don't mean in a sentence. The only thing funny here is you, bro. You feel me?" I've never heard so much silence as after those words. It was so silent there was a whole other level of silence just below it. Right now we'd probably be able to hear anything Joffrey would have said.

What broke that silence was Tony Baloney. We listened patiently as he dragged his massive body up the stairs with his own two tortured feet. It was the first time he had come to a practice. He didn't knock. He just busted in. He owns the place. He had a fat grin on his ruddy face. He told them that he'd bagged them their first gig as The Wyldbillies. I've never seen him so sweaty or pleased with himself. Slim rolled his eyes like a child and said, "About time, Baloney."

### **June 03**

The Wyldbillies have been readying for their first gig coming up in a few days. The songs they're covering have a lot more distortion to them, a lot more yelling, and a heck of a lot more solos. There are solos in songs where previously there had been none. Sexual innuendos and solos are suddenly considered important criteria for choosing a setlist.

The walls of the practice room buckle and bend, trying to contain Slim's presence and his wall of amps. He's much louder than even the drums. Sonny hasn't touched Slim's volume on the mixing board since the day Slim walked all the way over and adjusted the volume himself during a song. Slim allegedly has the longest reaching guitar cable ever invented so he can get right

up in everyone's sad business. The louder Slim is, the less he complains.

### June 06

So The Wyldbillies' first public gig was an outside family event at a bank. There was nothing sexy about it and I wondered how appropriate their song selections would be. Children were running around the place, and I hoped they wouldn't catch the heavy sexual innuendos that Harley had to sing.

It was The Wyldbillies' turn to take to the scary, homemade stage. With the lifespan of a mayfly, its rickety construction was not up to any code. The band was crammed up there like sardines. One would think "rocking out" would be limited on that shaky platform, but that didn't stop Slim from letting his hair down and inadvertently slapping Chip in the face with it over and over again. Chip had nowhere to stand that would avoid the onslaught. I see a chiropractor in Slim's future. His neck will eventually regret going along with all of this.

While Slim thrashed away up on stage, his face was the real show. It would contort and express itself in all manner of exaggerated ways, as if his playing alone wasn't sufficiently grabbing everyone's attention. It would follow in sync with his playing, using such classic expressions as anger-at-nothing, shock-at-nothing, pensive-for-no-reason, surprise-for-no-reason, elation-all-uh-sudden, and my favorite look: Orgasmic-Solo. That one specifically needs to be capitalized. The price of admission was justified upon seeing Orgasmic-Solo in action. The variations

of his eyes and mouth being open or closed were twists on previously-used faces, making them new and exciting all over again for still no reason. Slim took "feeling it" to a whole other level, cresting Mount Shameless and firmly planting a flag upon it's summit.

Quite a few of the songs Slim chose for them to perform contained the words *lips*, *lick*, *legs*, and *cherry*. In private or at a bar I wouldn't have felt uncomfortable about these words, but outside a bank they were poorly chosen. Maybe if Harley had really sold the emotion behind these words then they would have seemed deliberate at least, but here in this dry county I doubt that would have mattered much. A dry county is a patch of land that God has deemed unfit for liquor sales; to Hell with the other patches, I guess. Regardless, I'm pretty positive many of the folks at the event would prefer to be sloshed right about now.

The Wyldbillies played five songs and were done before you knew it. Slim oddly apologized to the audience for the mistakes the rest of the band made, smiled, and walked off the now-leaning stage. Slim's *head banging* probably did that thing in; without question it had an effect on Chip. For the rest of the day Chip was randomly dodging imagined threats like he had some sort of post-traumatic syndrome. He would become startled and duck his head; in those instances you'd notice strands of Slim's hair caught in Chip's sunglasses.

But I'll say this for Slim, he's put an end to the public tuning that had become Just Whatever's staple opener. That's improvement. There was no tuning, no feedback, and no police

scanner interference during the entire gig, so that was good. From that perspective they really are getting better. The bank organizers had their own sound mixer, so Sonny obviously boycotted the gig. There usually aren't as many sound issues when Sonny boycotts something.

As we were all walking from the stage to the parking lot, Slim took off his shirt. It was a hot day, but with that action he proclaimed himself hotter than everyone else there. We passed an older gentleman who crankily said to Chip, "Tell yer friend there to put on a shirt. This here's uh family event." Slim heard the man just fine, bowed up, and retorted, "Shut up, old man. I'll break you clean in two." Slim lit a cigarette and we kept walking to the parking lot. I just wanted to get out of there before he got a sunburn in the shape of a million necklaces.

Ultimately, Slim only has two modes of operation: Him and Him Only. I'll admit the guy is talented, but it doesn't matter how successful he might one day become; no amount of success will ever supplant what's been put in the place of common decency.

### **June 12**

The good thing about the bank gig is that The Wyldbillies actually made money. It's a first. The little money that Just Whatever made in the past was always offset by the current price of gasoline.

Making their first profit didn't satiate King Slim's hunger for control and power and, more importantly, the spotlight. I couldn't have guessed what came next...but I should have.

Tony and Slim have been colluding; that much is clear. The tectonic plates of Just Whatever's world were shifting once again and all too soon. The smell of old plans finally coming to fruition hung ominously in the musky air.

It's nothing unusual for Just Whatever to wait almost an hour for Slim to show up to practices. I'm not aware if Slim issued orders, or if they did it out of a fearful respect, but his cherry red guitar was allowed to "breathe" for the hour prior to his arrival tonight. His Flying V guitar glared at them while they waited, shaming them in Slim's absence. The wait for Slim was a quiet one. The guys have commiserated so much that there was nothing new to say. The distant gravelly roar of a motorcycle queued them to get their tuning out of the way.

Slim jingle-jangled his way through the building and up the stairs. When he entered, he was smoking two newly-lit cigarettes and holding a gold-plated mic stand. Confusion washed over the room. Had Slim purchased an elaborate gift for Harley? I mean, this mic stand was immaculate. It had multiple bandanas tied up and down the length of it for decoration and was lined with easy-access guitar picks for the serious strummer. He carried it over to Harley and set it down. Slim took one of the cigarettes out of his mouth and gave it to Harley, who held it like it was a foreign object. Then Slim picked the mic stand back up and walked it over to his corner and started setting it up. "Band meeting," Slim said. Everybody was there already so he continued, "There's

gonna be a change. We're tryin' somethin' new." He went on to say that Harley's singing hadn't ceased to be shit, and he relegated Harley to singing backup. The cigarette he had given to Harley was not unlike the last courtesy of a firing squad. Harley sucked down that cigarette in just two hard puffs, which is sad because he had finally kicked the habit.

### July 02

Slim's talent with a guitar is unrivaled, but his singing could be rivaled easily, just not by Harley. In many ways Harley is better as a backup singer, but that may be just because he's so low in the mix.

Slim has a guttural singing style. If his style can be described as "in your face," then Harley's would have to be described as "from another room." Slim also uses way more reverb on his vocals; there's almost more reverb than there are vocals. It sounds like he's fifty feet away, yelling in a cavern.

