

When Thomas Diggs walks inside the doublewide trailer that produces the Mama'n'Dem podcast to promote his latest album, No Good Place on Earth, the sun blazes in silver streaks through a golden halo and illuminates his body.

He's handed a beer, cracks it open and pulls out a cigarette and lights it, ashes into a Coca-Cola bottle, exhales and starts on a story.

"This ole friend of mine has a good one, swears by God it's true, about his uncle, saying dude was an all-out family man. Took care of his wife and raised three beautiful children. Nobody calls him a great husband or great father. He was in Vietnam too. Done three tours. He killed seven of the enemy, and saved twice that many Americans. Ain't nobody to call him a war hero. He started this farm, where he gave convicted criminals coming from prison a chance for a job when the damn burger king wouldn't hire them, gave them a second chance in this world..

Nobody says he's a Good Samaritan. Nobody called him a man of great compassion. Nobody called him a man of integrity, or a man of charity. Nobody evaluated the size of his heart, saying that it was big and full. Now. There was one night when he was a teenager. His buddy had caught him in the pasture fucking one of his daddy's cows. Well, what do you think it is everybody calls him?"

Throughout the interview Thomas is asked about his life and he tells it.

He says that he was born inside a liquor store that his parents were trying to rob. There was a blind reverend buying wine with a guide dog that apparently heeled over and died as soon as it laid its eyes upon and reckoned the newborn into this world. The reverend dropped his bottle and it spilled all over the child and he pointed and cursed it unto damnation.

When he was six years old, the local sheriff's department raided his home, finding the manufacturing of crystal-meth with intent to sell, and his parents screamed and cried, and his father pulled out a gun and was shot and his mother charged them with two bread knives and was shot and killed too.

The score to this scene was in front of the television, where the six-year old was wearing Starman superhero pajamas, a white Stetson cowboy hat that rolled around top of his head, and playing a dust-tinged National Duolian guitar singing out his heart like a sharecropping bluesman from the Depression era.

His lungs rose and his breath shrined his own face a gray smoke and godly cloud. He was singing, "No matter how I struggle and strive, I'll never get of this world alive."

The sheriff took one look at him and said, "My God, he's bee-utey-ful," and adopted him and had the boy baptized and had him join the church choir. The boy quit school and nobody noticed. He spent his days stealing tobacco from the liquor store and selling it to older kids and spent his nights listening to Mister Fallen Angel's Midnight Blues Hour on a radio he found in a dumpster.

At fourteen, he was asked to perform a Protestant Hymn in front of the entire church, and he had already stolen his first cassette-tape and listened to it religiously, practicing the guitar at night in the cemetery beside the tombstones of his birth parents, singing the Gospel according to Blind Willie McTell and Blind Connie Williams and Blind Willie Johnson. Playing the harmonica until his lips dripped with blood. People who drove by the graveyard in the cold fog could hear him and thought it to be haunted by ghosts. The animals sang back-up vocals, digging up the graves of his parents and their bodies rose and their spirits sang with him too.

The day he was to perform the Hymn in front of the church he stood in the left vestry sneaking pulls from a bottle of wine he stole and had hidden under his robe, and the sheriff put his hands on his shoulders and bent his knees to look him in the eyes.

“Boy, the whole town comes to this here church and is here today to hear you sing the Word. Do not let me down.”

He said Okay.

When he walked to the pulpit they started in with the organ. He began to mumble the words which he never learned and heat bolted from inside his face. He vomited some and wiped it on his sleeve.

They booed him and shouted at him with disgrace and cursed his name.

Then he sang Old Lost John, wailing sexually and crying with fervor lungs a moan that had been scorned and beaten by the world's belt. He slid to his knees and rolled on his back and for the first time was totally taken by the spell of song. Some folks screamed in horror and others fainted, and some went down into the spell with him, shaking their hips, and it is said that one poor old man up-and-died there on the spot, and almost all ran out of there acting as they'd just been seeded by Satan.

