

You Can't Catch Me

Every time I write a melody it feels like I can see through walls. It's as if I'm flying inside, surfing a wave of crackling electricity, the infinite explosion at the center of existence. When this happens, it makes no sense to be living on anyone else's terms. Bosses, work, friends, gravity, pain, love; all things fall by the wayside.

It just happened, minutes ago as I climbed behind the wheel of the van, and I was there, harvesting the moment, making the most of the feeling, the energy; the spark that is creation. Now I'm back in ordinary reality still holding it there, playing it back in my mind, this wonderful new song. As I drive, the gears grind noisily up the ramp on an overcast afternoon with the radio distracting me, shouting something about a new club on Lansdowne, and I find myself on the slim raised asphalt of the humming central artery before I'm exactly ready, like some overweight Russian kid prematurely pushed out onto a balance beam. The heaviness of my vehicle equals the awkwardness of my body, suspended here as I am above the ugly Boston sprawl. A shimmering gold Charger zips past in the traffic flow, all smug in its puny little 2.2 liter 84 horsepower buzz of newness. This is what I know: Chuck Berry envisioned something very much like this in the song John Lennon borrowed for the lyrics of "Come Together", the one where Chuck's on the Jersey Turnpike and flat top comes up behind him, movin' up slowly, so he puts his foot down and starts to roll, but then he hears the moanin' siren of the state patrol so he lets out his wings and blows his horn and says goodbye to New Jersey because he's become airborne. There's a secret I'm aware of, the real reason why in his songs he's always screaming down some highway. It's because that's the only way his mind could translate into words the

pure exhilaration of riding this wild cloud of devil energy that poured out of him. He was a mad scientist tossing explosive elements together, and he created a volatile balance of the bright twang of country music with the minor key howl of the blues, and then set the whole thing aflame with guitar heroics, like jagged streaks of lightning illuminating a primeval landscape, or like our Creator saying let there be light, and them making it happen. He discovered an ocean of strange energy hidden away in another dimension, a force that's there for all of us to tap, living out on the edges of our brains. To this day we still experience it, transferred here into our quotidian existence through the tiny portals of our radios. Sometimes, on a rare day like today, I'm allowed to grasp just the tinniest echo of it for myself.

I can't wait to show the band my new song. We're doing a gig down in New York City tonight, and I'm on my way to pick them up at the practice space on Harrison Ave. A rat half the size of the Prudential Building runs out and explodes under the wheels as I turn into the trash-strewn parking lot, trying to keep my new song playing in my head so that I won't forget it. The guys are waiting out in front of the space with the garage door open. A few of them whistle appreciatively and come out to examine the right front tire, which is apparently covered in rodent blood. All I really want right now is to tell them about my new song, but I keep my cool as they load the gear in. There will be plenty of time during the long ride. After we're all loaded up I head down Harrison and take a right to get back up onto the freeway. Bill, our new lead guitar player and the youngest of the bunch, is talking excitedly about winning some respectable sum of money betting on a horse that happened to have the same name as his grandma, Grace, out at Suffolk Downs. He recently dropped out of Berklee College, which is what I hear happens to anyone who's any good that goes to that school. He's told us he was weaned on Ritchie Blackmore and got sick and tired of copping slick Larry Carlton solos and quietly fingering the

complex chords for “Take the A Train” in antiseptic ensembles and wanted to experience a bit of the real world, seeing as he came here from Iowa or something. Everyone’s pretty much tuned him out – his youthful enthusiasm is as irking as his intimidating musicianship, but everyone’s also been there as far as being new to a band, and so no one’s judging. Before long he’ll be as jaded as the rest of us. Mitch, our tall, dread-locked bass player and uncontested bandleader, is sitting shotgun and cleaning some dope using a faded Sergeant Pepper’s album and the power of gravity, deftly pulling and kneading the bright green plant, letting the seeds roll down into the crease. He’s the kind of guy that doesn’t talk much until he has something to say, and then immediately he becomes the center of attention because his words are always well considered and he can be really quite funny. Mike the drummer is already semi-conscious, lying on his back on the floor of the van, groaning slightly. His eyes are red from having stayed up all night partying with chicks in a Wellesley dorm room. Mike is superficially handsome, tending to attract women the way I attract dandruff, and he acts like it’s the same sort of nuisance: something he has to brush off himself periodically, with the sure knowledge it will always return. Usually what happens is he falls in love with the most breathtakingly beautiful and unstable of the feminine pack, talks her into trying anal, and then she flips out and has nothing further to do with him. We know this because he will spend the next two weeks whining about it, until he inevitably finds another one just like the last and promptly repeats the cycle. He’s in the band because he’s notorious for being the hardest hitter in town, a ferocious shredder of snare drum heads and destroyer of kick pedals, and because Mitch absolutely will play with no one else. Malley our lead singer is probably in the worst shape of any of us. He has evidently thrown up into a pile of McDonald’s wrappers just before climbing in, and there are still traces of vomit on his silver shirt. He says it’s the flu. We got him from one of the premier punk bands in the area,