Slim gets the lyrics out in the correct pitch, yes, but his exaggeration of certain syllables has about as much soul as a burning tire and just as nauseating. Slim's inflections will haunt your sensibilities. At the ends of words, where they normally should end, he will add an *-uh* or a *-guh*. A simple example would be:

*I love you so much-uh,  
That I can't live without cha-uh,  
You know you're my thang-guh,  
Got me wrapped around fang-guhs*

It is what it is, as they say. I just wish it weren't.

### **July 04**

It's the fourth of July so there's always a gig for a musician, and The Wyldbillies played their Gig Number Nine at Bar Number Five. It's a chicken wire bar, and it was plain to see The Wyldbillies' theatrics were going over better than the antics from Just Whatever's earlier gigs there. The place was packed tight, and Slim was up on stage *uh-ing* and *guh-ing* his way through the lyrics. The former Just Whatever gang was up there too, but only barely. The back row of hanging stage lights had either gone out or Slim had them turned off; Just Whatever was buried in darkness while Slim absorbed the spotlight, hoarding the glory.

During the break Slim sat at the bar drinking and schmoozing while Harley, Chip, Dale, Sonny, Bob, and The Bass Player scarfed down their coveted free meals and beers. They were so focused on cramming food in the their mouths that they were startled when a female voice called out to our table. The guys looked up in unison and watched, spellbound, as the woman approached. She had the largest hip sway, the biggest hair, and the most raccoon-like eyeshadow in the entire place. Her makeup must have been applied with a paint roller; I've seen clowns wear less. She hooted,

"Hey, y'all," as she arrived. With the exception of yours truly, everyone at the table stood up, again in unison. They stared at her with mouths agape and full of food. "How y'all been? It's been years!" she said while smacking on gum. She took a swig of beer, which doesn't go well with gum. Her hair looked like a 5th grade science project. Closer inspection revealed it had been through the gamut of bleaches and dyes, and what was left is referred to by geologists as *strata*; all the layers were still there from millions of years ago. This woman's lipstick ignored the boundaries of her own lips. If applying lipstick were a sport then this would clearly be a penalty. All the way from the earrings that touched her shoulders to the bright red, extra-high-heeled boots, she was quite something, which is what you say when there are no words in the language to adequately grasp the scope of a thing.

With a mouth full of mashed up french fries, Bob asked, "Sussy?" A chunk of hamburger rolled out of The Bass Player's open mouth and plopped into his drink. "Yeah, I'm back visitin' for the weekend, fellas!" she screeched, confirming that it was indeed the fabled Sussy Maye Stricklan.

After a bit of reminiscing, it was evident this woman had slept with all of them at one point or another, possibly overlapping the instances. It was also evident that Sonny had had his go with her, and that makes his soundcheck phrase of "sing-song-soundcheck-susie" all the more antagonistic. She was akin to the word *atrocious*, and not totally dissimilar to the word *grotesque*, but there was a Southern charm about her that was undeniable. Maybe in the past she used to be a catch, but that

past had caught up with her. In Sussy's case the old saying was only partially true; she had lived hard but had not died young.

I guess the moment Slim caught a glimpse of a woman standing at Just Whatever's table his ego took over, not that his ego ever truly lapses control. He clinked, clanked, jingled, and jangled up next to Sussy, very intently smoking a cigarette. When her eyes caught Slim, her body language shifted. Though it took everything he had, Slim feigned oblivion to her presence as he stood literally right next to her. "Y'all are so great! I loved the show!" Sussy swooned at Slim. She had failed to mention this until Slim's arrival. "Cool," he barely said. Then she bummed a cigarette from him, which won't mix well with the gum and the beer.

The guys at the table sat down in unison. They had front row seats to watch Sussy lay her charms on Slim as she had once done for each of them. Like the mighty locust, ruining every crop it touches, Sussy, yet again, broke the hearts of those sitting at the table. They gazed intensely at what was transpiring between Slim and Sussy. If the air conditioning hadn't been blowing in their faces, I doubt they would have blinked. Without even looking at her, Slim offered to get Sussy another beer, and they were off to the bar together. The guys were dumbfounded, exchanging looks of disbelief that traveled 'round and 'round the table.

The Just Whatever crew finished their burgers and headed back to the stage to get ready for the last half of their performance. A scruffy man in overalls approached Chip and told him he was a scout for a record company. He told Chip he played

guitar and would love to sit in on a few songs. If this guy was a real record company scout, then I was Paul Bunyan. But ever the optimist, Chip told the guy he'd have to check with Slim first. Chip would soon have been known as Mr. Gullible by his peers had it not been for the ruckus coming from the bathrooms.

The whole bar took notice of the commotion. Two men emerged from the dark recesses blanketing the bathroom area. Walking tall, with a bloody nose, was Slim. His hair had been punched clean out of his ponytail, and he was leading a hunched-over man by the back of the neck. His other hand was holding up his pants. Slim strolled through the crowd, leading the man out the front door. Sussy followed behind them the entire way, clasping her shirt closed and pulling her skirt down. The bar evacuated into the streets.

Outside were a thousand glossy eyes raging for a show and Slim was going to give it to them. Those of us associated with Slim pushed our way to the front lines. Not knowing the impetus for the altercation led to irresponsible cheerleading from the crowd. Someone eager and offering encouragement shouted, "Beat his ass!" but didn't necessarily clarify who it was intended to encourage. The man Slim had dragged into the middle of the road was dressed completely in camouflage, head to heel. His jumpsuit was camo. His camo shoes covered camo socks. Although the man's face hid under the brim of a camo hat, the street was filled with barbarous animals who could see him clearly this night and they drunkenly demanded blood.

"You got a problem, bro!?" Slim snapped. "HUH!?" he snapped again. Slim picked Camo Man off the asphalt, but pushed him right

back down and spit on the ground. Then Slim pulled out a stick of gum and put it in his mouth; odd move, but it happened. I guess Slim's certitude that the fight would be one-sided gave him the utmost confidence that he wouldn't accidentally swallow the gum in the middle of any fisticuffs. That would be seven years bad luck for your innards, but Slim was just the badass to weather that storm.

Slim buckled his belt then spit the barely chewed gum out into the crowd. He picked up Camo Man with both hands and punched him square in the nose so hard that Camo Man's camo hat flew off into the surrounding mob to become memorabilia. Camo Man hit the ground and damn near broke his ass bone. Slim victoriously lifted both arms into the air and made his fingers dance, clacking his pewter rings together. Camo Man rolled over on his belly and looked up at us. We finally saw his face and it was black in both eyes and red from the nose. It bore indentations from Slim's crappy rings; one, ironically, a small Christian cross and another a skull. It didn't register at first who it was. Slim's alterations to the face made it difficult to recognize, but it was soon apparent to all of us. Unquestionably, it was Randy.

Slim had time to pop some new victory gum into his mouth as Sussy ran up and wrapped herself around his arm. Randy looked up at Just Whatever with eyes full of *help me*. Harley, without a second thought to the fear so obvious in his eyes, stepped forward and planted his feet in between Randy and his assailant. Sussy screamed, "Harley, no!" Slim's projectile of gum from moments earlier had landed in her massive head of hair. She didn't know it yet, but what a waste of peanut butter that'll be.

