

one | epiphany

My earliest memory is shitting the bathtub.

Seriously.

A close second, *number two* if you will, is the haunting just-after contortion screwed upon my then-mother's face as she calculated the odds of having brought the wrong infant home from the hospital a few years prior.

I don't know how exactly that little nugget ties in with what's to follow here, I just figured maybe you could use that somewhere.

Anyway, so there I sat, an inch taller than before, gauging her reaction for future performances. She had no idea what a profound event she'd just witnessed, otherwise that wipedown washcloth would've gotten bronzed instead of my pleather Stride-Rites.

This was the precise moment that I became aware of my own ability to create.

And do you know what first triggered that realization? Even before the surrounding telltale bubbles, before that squishy comfort that came from the displaced porcelain below, it was The Sound. It was the *Hallelujah Chorus* through clogged plumbing. The world had my ear.

And now, twenty-three years later, I'm still making shitty music. Or at least I was until recently.

#

Occupation: musician usually means *unemployed*. But I write the songs that make the whole world sing. My business card proves this.

The reality is that I write The Songs That Pay the Rent, mostly regional television commercial tracks and gimmicky morning-radio parodies. *The world* being the tri-county area.

I write the songs that make the young girls buy.

“Ooooooh, ahh ... Seaside Chevrolet.” That was mine.

So was, “Gotta make a break for a Lucky’s shake.” You know these – come on, sing along.

Yes, all these and more are available only through this special limited television offer! You get all the hits, including “Traffic Report Music Bed (:45),” “Corporate Tech Vamp,” and “Savings Hoedown.”

But wait, there’s more! Act now and you’ll also receive as a bonus, “Pfeifer Furniture Underscore” and “Segue 12: Zings” at no additional charge.

It’s not like these tunes write themselves, you know.

I place those fleeting opuses in your ear that burrow into the brain, nesting just below the surface for involuntary retrieval at the most inappropriate times, shielding you from any truly productive thought.

When you’re staring out the window in math class, it’s my riff providing the mental soundtrack. During an awkward pause in conversation, my jingle soothes your conscience and silences the crickets. When you’ve run out of baseball stats and fear you’re going to come too

soon, one of my playful melodies will dull your senses just long enough to save your relationship.

Yep, I'm renting a cortex timeshare with Suzanne Vega and Gary Glitter.

Of course you're wondering what any of this periphery career justification has to do with what happened to Layla, or where I've been the past several months, but I'm building a case here. Patience. And don't worry about taking notes.

two | external attribution

Evolution is all around us. It's in the routines we intensify to shock our jaded selves. It's the difference between what erects one while turning another away in disgust. It's genetics. Religion. It's the mother of invention who keeps us either on the nipple, at the office, or in front of the telly. And it's not necessarily progress. Devolution, sometimes. *Devilution?*

My life up to this point has basically been a series of sideways steps – a two-left-footed stumble away from the dance floor.

#

Edgewater was once a pretty normal 'burb, only the print on the map was a bit finer. Just a few years ago we had a couple of beachfront parks, a McDonald's, a two-plex theater, and small-town charm aplenty courtesy of our nine bed and breakfasts (two of which received three-and-a-half stars in Fodor's).

Now we have zero beachfront parks, seven beachfront motels, twenty-nine ATMs, Starbucks, an "entertainment district" (bars within stumbling distance of one other), Starbucks, a film commission, Starbucks, every fast-food chain you can stream through your arteries, and an Arby's. Fucking Arby's! (I can say *fuck*, right? Or is that an academic cred-killer?)

It's my theory that Arby's is the de facto barometer for metropolitan advancement. And not in that *statistical* way that anthropologists drool over, either. Look at it this way, if the market is saturated to the point where even Arby's knows it's safe to toe the greasewater, you've got too goddamned many dining choices.

I've lived here all my life and I hardly recognize the place anymore. It's like the sister who spends a year in Paris and returns with a worldlier-than-thou accent, designer threads, and a pocket full of Euros. Only now she's got places to spend them stateside and everyone's suddenly adopted her language.

F G/F Em7 Am

Down the street they're changing the world

F G A

But here is where I need to be

The catalyst for this metamorphosis from *town* to *city* was, of course, the greed bandwagon. A ten-minute drive inland places you in the heart of what is becoming the Hollywood of the eastern seaboard: Wilmington, North Carolina. They make movies over there. And they do it cheaper than is possible out in southern Californ-I-A, which attracts producers. The producers and executives built studio lots around their boundless egos, and all the surrounding communities built business around the studios.

They call this Growth.

While I admit it's bolstered my own career, even *I* draw the line at imitation roast beef.