He was kicked out of the sheriff's house that day, beaten with a bullwhip across his shoulder blades until blood was smeared across his back and stained into the carpet an outline of red wings.

The boy stood and said, “You don't know nothin' about Jesus Christ.”

He stole his step-sister's blue bicycle, which had a green basket—with flowers still inside that he'd watch die in the coming weeks—he'd use to carry his whiskey and his tapes and harmonica, and a silver trumpet bell and he was gone. He would add the bell as an accessory to his guitar delivering a steel-horn affect giving his music a strange church-chime.

It was not long before he was old enough to go to prison and he was sentenced for betting on dog fights.

He was arrested by the same sheriff who raised him.

“If it ain't the prodigal son,” the sheriff said and shook his head, cuffing his wrists. “God you disgust me so.”

He met the fiddler Ray Jim Lyall while in prison and they played together in spare time and wrote songs and when he was released he joined Ray Jim's bluegrass band, The Yokel Pilgrims. They toured Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama again, playing fiddle and harmonica and banjo and stand-up bass, snare drum and steel guitar before a hundred and even a hundred fifty somewhat enthusiastic fans a show.

The song that gave them a small following in certain circles was their bluegrass cover of “She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain.”

Thomas Diggs stole each show from his amphetamine laced kicks sliding across the stage and hyper paced guitar licks and wild-rage performances, letting those angels-banned-from-Heaven imprisoned inside him race all through his bones, looking like a man succumbed by exorcism.

Ray Jim would let the shouting of fans die down some from the previous song, and in hoarse voice wallow out, “Alright now, whoow, alrighty.” And he would eye down Thomas from behind

their microphones, while they tuned their instruments and say, “Tommy, I believe you had a question for me.””

“Well yeah,” Thomas would say, checking a note or two on his guitar. “I think we all want to know. Where’s she been and when is she coming?” And the audience would roar while the band went straight into chorus singing acapella in low-toned lungs styled after a funeral procession, which was followed with savage screaming from the band members, and duck calls and cowbells from the audience, and blank rounds fired into the air and ceaseless, un-abandoned shouting. The drums banged recklessly like an announcement of birth, and then for twelve minutes the band would search their instruments with their fingers as it were sparked from their soul, and bellow out with the audience, “When she comes!”

They sang about her laying down with the scum of this world, skin cloaked by the heat of the sun, spending her time with the mortals upon earth, one day she would slay the dragon that she had once brought strings and sealing wax, but it would ferment again from the dust and dirt, flying woodenly over her while she was giving birth, her moaning in horrid pain with the pitiful seed in the clouds of Heaven, and her fleeing and hiding in the wild horse-chestnut trees, running by night and her feet would sparkle as they were dressed by the moon, she’s been farming twelve oxen and milking twelve fine cows, she’ll be deep in a flood from the dragon’s breath, the bubbles on the surface are the stars that crown her head, and she was swallowed up by a whale been hunted since man became flesh, she’s been weaving seven years through Hell on a crimson shell, she’s been singing seven long years with a golden tongue, the fire down there flashed within in her eyes, she’ll be risen by the seed where the flowers come from, and she’ll be coming around the mountain.

The band was trying to record their first album when they finally kicked out Thomas from the group because of his recklessness and abusive nature. After he first tried heroin he started slouching during rehearsals and slouching out of the tour van, and slouching out of motel rooms shading the sun from his body. On many occasions, wherever they were, he crawled across the parking lot. He would flat collapse on stage and start fights with other members of the band, or be missing with some woman, or locked in the bathroom suicidal. He slept with Jim Ray's sister and introduced her to heroin too, and he missed practice and when they rehearsed before shows he was likely playing his guitar with broken strings and singing incoherently or passed out drunk, unconscious and lifeless.

"We had wings back the," he says on the podcast. "But I couldn't get straight. Only time I ever seen God is when I was high on heroin. I wasn't about to kick those visions."