Slim pushed Sussy away hard, slanted his eyes, cocked his cocky head, and snarled, "What's this?" It was a countryfied standoff that hushed the crowd. That is, until Harley told him what it was by landing the limpest attempt at a cold-cock ever attempted. Harley hit Slim in the eye about as hard as hot butter. Slim responded from the blow with a cheetah-quick uppercut that racked Harley's jaw so hard the friction almost started a fire in his mouth. Harley didn't realize he'd been knocked out; everyone else did, but Harley wouldn't even remember hitting the ground.

Roadie Bob stepped over Randy and Harley and pushed Slim back into the surrounding crowd. He was then rebounded back into play by the very same crowd. Bob watches *wrastlin'* on TV so he tried to clothesline Slim, but that didn't happen. Instead, Slim dodged the arm meant for him, grabbed it, and bent it behind Roadie Bob's back. Roadie Bob had few options with Slim behind him so he slammed his elbow into Slim's cheek. This caused Slim to painfully push Roadie Bob's arm further into discomfort, buying Slim enough time to not only recover but to also kick Roadie Bob in the junk from behind. I'm sure that move has a *wrastlin'* name he could tell you about, but for now Bob fainted forward, eyes crossed.

Suddenly Chip appeared over Slim's shoulder and tried to karate chop it. Sure, Chip had been taking classes for the past month or so, but it was way too early to try what he did. Especially when you consider the irony—and we all learned this later—that Slim had been a brown belt before he dropped out of high school. He took ahold of Chip's attacking hand. It happened so quickly that everyone watching got whiplash, and it startled

Chip so badly that he started slapping and clawing at Slim's back like a small defenseless animal. If it's aikido where you use someone's own momentum against them, then that's what Slim did. Chip may never use momentum again. Slim flipped him over like he was a fluffy little pancake, and Chip never got back up.

Slim had his head on a swivel and promptly swiveled it in the direction of the remaining members of Just Whatever. Sonny took two steps back and disappeared into the raging crowd. The Bass Player looked at Dale. Dale looked at The Bass Player. They screamed in each other's faces at the top of their lungs, priming up their primal instincts, before turning it on Slim. They bolted for Slim, who shifted around in anticipation and yelled back at them. When they got close, The Bass Player split off from Dale, leaving only Dale to be punched in the gut. Using both hands, Slim pushed Dale away by his face, and Dale rolled over like a rag doll. The Bass Player eventually came back around and palm-smacked Slim's face like a brick. The feces in Slim's bowels shifted down and into his leather pants, I'm sure. It was pretty hard is all I'm saying. Regardless of what it may or may not have done to his bodily functions, it did stun him properly. This in turn stunned The Bass Player who didn't expect to make real contact. Instead of taking advantage of that moment to pounce, he hesitated long enough for Slim to regain enough awareness to whack him in the throat. The Bass Player dropped to his knees, hacking for air. He soon joined the likes of Randy, Harley, Roadie Bob, and Chip on the ground. Randy stayed down the whole time, watching, dodging bodies. It looked like the worst game of twister ever. Who knew how many miles away Sonny was by now.

Slim found the strength to laugh at The Bass Player. He started making the sweep across the ground to laugh at each and every one of his fallen foes. His jaunty, forced laughter got all the way to Roadie Bob before he finally noticed Dale, fully reared back, cocked and loaded, and releasing what professional boxers call a *haymaker* carrying a ten megaton payload of hurt. It happened in slow motion and Slim accidentally gulped his gum. Dale's large knuckles made contact with the whole of Slim's face, which swung Slim around 180 degrees before his necklaces even thought about catching up. The impact sent a shock wave down Slim's entire body before it busted out his knee's ability to hold him standing; and just like that, Slim's lights were out. Gravity took hold. The crowd went berserk. Dale barely realized what he'd accomplished. He kept watching Slim's limp, motionless body just waiting for him to get up, but it never happened. Sussy ran over to Dale and attached herself to his arm, cheering. She planted a big kiss on Dale's cheek that left a nasty amount of lipstick behind. Dale jerked his arm from her grip and pushed her off into the crowd. Then he held his hand out to Randy, and Randy gladly took it.

### **July 07**

Sussy and Slim deserved each other. They were both locusts, devouring up bands as they went. After the debacle in the streets, Slim eventually became conscious enough to finish having sex with Sussy before she left town. From what I've been told, all of Slim's gear has been removed from the practice room. All that was left was a urine stain where his wall of amps had been. That's a classic Slim move, right there.

**July 09**

PERSONAL ENTRY:

It's tumultuous times. No one knows what's going on, and I don't see any easy solutions. The guys are much better as a band than they are by themselves. If nothing else, it's a support system that keeps them involved in each other's lives. Without it the fabric of their friendship becomes more and more frayed by the day.

It doesn't take much to make a band. People just have to hold instruments near one another. The gravitational forces of wanting to be in a band pulls them together. Some bands come, some bands go, but anyone can start one. Being in a band is a marriage, and like a marriage, you sometimes marry the wrong person and end up fantasizing about your high school sweetheart.

Tough days ahead.

**July 20**

Just Whatever was kicked out of the practice room. Big Baloney sent them a nasty letter claiming that the eviction was due to the plethora of cups filled with dip spit and cigarette butts scattered around the place. It wasn't the real reason, but it was a fact, nonetheless.

They had no practice room. They had no manager. They had no gigs and no lead guitarist. Chip told the guys that he'd learn how to play lead. A couple of the guys shuddered at the thought

like a cold, cold breeze had come through the room. Chip would certainly pass imaginary guitar kindergarten, but would struggle through guitar high school, and ultimately disappoint at guitar college.

### **July 30**

#### **PERSONAL ENTRY:**

I haven't seen much of the fellas this past month. I tried to find Randy, but he's still avoiding everyone. His car is often not at the new home he and Whitney moved into. There's a lot of butt-hurt going around. It's an epidemic. Just Whatever has had the teeth kicked out of its hopes and dreams, and blame is the currency everyone is spending lately. I'm only able to occasionally meet with one of them at a time and they each tell me they'll maybe practice soon. I don't know if I should just leave town or not. Sonny finally answered one of my phone calls. I meet with him tomorrow.

### **July 31**

So Sonny all of a sudden has a heart condition. When asked where he was the night of the big dust up he said, "When I ran outta that bar that night I felt uh heart condition happen." I think he's been saving up for a top-of-the-line Excuse Machine because he didn't stop there. He added, "Then I felt my colitis kick up and I needed a bathroom, like, yesterday." I didn't even press him before he offered up yet another reason why he left his band hanging. "Not to mention I was double-parked in one uh them

handicap spots," he explained even further. I guess he thought if he could build a big enough case for why he left the band high and dry, his decisive moment that night would somehow seem more noble. Quite the opposite is true, of course. "Anyway, I was carryin' my .22 pistol that night, and I didn't wanna kill nobody in anger. Wuhdn't in the mood," he added to the pile. It was a rather large pile.