Edgewater thought it was buying culture, but instead just got an asshole transplant. Now everyone you meet is in the process of *becoming* something. *Aspiring* this-and-that. We get more hyphenates and slashes passing through here than Ellis Island: actor/bartender, writer/caterer, musician/security guard.

That last one is me.

Three days a week, I'm the part-time point man at the New Hanover County courthouse. It's every bit as glamorous as it sounds. When you think about it, I'm all that stands between the hypothetical shotgun-toting vigilante at the door and the judge upstairs who took that same perp's daughter away last month for waving the gun at her. Of course, when *I* think about it, I'm pissing myself. On your dime, taxpayer.

#

Now that Edgewater parking is at a premium, I find myself biking a lot. It's harder than you might think for someone my age to look cool pedaling through town on a thigh-chafing, single-g geared beach cruiser, especially wearing a backpack that probably calls my sexual orientation into question yet bears only the necessities. These include: a Macintosh laptop, one Sennheiser hand-held condenser microphone, palm-sized beat box, closed-ear headphones, discs of in-progress mixes, two Moleskine notebooks (perforated), a handful of business cards each bearing a uniquely-clever title like "Spiritual Advisor" or "Presidential Food Taster," a one-hitter, and a single condom (wrapped).

Allow me to break that down for you.

The business cards aren't the professional raised-ink-on-eggshell-white you pick up in boxes of five hundred from ReamWorks. Fuck those guys. These are hand-crafted ones I print on mauve eighty-pound cardstock. Incredible effort goes into casual appearance – a recurring theme

around here. My apologies if you received a mangled prototype; I still haven't quite figured out how to cut them perfectly yet, so it's a crapshoot as far as negative space and logos and such are concerned.

Guerilla *I Ching* marketing.

I shouldn't completely damn ReamWorks; I'll be there in line with my own tail between my legs when it's time for this particular piece of self-indulgent shit to birth from my man-womb.

The laptop is my life encapsulated. Tangled amid all those wires and chips are song lyrics, multitrack music files, a taste of pornographic distraction, my scheduler (porn 6:30 - 6:45 p.m.), incrimination, and this very manuscript. My entire existence squeezed between a fifteen-inch screen and seventy-five plastic buttons. But hey, so is yours.

The mic is for recording sudden bursts of inspiration, on-location sound effects, and occasional roommate surveillance. It also serves as an ample phallic substitute in a pinch. The pipe enables the same.

As for the condom, well I guess it's kind of like that crazy old biddie in the apartment complex who carries around an unscratched lottery ticket for a lucky day never to come.

Once I've rid myself of the potential homosexual overtones this backpack invites (thank you, embroidered Motorhead patch), I still have the biking tree hugger stereotype to negate. That means no sandals, wraparound shades, raveled cargo shorts, or goatees.

The bike is purely practical; I swear I'm not granola. And my Motorhead fandom is a cover-up, too. Heaven forbid the public should discover I favor Tori Amos.

#

I'd planned to move to Hollywood eventually anyway, but instead it came to me for a while.

Unfortunately it also packed its entire wardrobe, including some Oscar®-caliber supporting performances and its callous sense of irony.

And now, with the painkillers fading somewhere along I-40 between Knoxville and Nashville, the final facts have become distant enough to commit to paper.

Okay, disk.

three | subjective reality

PLINK! We're two songs into our third set and I've just broken my *G* string.

Now my epic guitar solo in Warrant's "Cherry Pie" is out of tune, sharpened. Rather than *crisis* I see *opportunity*. With my right hand, I grab the surviving length of the string dangling from the headstock and go to work. I tug on it with dramatic exaggeration to the beat, left hand committing violence against the whammy bar in soaring and crashing sonics, all the while morphing through my collection of rock faces. There's:

- a) "I surprise even myself with my talent,"
- b) "my eardrums are bleeding from the metal power being projected,"
- c) "an invisible crewperson is getting my attention offstage," and the ever-popular
- d) "imagine what this agile tongue could do for *you*."

Just to name a few.

With two more strings now shredded, the cheese factor escalates. I toss the fuchsia-and-electric-blue axe into the air and my silk strap swings around my back and perfectly returns to playing position.

I am a master showman and this is my bag of tricks.

The leather-and-hairspray crowd of about two hundred devours these clown acts. And I'm barely playing actual notes on the damned thing. I glance over at Xavier, our frontman, and he rolls his eyes at me before launching into a scissors kick and a banshee cry that signals the final chorus.

Forty minutes later and five pounds lighter, the lights fall dark on *The Down Boys*, our iridescent stage backdrop. After scattered whoops and hollers come the familiar few seconds of eerie quiet just before the deejay music spins up. I retire this guitar to its stand for the night in triumph.

My work here is finished.

F#m A E E6 A D

Is applause the effect or the cause? Fuel to be used?