the Rail Splitters, who had a national college radio hit with a really popular joke song called “We Can Murder the Smurfs” but then couldn’t repeat their success. There were rumors that the band split up because of excessive drug use, but Mitch didn’t care about any of that because Malley’s name associated with the band instantly moved us up two slots closer to headliner in gigs at TT’s and The Channel and even got us added on a whopping big show at The Paradise with The Clash.

As we rumble up the ramp, impatience gets the better of me. I turn down the radio, which is playing a reggae-tinged song “It’s a Night for Beautiful Girls” by The Fools, a local group that our band had opened for just last week in Providence, and that had treated us like shit backstage.

“Hey,” Bill shouts from behind me. “Turn that back on! I was liking that.”

“Yeah? Well how did you like it when that band’s asshole guitar player put out his cigarette on your arm?” Mitch says.

“Oh, that’s those guys?” Bill rubs where it’s scarred, his voice incredulous. “What are they even doing on the radio? Good going Gunk.”

I glance over at Mitch and make a motion toward my throat.

“Oh Jesus, not again,” Malley says in his ragged voice from behind me, I even get a whiff of his noxious, smoke-stained breath. “Don’t you ever give up?”

Mitch smiles and looks over at me paternally. “I think we should listen to Gunk’s new song.”

The thing about writing a melody is that it’s the shortest distance between two points: the inside and the outside, unlike talking, which Dad stopped me from doing a long time ago. Going silent was the logical thing, as far as my own personal survival. He taught me that words have too

many moving parts, and they should be kept in my head where I can control them; that people won't have the patience to listen to me if my speech patterns and inflections don't match up with those of others. I'd always get punished when I tried to talk, especially when he was climbing into bed with me. He's long gone now, dead from cancer, but every time I attempt to speak he's still right there inside my head, hurting me as effectively as ever. They tried to get me to speak for years, they called it therapy, and they said there was no physical malady holding me back, but they didn't understand. Singing though, that's another matter. I can feel these melodies living inside me like children ready to be born and I know they translate, unlike words, which always get muddled up in that long trip from brain to throat.

And so I let it out, the melody trapped in me, and it flies off into the air and becomes alive and free, like a flurry of white doves released from a cage on high.

When I finish, there is silence except for the moaning engine.

"Is that it?" says Malley, after a few seconds. "Sounded like, I don't know, a walrus in heat trying to sing Maybelline?"

"Shut up Malley," Mitch says. "Have some respect."

"For what?" Mike groans from the back. "The guy's our driver, not a songwriter. He's not even –

"Hey! You shut up, too," Mitch says.

He's got my back. Mitch believes in me. And so it's for him I'm going to sing it again. I glance down at the speedometer: thirty miles an hour. No wonder. How can you truly experience rock and roll when you are nearly standing still? I start to sing and simultaneously jam my foot down on the accelerator.

“What the hell?” I hear from Mike somewhere behind me. This is good. It means it’s having an impact on them. The speed has crept up to seventy. I’m nearing the chorus, the best part. Soon we’re pushing a hundred, the van is rumbling loudly, I can feel it singing along with me, and the cathartic screams of my bandmates add to the ecstasy. We are all in this together, and they are feeling it like I’m feeling it here riding on the edge of existence, and in my mind I’m taking on the power, coming directly from Chuck Berry, from that hidden dimension inside us all. Now I’m finally free, and my dead dad can’t catch me, my powerful motor has hideaway wings...

And for the first time in twenty years I speak, because I’m safe now and my dad’s voice has fled my brain for good.

“Don’t worry guys!” I say, and their shouting fills my ears now like a guitar solo that is the sound of the world building to a wild majestic screaming climax, “Don’t you see? We can fly!”

And all it takes it a slight jerk of the wheel to the right and we are sailing over the embankment, out into the air above the city, and we’ve become angels in the words of the great one, and so in tribute I add these words into my song and sing them out loud for all I’m worth as we arc out into the void: “We’re gone like a cool, cool breeze!”