He asked for my version of what went down that night and I didn't deny him the full play-by-play, definitely denoting the moment he backed away from the proverbial plate. I pleaded with him to get all the guys together for a band meeting. Sonny said that his trying to get the band together would be, "about as useful as throwing a nickel at a bank." I had never heard the expression, but I understood it enough.

### **August 03**

I visited with Chip. I've chatted with Bob, and I've reached out to Randy again. There's still no consensus. But today I finally caught Harley on his front porch. He was wearing fluffy slippers, ripped pajama pants, and an ancient wife-beater. He looked like a sack of garbage disguised as a man and propped up in a chair, like a bad halloween display. He was smoking cigarettes again. He offered me the murkiest cup of coffee I've ever seen, but I took the sludge and even complimented it to boot. "It's my special brew," he said proudly. Apparently Harley refused to take used coffee grounds out of the coffee maker until there was no more room for new grounds. What a treat. No amount of sugar could make this drink bearable, but that didn't stop him

from placing a five pound bag of sugar right next to the coffee maker. I digress.

Harley was the only one who could get the band back together and I told him as much. It was going to be tough because I could see the epic amount of butt-hurt in his eyes. He was a broken man. The situation had stuck so deep in his craw that a medical procedure might have to be developed to remove it. How do you build up a man who's wearing fluffy slippers and drinking cocaine coffee? I appealed to his sense of ego, referring to him as the leader of the band. He didn't bite, more than likely due to Slim's having body slammed Harley's ego against a gravel road. I appealed to his sense of responsibility to the other guys. The band meant just as much to them as it did him. That didn't take either, possibly due to the memory of Randy's quitting when they needed him most. Lastly, I appealed to his sense of indignation; so maybe things hadn't gone their way but he was now free to start over and do things differently. My stomach turned when he mumbled, "The only reason I'd get everybody together would be to leave the band in person, honorable-like." I don't know if he remembered Randy's leaving the band as honorable, but I didn't mention that. Regardless, I told him I'd get everyone together. It was better than nothing.

#### **August 07**

So I lied by omission. I told everyone that Harley called a band meeting. We met in the evening at The Bass Player's house. He lives in the middle of nowhere at the end of a long and dusty driveway. Bob, Sonny, The Bass Player, Chip, and Harley sat on

the front stoop waiting on Dale to come out of the bathroom. The sun was starting to set, but it was still hotter than blue fire and as humid as Hell's kitchen. They seemed to have a good time retelling the story of Slim, how they each had their asses handed to them like cheap takeout food.

Dale joined us outside. His position with the group has obviously changed. He's respected now for what he did. When duty called, he answered. They named his story *Dale and Goliath*, and it was the only story that wasn't made light of. One good thing that came of all this was that Dale impressed a young lady that night, and he's been seeing her since. Hell, he's actually acting like a real man now. I don't even think drumming to a click track would make him cry at this point. He's even moved out of his grandparents' house. His new girlfriend's name is Dana Purdy, and from the pictures he showed us she's a looker indeed.

Harley cleared his throat to speak. He wasn't but a few words into his opening sentence of, "Well, I s'pose we should talk about a few things," when we spotted a car barreling towards us, dragging with it a tidal wave of angry dust and dirt. The sun setting behind the car made it difficult to assess who it was.

"You expectin' anybody?" asked Sonny. The Bass Player shook his head. Harley uttered in disbelief, "It's Randy." The vehicle was approaching way too fast for comfort. Closer and closer it sped towards us, becoming more and more frightening by the second. It was nearly at our feet when it screeched to a halt and skidded, throwing the full brunt of Earth's particles in our faces. We looked like dust bowl survivors. The car door opened

and a female silhouette bolted out. "You can have the sorry sack of shit!" the figure exclaimed. Harley yelled out, "Whitler!?"

Whitney didn't even notice Harley's slip of the tongue as she threw Randy's guitar tuner at us. "He left this crap and I want it out of my sight!" she screamed, as she threw out small items like underwear, a single sock, lip balm, and a few guitar magazines. "He'll need it because that's all he's gonna have when I'm done with him!" Harley stood up and said, "What happened?" She reached back in the car, pulled out a caged parakeet, and slammed it on the ground, much to the parakeet's chagrin. "He bought this damn bird and it won't shut up, so he can have that too!" With that she got back in, slammed the door, accidentally hit the wipers, and skidded out of the driveway backwards. As the cloud of dust cleared, Sonny went and picked up the parakeet cage. The bird croaked, "RAAAUURRR, YOU'LL NEVER BE ANYTHING, RAAAUURRR!"

### **August 09**

Dale had called Randy and left a message about the band meeting, which is how Whitney even knew about it. Whitney is obviously divorcing Randy. Baffled reactions to this information didn't exist. If the phrase "good riddance" is uttered by the guys about twenty more times, they may be up for a world record. Randy has moved back into his old double-wide trailer, and he and Dale made arrangements for us to meet him there. Randy specifically asked about his parakeet, Birdie.

Although it only took one person to return Randy's belongings, we all went. When we showed up, Randy was shirtless but wearing his letterman jacket from high school and tying off a white bandana around his head. Randy's face lit up when he saw Birdie, and when Birdie saw Randy it squawked, "RAAAUURRR, GET REAL RANDY, RAAAUURRR!" Randy smiled and thanked us again. He sure does love Birdie.

### August 10

Last night was a celebratory night of excess, full of drinking, eating, smoking, and sloppy acoustic guitar playing. Right near Randy's place is an old run-down bus that was stripped of most of its seats long ago. We spent the night inside it, butchering cover songs left and right. It was the most fun we'd had in ages. Birdie joined us on the bus too. That bird may never learn the word *cracker*, but after last night he can use the word *shit* like nobody's business.

Randy was asked about the night of the big fight with Slim. He was candid about it, saying very plainly he was jealous and curious about them as The Wyldbillies. He said he wore all the camouflage "to go undetected and stealth-like," but that had quite the opposite effect. He would've gotten less attention if he'd worn bushes and a small tree. He admitted it was seeing Slim and Sussy in the bathroom together that did him in. It was hearing Slim demand, "A little privacy, bro?" when he was in a public bathroom and when Randy totally had to pee, which is something he was forced to do all over himself when the fight began. In that respect, the camo was a good idea.

Randy took that intimate moment on the bus, intoxicated by camaraderie and more, to bring up the song he had been working on. It was the original song he attempted to play for us many moons ago, but it actually went somewhere this time. Before, when he played the fragmented version, it hung in the air like a hot funk. Now it had clearly defined parts, a structure, and even a bit of melody to carry it. His singing was unsophisticated, like that of a child just learning to speak, but that didn't stop him from belting out his emotions. The underlying sentiment in the lyrics wasn't all that bad, but the pablum in which those sentiments were written WAS that bad. Still, we were actually impressed with it even if it was a bit juvenile in nature.

When he finished playing the song we clapped for him. He said, "The song's about love and loss, and I been thinkin' a lot about all that kinda stuff lately." Indeed he had. Out of his personal turmoil had come the most genuine thing yet. Was the song going to change the world? Oh, no, no, no—not in the slightest. But had the song changed Randy? Yes. Had it informed the rest of us emotionally? Yes, as well. The emotions expressed in the song may be on the level of a 5th grader, but that doesn't mean we couldn't relate to it. We've all been in 5th grade.