C#m7 Bsus2 Asus2

An oedipal battle to kill the creative muse

A couple of male groupies always pack up our gear in return for free passes and a little bit of hang-out time. We call them *scrodies*. To their backs, of course. After high-fives all around, I disappear into the crowd's fringe for a little refractory time.

My wig itches like a junkie's arm. It's big and blond and fabulous, and would've been the envy of all circa 1989. Two decades have passed, my brown hair barely meets my neck, and I'm the junior member of this weekend gang: a *hair-are-they-now?* glam-metal tribute act. Poison, Cinderella, Enuff Z'Nuff – if it dampened the girls' spandex back then, we're sporting it now.

In a different capacity than those ladies, we've even opened for many of those bands on their last-dash-for-the-cash retro tours. Six months ago at a club in Charleston, one of those acts, who shall remain nameless (let's just say their name combines a color with a wild animal), actually got booed off after four songs. We had rocked balls out in full glitz and whipped the crowd into a headbanging frenzy, then Band X took the stage with their "modern sound" and the Charleston faithful weren't having it. This band that had once ruled Hair Nation now betrayed it with neither eyeliner nor snakeskin boot at the business end of the club. Heresy committed by both sides. It cemented why I've never aspired to fame.

Give me fortune.

After tonight's show I nearly make it up to the rear bar before getting pulled away by the belt loop into a corner booth.

A single light pinspots the center of the table, darkness falling off its edges. A drink awaits me with what might be a bimbastic redhead's bloodshot eyes locked upon mine.

"Thanks," I tell her, evading to stare down into my swirling glass. I shoot half of it in one pull, but can't place the taste, as it's merely a palate cleanser for the two pitchers of Shiner Bock I quaffed on stage.

"Sloe screw," she offers, playing oral games with the plastic stirrer.

She read my mind.

"The drink," she clarifies and puts her overexposed hand on mine. My pupils adjust. She's thirty-something and old enough to have lived this scene the first time around before irony, but hides it well. Unlike me, on all charges. A tiny, open leather jacket frames her black studded bra. She notices me noticing.

"Weren't you in a Firehouse video?" One of my standard lines.

She grins, slowly shaking her head.

“Roxx,” she says, because that’s how she remembered me being introduced on stage just a few minutes ago, “I been waiting for you all night.”

Roxx is our bass player, but who am I to spoil her little fantasy?

His real name is Matthew Goldfarb and he’s a financial planner by day. I’m Drew Ballard. But you already knew that. Sorry to bore you with these details. And one night a week – tonight – it’s Jag.

With eyes still fixed and her hand massaging mine, she swings around into my side of the booth, crossing her right leg over mine, tangled in the fishnet. She produces one very lucky cube from my glass and holds it up, magician-style, complete with the arched brow of intrigue. The cube is guided across her dusky rose lips, down her neck, and between her steel-reinforced breasts, losing mass to heat all the while. It makes its way down through the golden plains of her abs and disappears into her leather shorts.

Gulp.

Her eyes remain closed for what seems an entire song, and I’m talking the dance remix of Prince’s “Gett Off.” Her nostrils flare and jaw grinds. When she comes to, the next thing I know the half-sized cube is being fed to me.

“I’m Candy,” she purrs.

“Yes you are,” is what I mean to say, but it comes out impeded as one might expect with a chunk of salmon-sicle on the tongue. She’s delighted, and sucks on my earlobe.

Right about the time her hand finds my codpiece, I recognize the scent.

“Down boy,” she giggles. As if I’ve never heard *that* little pun before.

Jasmine.

It's the scent that, no matter how you scrub, you cannot get off your person after even a single lap dance before your woman interrogates you about it. So Candy is probably a stripper. I'll bet a stack of Washingtons she prefers *dancer*. *Entertainer*, maybe.

We're in the same business all of a sudden.

Last week's girl was younger and skipped the ice capades.

A couple of weeks before, it was a stone-washed brunette in a cut-up Motley Crüe tee. A new one.

I am Mr. Hyde. Slim odds are that any of these vampires would sleep with me in day life. A certain breed just fetishizes musicians for some reason, even drummers. My guess is they figure that anyone who can deliver passion to an entire crowd must be even better one on one. Little do they know that I've been phoning it in for years now.

On stage, that is.

The metal grrrls never brave my other band's shows. The cliques do not cross-breed. Spandex sluts tend not to ogle Drew when my brain and hands are wrapped around some ponderous minor-seven-flat-five chord in the middle of a jazz set.

I'll occasionally catch eyes from some middle-aged widow, or maybe the rare coffeehouse jazz snob. The select few who've graced my bed were incredibly difficult to please outside of character.

And since I'm sure you're dying to know, yes, Jag is routinely asked to leave the wig on.