### **August 17**

We're practicing at Randy's again. Mixed into the new setlist is Randy's original song. It's been rough goings for the song, but that may be because the guys have never had to create the music for themselves. Making the step from being told what to play, by the very nature of recreating preexisting music, to

creating the individual parts yourself seems to be a high hurdle. Judging by the scowls of deep concentration on their faces, it must take every bit of feeling they've got. There's no feeling left over to care about what their faces look like as they stumble through it. The fighting has returned over Randy's song, but now the fights are about the abstract concepts of right and wrong. The guys ultimately defer to Randy because it's his "baby," but that doesn't make him any more right than anyone else.

### **August 20**

Just Whatever has been getting gigs for themselves and mixing in Randy's original song without any added moaning and groaning from the audience, so that's some sort of victory. Dare I say it, but Just Whatever might have their first fans. A couple of bar hoppers named T.J. and Tipper no longer hoot and holler sarcastically after each of Just Whatever's songs. It used to be an understandable nuisance. Was it rude? Yes. Was it often warranted in some way? Yes, again. Did they once publicly challenge Just Whatever to play an imaginary song the two of them made up on the spot called, "Sweet Brown-Eyed Sally Alabama?" Yes, and it was obnoxiously amusing the way T.J. and Tipper took turns demanding they play this farce of a song. They remained drunkenly tenacious in their requests. It was the only enjoyment they got out of having Just Whatever invade their bar scene. Now those guys have come to know Harley and the gang. I'd say they're fans in some weird way. Now when they hear Randy's original song they stammer out the title in sloppy celebration. T.J. will cry out, "'Loove aaand Loooosssssssss!" which is now the name of

the song. Then Tipper will shake his head at the floor while holding a lighter in the air, sputtering, "'Love and Loss,' man. 'Loove-aaaaand-Loossssss.'" I can't help it. It makes me smile every time.

### August 28

Randy's uncle-in-law has finally come out of hibernation after his last experience with them, that of getting the demo tape recorded. Randy asked him to drop by practice tonight and hear his original song. Uncle-in-law agreed and showed up prepared with a twenty-four pack of beer. He remembered me and asked how I had survived so long. He didn't laugh at his own joke, so it may have been a real question.

The first thing Uncle-in-law did was down two of those beers like they were the last cold brews on planet Earth. He burped and said, "Alright, y'all. Let's do this." Just Whatever played "Love and Loss." Uncle-in-law sat there patiently. He didn't crack another beer. Surprisingly, the next beer he felt the need to pop was at the end of the song, and he shared the rest of those beers with everyone.

Uncle-in-law's official response was, "It needs a lotta work. I mean, a ton of work. But after a God-awful amount of work that there may be a real song, gents." The guys haven't been more proud of anything. It's like they've had their first child. They may end up being terrible parents, but for now they've at least created something in this world that wasn't here before them.

### **September 03**

Uncle-in-law wants them to record the original song in a "for real" studio down in Florida. He's putting his own money into it. As it stands, Just Whatever is to work on the song as much as they can before heading into this real studio where every hour is "expensive as all get out."

To save money on the excursion, Uncle-in-law has enlisted the help of an eccentric friend whose nickname is Nutsy. I pray the nickname is inappropriate to the man; I'd like to assume it spawned from Nutsy's being a nuts-and-bolts, gearhead type of guy. From what we've been told, he's an extreme hobbyist of many things, the most relevant being his "double-wide homebuilt airplane." Uncle-in-law plans to save money by flying the band to Florida on the most non-commercial flight you could think of; only Harley has refused the idea. He has a fear of flying and insists on driving all the way down there. Harley is hoping to get the extra days off work to do so. I don't blame him because it sounds like a shanty of a plane that's forced into the air by the pressures of expectation alone.

### **September 10**

We met Nutsy on his ranch today. Everyone who was flying seemed to want reassurance of the situation. Nutsy is into anything and everything, and nothing could be brought up to him without his letting everyone know that he knew more about it than they did. According to him he's done it all and he's seen it all. He's an older man, small in stature, with a grey buzz cut. He

wore a hat that had the #1 symbol written on it; not #1 Dad or #1 Granddad, just #1.

Nutsy is referred to as what's called down here a "good ol' boy," which can be a good thing or a bad thing. I can't tell the difference yet. The term goes both ways, as they hoped his plane would be able to do.

There is no doubt that Nutsy is as crafty as they come. But *crafty* is another word that goes both ways, and knowing that makes me certain this flight is not going to be one of a legal nature. I'm pretty sure there are regulations and formalities for their flight that Nutsy is taking an irregular and informal approach to. He's said things like, "I've done this uh hundred times," and "Don't take my word for it, but ya should," and "There's a wrong way and there's a right way, but we're gone slide up the middle there."

Nutsy herded us out to a large hangar-esque building he'd built himself, of course, and proudly presented his plane. The plane's name was painted on the side, *The Enola Straight*. As Nutsy would tell you, *The Enola Straight* was a combination of a couple of different homebuilt aircraft kits. She was pushing capacity at seven passengers. When asked about the duct tape on the front of the plane, Nutsy said, "Oh, there's a reason for that." Well, I sure felt better.

Nutsy made it sound simple, "We just pull on out and take off from the landing strip there," which was his driveway just a second ago. Nutsy isn't afraid of anything, and that scares the Hell out of everybody. He's quite handy and intelligent, but his

scruples are out to lunch and they may have taken the rest of the day off.

The band didn't ask many questions, most likely because Nutsy's answers are usually condescending. Harley had come along to solidify his fear of flying. With crossed arms, he did the proverbial kicking of the tires to which Nutsy barked, "BE CAREFUL!" Harley just looked at his band with a solemn face as if to say goodbye.

### **September 17**

It's a hard thing to admit, but the lasting effect of Slim's presence in the band has helped the guys in more ways than one. They are harder on themselves and easier on one another. They each appreciate the other members more for not being a complete asshole like Slim. Dale's tightening up his abilities as a drummer has helped everyone stay closer to the page they're all supposed to be on. The kinks and mishaps in their music are still present, but they happen more together than they have in the past. Some of the mistakes almost seem deliberate now, which I know is not the case, but it helps to imagine it that way. There are moments in songs where Harley will exclaim excitedly, "YEA-UH!" and now you almost agree with him. That's progress.

### **September 25**

There's a buzz in the group that hasn't been here before. Even some of the girlfriends of the members are showing up now

that the song "Love and Loss" is here and being recorded soon. Dana Purdy, Dale's girlfriend, comes to most practices now. Tammy, The Bass Player's fiancé, comes too. Deliluh, Chip's on-and-off-again-but-mostly-on girlfriend, is also showing up from time to time.

Harley has asserted that he's sworn off women because, "Either they're all crazy or I'm pickin' all the wrong ones to have sex with, so I'm done bein' picky." I'm sure Sigmund Freud would be able to write an entire paper about what Harley was trying to mean in that one sentence.

Roadie Bob brought his little nephew, Tate, once or twice and Tate thought that Just Whatever was the coolest thing ever until cookies were brought out. It's hard to compete with cookies.

### **October 03**

Just Whatever had their last gig tonight before heading out to record. It was Gig Number Forty-Two at Bar Number Six and the only interesting thing that happened—because newfound fans T.J. and Tipper weren't there—was that Tony Baloney had the bowling balls to show up. On their first break, Big Baloney approached Just Whatever's table with a grin the size of Texas and with good intentions the size of Rhode Island. He greeted them as if nothing had ever happened. Mr. Bologna had heard it through the kudzu, as it were, that Just Whatever had themselves an original song and were going to record it. Wherever there's chum in the water, Tony Baloney would be there. If he doesn't snag you with

the first row of teeth, you'd better believe he'll get you with the next.

He started off with high praise at the top, placed their need for his managerial integrity in the middle, and closed it with a "generous" proposal of taking thirty percent of earnings. It was a bullshit sandwich, for sure, but would the guys eat it? And that's when the stakes were raised.

Sonny reached down under the table and produced a .22 pistol that he then calmly laid out on the table for Big Baloney to see. Then Sonny went back to eating his tiny salad. The rest of the guys glared at Tony, making him as uncomfortable as possible. I'd never seen Tony Baloney get nervous before, but he turned a shade of rouge, trying to ignore the gun on the table by saying, "It's just a little somethin' for y'all to ponder on. Y'all have my number if you need anything." Sonny adjusted the gun so the barrel faced Tony and went back to eating. Tony defiantly scowled, "Real professional, fellas," before turning to leave. Sonny lit up like a demon possessed, and with his mouth full of lettuce said, "What'd you say?!" Tony turned back around and hollered, "Ya bunch of amateurs! You ain't nothing 'round here and you won't ever be without me! Yer nobodies, the whole lot of ya!" Sonny picked up the gun and tore off after Tony who, as you would imagine, ran; well, maybe not *ran* but rather *waddled hastily*. Sonny chased him out the front door, waving the small gun in the air. Once outside, he fired four shots. The band had Big Baloney's number alright, and they finally added it to their "Nolodex." The gun didn't cause much of a stir in the bar. Someone later commented, "What? It was just a .22."

### **October 05**

Sonny will be in county jail a small stretch for discharging his weapon within the city limits. Even though he only shot up into the air, that didn't stop Big Baloney from falling down in the mud and soiling himself in every way possible. The fact that Sonny made the large man roll around and squeal like a pig in the mud wasn't illegal, but it was an undignified thing to do to a man. Tony had better be glad Sonny had double-parked his car or it could've gone on longer than it did. I reckon Tony Baloney might hear mocking pig squeals from now on when he shows that duplicitous face in public.

### **October 06**

With Sonny in jail, Bob has been running Sonny's mixing board in his stead and doing a fine job of it. I can't wait for the fight that will ensue over this. Considering Bob tried to post Sonny's bail, but was refused by the judge, Sonny might have to swallow some pride on this one.

Just Whatever flies out for Florida in ten days. That'd be eight days from now for Harley's drive.

### **October 10**

Practices have been full of a lot of hard work. The guys have been sticking with it and putting up with the repetition and monotony of trying to perfect "Love and Loss." It's daunting. The

song is growing on me, but this can happen when you've heard something as much as I have this. It's like when a horrendous song is played on the radio so much that you simply become familiar with it, and it tricks you into thinking you like it. I've known people that are similar.

Their website hit over a hundred visitors and it got me thinking about the state of technology. It's pretty amazing that they have some sort of omnipresent outlet with this website. Everyone now talks in MP3s whereas it used to be tapes and compact discs, and before that it was eight-tracks and vinyl. Bands no longer need a huge record deal to record their music. It's amazing. I've been told that when they leave this professional studio in Florida they'll have the song burned onto a genuine compact disc, just like real bands who have CDs that you go to the store and buy. It's pretty impressive.

### **October 13**

Harley showed up to their last practice, his face as white as double-bleached paper and full of consternation. He walked into Randy's house looking rough as a corncob. From his lips dangled a cigarette that he seemed to have forgotten about. Birdie croaked, "RAAAUURRR, YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT, RAAAUURRR!" The bird is a bit of a smart-ass, but it squawked the truth. Harley looked terrible. When asked why, he told us in a somber tone that he couldn't get the extra days off work to drive to Florida. He took a seat in Randy's La-Z-Boy and started crying about flying. Dale told him to "man up." Then Chip agreed and reiterated, but used instead the phrase "nut up." When Harley still wouldn't stop

crying, The Bass Player finally told him to "shut up," so they pretty much had everything covered. In an effort to calm down, Harley mixed himself a hard liquor drink. Then he insisted, since there was one open seat on the plane, that I go with them.

With that, I too poured myself a stiff drink.

### **October 16**

We all met at Nutsy's ranch early on a foggy morning. After much cramming into his plane, everyone but Nutsy took a Valium and we were off and sputtering down the driveway. When we got up fast enough to leave the ground, Harley grabbed my hand and then put it right back down. I don't think he knew he did it, but it made me feel better knowing that someone was more scared than I was.

The flight wasn't nearly as bad as the dream I had about it the previous night. It was over before long, and other than the bumpy landing making The Bass Player swallow a bit of his own vomit, we survived without incident. We landed on Taggart's driveway; he's one of Nutsy's friends. We soon realized that Taggart is the local Nutsy. Their personalities are mirror images of each other. Watching them together was like watching those science fiction stories where a man travels through time—or a time zone, if you will—to meet himself in a different state...literally, in this case. I assume there's a whole Nutsy network out there.

So the flight out wasn't that bad. I just wish we had more Valium for the trip back.

### October 17

We got to the studio early this morning. It's a far cry from Uncle-in-law's cardboard on the walls and bath mats on the floors. It feels like a church for musicians more than anything else. The mixing board, or "console" as they call it, houses the billions of knobs that are required for this work. I've never seen so many knobs, dials, switches, inputs, outputs, analogue and digital readouts, and tiny lights fluttering in the dark. The band was so excited that they didn't know what to do with their hands and it took great effort for them to rein in their excitement. This place made Christmas feel like waiting in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. There was so much to look at and ask about that the engineer finally told them he wouldn't answer anymore questions or they wouldn't be able to get anything recorded.

This engineer is a whole new breed of person I've never met before. His name is Tino "Bones" Deviar and every time you call him Tino he says, "Call me Bones if you like." I'm not sure why he adds the *if you like*. He doesn't leave you much choice.

Bones is doing something special with his hair, but I'm not sure what it is. I've never seen a mullet in this configuration before. I've seen rock star hair and I've seen plenty of normal hair, and this is neither of those. Bones has piercings and a couple of tattoos. He wears a normal shirt, but he's kicked the

collar up and refuses the shirt's top button its function, letting his chest hair act as a puffy pillow for a gold necklace. Over the shirt he wears a Member's Only jacket. Bones has a gold tooth front and center in his mouth; there's no missing it. He wears boots as a fashion choice; I say that because the boots are shiny. He'd be laughed at back in Mississippi. Lastly, Bones has a golden skull ring much like Slim's pewter skull ring back home. When Randy saw it he winced.

Once Bones was able to stop the guys from asking, "What's this?" about a million times, they got to work. The first order of business for Bones was to "shred out" on the studio guitar. I guess he did this in the name of showing them that the guitar and amplifier were in proper working condition. Chip tried to ask a question in the middle of Bones' testing the guitar but was shushed until the solo was finished.

I also noticed Bones flip back the hair that tickles his forehead every time he looks down...and he looks down a lot. Once you notice him doing it, you can't help but notice every time he does it. You start wondering about that haircut and why he would ever keep it. Whoever cuts his hair is lying to him about it.

### **October 18**

They really started working yesterday after getting set up and playing "Love and Loss" for Bones, who nodded afterwards and said, "Yeah, I can fix that. Sure." They started by recording the drums. All the recording went straight into a computer, which was futuristic to watch happen. Dale played the drum parts twice all

the way through and then Bones worked his magic by cutting, nudging, copying, and pasting the beats like they were text in a word processor. Heck, Bones cut and pasted more than Dale played the drums. After a full morning of work the drums were absolutely perfect. Amazing!

Chip and The Bass Player went through a similar process to Dale's. The instrument that was played the most in the studio was by far the computer mouse.

### October 19

After Randy laid down his guitar parts it was time for Harley to go into the *dead* room. This is a small, padded chamber where the vocals are isolated. It sounded crazy in there. There's no reverb or reflection of sound, which, I learned, is the reason it's referred to as dead. Harley noticed this, too, and it made him nervous. We heard him in the dead room trying to explain to Bones what he thought was wrong. Harley said, "Hey, man, I think I can hear myself too good. I'm too, I dunno, close to myself or somethin'." Bones asked, "You want a little 'verb in the headphones?" Bones added twelve tons of reverb before Harley comfortably couldn't hear himself.

Harley's performance was nervous and forced. He'd never been under the gun like that. At one point he was so nervous he lit up a cigarette in the dead room and Bones lost it all over Harley. They got past the tense moment quickly enough, but it didn't help Harley's nerves. It also didn't help that he'd drunk all the milk from the studio's kitchen. It made his stomach upset. Cold milk is not something a singer wants to drink before recording, so

Bones informed him. Harley inquired, "But milk's good for you, man. How's THAT bad?" Bones came back with, "Who's the one sucking right now? Is it me? No, no it's not."

Even after a break the singing still suffered. No matter how many times Harley sang the track, it wasn't coming together. In the middle of a performance, Bones all of a sudden stopped recording and told Harley he was done. Harley couldn't believe it. He said, "Oh, okay." It had exhausted both of them. Then Bones rolled up his sleeves and started cutting, copying, and pasting away like a madman. He muttered that he'd have to use every trick of the trade and added, "Hell, if magic were real I'd use that shit too right about now." When he finished making about a thousand edits, he ran Harley's voice through some kind of machine that made him sound more like a robot than a human, but it was a robot with much better pitch than Harley so it was an improvement for sure. Robot Harley definitely performed more consistently and in pitch than Real Harley. Sure, Robot Harley sounded a little weird and unnatural, but in a lot of ways Real Harley sounds a little weird and unnatural.

After a few final touches and a bit of mixing, Bones burned off a handful of CDs for us. The whole process was engrossing. Listening to the finished song I can barely believe it's them. It sounded so good compared to anything else they'd done. They sounded like a real band. Randy handed one of the CDs back to Bones and asked, "Can you put this on our website?" Bones tossed the CD aside and told him, "Naw, man," and handed them a bill.

This day will go down in Just Whatever's history as a clearly-defined milestone in their careers. Nothing could bring the guys down from the cloud they were now perched on.

### **A retelling of October 20th, 1997**

October 20th has made an indelible mark on my life, and I presume that's true for everyone else who was involved. As I write this I'm shaking less than before. They tell me it's called trauma.

We flew out later in the day than expected because of the weather. Randy, Chip, Dale, The Bass Player, Harley, and I were downright exhausted. Since we had no Valium for the flight back, we made certain to get sideways drunk before takeoff. Stepping up to the plane, the whole line of us was slanted one way or the other. The last thing I remember before taking off was Taggart's high-fiving everyone; about half of all attempts never made any real contact.

Nutsy was full of energy. He doesn't drink coffee but he sure always acts like he's had a full pot of it. Today he was absolutely wired. When we left the ground, Harley didn't even reach for my hand. He looked at me with lifted eyebrows and half-opened eyes, then let out a soft and childlike, "Wheeeee." We must've passed out soon after that with the sun laying the horizon to sleep as well outside our small windows.

I dreamed lucidly about a roaring and thunderous audience. The deafening cacophony of the crowd was eclipsed only by the

musical musings of Harley & Company. It was an open-air arena at dusk. The crowd was lit entirely by stage lights, leaving the band silhouetted from my backstage perspective. I can't recall the music they played, but the adrenaline from it coursed through my dream state and I was awash in bliss; bliss for the guys and bliss for myself for having been there with them. In my dream Harley ran from the front of the stage back to me. He grabbed my hand and was pulling me towards the chanting audience with him. At that very moment of bliss was when the rudest awakening I ever hope to experience ripped me back to a dreadful reality.

I was jerked conscious by Harley torquing down on my hand, squeezing the life out of it and up into my forearm. Lightning cracked right outside the windows, jolting the entire plane, and making the hairs on my arm stand up. Now Harley's discombobulated face was but inches from mine. My field of view was filled to the brim with a grown man who was showing me his molars and shrieking in my face. If you've ever heard a little six-year-old girl scream bloody murder then you've heard Harley's scream before. The shrill sound of it was only dampened by Nutsy's howling from the pilot's seat, "OH-MUH-GAWD!!!" as he wrestled with the plane's controls. Following that exclamation was a flurry of barely intelligible blasphemes that would make an atheist blush. It was dark outside; everything was shaking inside. Everyone in the cabin but Nutsy had chosen someone else's hand to squeeze and face to shout into. It was chaos. It all happened so quickly that any thoughts of taking control of anything left me feeling that much more helpless. There was nothing to do but yell, so that's what we did. We crazily took turns yelling at one another, and it evolved into a game that no one would win.

There was a hard brushing on the undercarriage. The sound came and went, but was followed by an even longer one as the plane glided up, then down again. There was so much noise bouncing around the cabin that the breaking branches were hard to distinguish; the more we heard them, though, the more it was evident. The brushing sound became louder, lasted longer, and dug more deeply into the interior. Like a pebble skipping on water, we were slowing down and grinding harder as we went. Thousands of tiny sounds filled the gaps between the recurring lightning and the heavy scrapes.

I can still see in my mind's eye the blurry image zipping past the window as lightning struck, casting a glow over the bed of forest directly below us. The plane played harshly with the thin treetops, whacking them down viciously, risking our lives at every dip. We heard tree limbs whipping the wings as the metal was stressed to its whiny limits; that sound would haunt anyone who heard it as vividly as we. There was what felt like an eternity of ten seconds where the rinse-and-repeat of dipping, grinding, lifting, slowing, and dipping again made us all a new kind of nauseous. That's when four of us threw up in unison. The projectiles almost floated in the air for a moment due to the mini-parabolas the plane was undertaking. There was a final grind that reported an awful noise and we almost came to a complete stop. Then Chip, not to be left out, threw up on The Bass Player's hand that he was gripping tightly. The Bass Player didn't notice.

There was time for one solitary breath before the gravity of our infinitesimal world shifted forward. Another slash of lightning revealed out the pilot's window that we had skidded to

the edge of a pine forest and were now about to meet its end in a dramatic fashion. Any loose articles in the cabin suddenly vaulted forward and slammed themselves into whatever they pleased. Nutsy instinctively yelled back to us, "HOLD YER SHIT!" We nose-dived through a sparse patch of young pines, obliterating their futures, before slamming down onto the ground that we all wished at this point we had never left in the first place. The plane tipped its butt up and over, leaving us nearly upside-down. I don't know if I was alone in passing out at that moment, but the shock of adrenaline and exhaust removed me from the situation.

### **October 23**

Many things have become more focused these past couple of days. Everyone on the plane miraculously survived with minor scratches and bruises. The worst that befell any of us was that Nutsy's knee was shattered and he had a mild concussion. The man is a marvel. He may have been the cause of the ordeal, but he was also the miracle. I'll never be able to fully appreciate his aeronautical maneuvering and his full-throttle spirit. Of the lot of us, he was bashed up the most, and he laughs about it as if he cheated death yet again. He may have acquired his nickname for the figurative size of certain parts of his anatomy.

We learned that Nutsy had been flying like a drug trafficker, riding low to avoid satellites and radars and such. It was all up to chance when that storm descended on us as our fuel gauge dipped to empty just short of landing home. Poetically, you could accuse the moon culpable of the prank, as

it hid itself behind a blanket of clouds, granting no guidance to the crazy but capable pilot.

Nutsy is in a bit of trouble with the authorities over it. The landowners of the crash site want to press charges, but Nutsy doesn't give the impression of being concerned. He smirked and used the expression, "Don't you worry. That dawg ain't gone hunt." He may never be allowed to fly again though.

#### **October 24**

We were all confused when our crash made national news today. The story was picked up by the Associated Press. The headlines read:

"Southern Band Crashes On 20th Anniversary Of Skynyrd Tragedy"

"On Lynyrd Skynyrd Crash Anniversary Band Nearly Meets Same Fate"

"Band Crashes Small Plane à la Lynyrd Skynyrd 20 Years Earlier"

It was surreal. It was also a ton of free press for Just Whatever. Of course most articles misspelled everyone's names, but they somehow got the band's website correct. There were over a thousand hits to the site today. Bob is busy trying to get "Love and Loss" MP3'ed—if you can verb that—and up on the site. The press is the only bright spot in an otherwise terrible event. As we recover from the minor damages to our bodies and greater

damage to our nerves, it's been a nice distraction. The band is totally honored to even be mentioned in the same sentence as one of their favorite bands of all time. Oh, and since their names were printed anyway, the bass player's name is Stewart Dewey.

## November 02

Things are almost back to normal here and I plan on heading back up North soon. You can bet I'll be driving home. I may never fly again. For me, Nutsy has done for flying what Pablo Picasso did for portraiture...made it look crazy.

Now that all the guys have replaced the tape players in their cars, they can finally blast their music from compact discs like any average person who isn't stuck technologically in the past. I, too, will have to replace my tape player when I get home.

Now and again Just Whatever sells "Love and Loss" through their website, and even T.J. and Tipper now help out by manning a merch table at gigs. The whole plane-crash incident has actually been good for their notoriety; the event itself is talked about more than their music, but it's enabled them to pick up enough regular gigs that they could quit their jobs and play music full time. That's always been one of their dreams. It's good to see at least one of their dreams fulfilled, because they've spoken of hundreds and some of them involve space travel, so....

Randy bought a new cherry red Flying V guitar and says he's been writing another song on it. The song is entitled "Love and

Loss II" and he says he may be done with it in the next year or so. Bob told Randy to, "Slow down. You don't wanna break a nail or nothin'." Roadie Bob is no longer the roadie. He's just *Bob* now because he runs his own mixing board for Just Whatever. Sonny finally quit after he admitted to having severe hearing loss. You have to wonder if Sonny added his own ears to his list of shitty things.

Dale proposed to Dana Purdy right after the plane crash. She obliged him happily. Stewart also upped the date of his wedding to his longtime girlfriend, Tammy, to next week. He said there were two reasons: one was because, like Dale, his life "withered before his eyes" in the crash, and the other reason is that he specifically wanted me to be there. Of the bunch, it took Stewart the longest to warm up to me, so this means a lot. Stewart also gave me permission to use his name when I write my memoir; truth be told... I kind of like him as *The Bass Player*.

Randy seems happier since his divorce. He equated it to being arrested in a foreign country, tortured a little bit, and then released back to the motherland. He's happy is what he's trying to say. He finally agreed to give Chip those guitar lessons. Randy even fixed those three missing frets on Chip's pawnshop guitar so he could *teach him how to play down there*. I've not seen the two of them closer than they are now. In fact, the whole band acts as though they've survived in the trenches of some forgotten war; not a real war, but one where the opposing sides pelted one another with something harmless but irritating...like marshmallows.

Harley finally looked up the word *diaphragm* in a dictionary from the library and has decided to take voice lessons from a local high school choir teacher. The teacher made him sing the *Star-Spangled Banner* in front of her as she played it on piano. She told him he wasn't good enough to be in her high school choir, but she'd help him anyway...like a charity case. In the meantime, Harley is saving up for one of those doodads that makes his voice sound like a robot.

Harley has also started growing his hair long. Considering that he's starting to bald on top, this could be a terrible move; but that didn't stop him from showing a picture of Tino "Bones" Deviar to a stylist for reference. Tino wasn't even balding and his hair was terrible, so I can't wait to see Harley a year from now. It's yet another reason to stay in contact with them.

#### **November 10**

Before I left town the last bit of gossip I heard through the kudzu was that The Best Cover Band In Town has officially relocated to Nashville, so that coveted slot is now open. I know who I hope eventually will fill it. With enough drive and persistence they just may do that. Of course, if they aren't able to, you have to ask yourself at what point would it just be sad to continue? But why ruin the mood?

If I've learned anything this past year, it's that it can take a good mix of ignorance and ego to allow us to dream of being artists. The creative pursuit reveals our dreams to the world, and the frustration with realizing those dreams reveals a

truth about reality and why it's so important to have dreams in the first place. Even the worst of creative endeavors is always going to be better than never trying. (The honorable Reverend Deacon James may disagree with me on this one.)

This journal has come to its end. I now start the long drive home and the arduous process of creating something myself when I get there. But I'll never forget the Deep South, where the big dreams are certainly alive and well. Farewell, Mississippi, my Southern savior...I stole some of your fireflies in a jar.

- Carson Wade

**Written by N.T. Bullock**

*Edited by Judy Waits*

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*info@wannabeinaband.com*