When the band got tour dates to play in Europe, they never told him and he was replaced.

He lived in dumpsters, and slept in public camping grounds, met friendly people at dive-bars and would stay on their couch or with them in their bed for a week-or-so before being kicked out or moving on, and took work as a mail-man, garbage-man, dishwasher and janitor, begged for money with a sign and guitar and it rained on him during one stint for seven days straight. Made enough money for cigarettes and beer and a little whiskey but not much else. Each night he found a spot with a microphone where he would be booed off stage and sometimes particular audience members hated his sound so much they took it upon themselves to beat him until he rolled around the floor bleeding and then kick him until he bruised and bled the more and lost teeth from his mouth.

Many nights he'd pass out drunk naked in truck beds with his face behind a spider-web of saliva, howling the verses of songs he'd not remember come morning while the stars seemed to arrange a silent sweeping score. Many days under an ocean firmament lit with fire-red waves and heat-lightning bursting in chains like circuited seizures would he drop to his knees and stretch out his arms, the scars behind his shoulders cracking, looking up and waiting for the sky to flood, and curse the name of whoever would imagine such a world and then make it manifest.

In these days, Thomas wrote what would become his first album and discovered and developed what would become his style —punk-rock and psychedelic hillbilly and country blues, all becoming the record Circus Freak, which would take two years of touring before being produced.

His hair grew long with tangled knots and his beard went ungroomed and greasy and he appeared in the image of an inbred Jesus.

He sang his songs in dives across the West, crossing into each new state with a wild and live vehemence that grew from within him like his spirit was fixing to burst through the stratosphere. Finally talent manager Jack Kettle heard him perform one night for nearly two hours and found himself in tears and his heart felt like liquid matter and he asked Thomas how he wrote one particular song which he swore was a ballad of his own father.

“Maybe I met him. He ever sell heroin? I might have jerked him off for some heroin.”

They picked out a band by traveling the state of Texas and set up a recording studio in the cart of an abandoned coal train, labeled in old bronze lettering Mr. Peabody, and the acoustics reverberated a hollow echo chiming of ghosts and dust.

The cover of the album is a photograph of Thomas and the seven band members getting out of a 1974 sky-blue Volkswagen Beetle Bug in the middle of a rodeo tent filled with fire-rings.

Thomas is wearing a straight brimmed black matador hat with a red band and red trim, a face painted in white and a red handprint on his left jaw, a wide silver bull ring hanging in his nose, seashell earrings tied by string and humming the ocean just over his shoulder, and a rhinestone sky-blue suit with silver sparkling and shinning the outline of his body like the sun against river.

Tied to his neck by a rope are three crows with green eyes. He holds his palm under the mouth of a bull while the band members—dressed as a bear riding a unicycle, or as rodeo clowns and circus clowns chasing geese and rounding up chickens, or as magicians or biblical shepherds in the image of John the Baptist holding his own decapitated head in his arms—flee from three other bulls chasing them ridden by monkeys wearing red pinstripe pants and playing snare drums and smashing crash cymbals together.

After the record was finished and released it was met with mixed reviews. Critic Alfred Welch wrote it was perhaps the most foul and vile thing his ears had ever endured and suffered, and Jean Valdie said it was just good enough in place to make even Milton's Satan weep.

Upon the album's completion they celebrated at Venus in Lion Furs which smelled like Saint Laurent and Avon Odyssey Perfume and flower-scented skin and cigarette smoke, and stale eggs and ass sweat. He met a stripper named Penny-Dice Gaia, who was ten years his senior with long forest shaded hair and hazelnut eyes that trailed somewhere into her soul a mystical mountain and waterfall. For twenty-five dollars she led him to a back-room.

He told her he was fixing to be a star of this world.

They unbuttoned her cut-off blue-jeans that hugged her thighs which revealed a tattoo of the Virgin Mary between her legs, golden halo and gold chiming out from her rose-tinted heart, incensed with Heaven's willows, and she grabbed his hair and steered his face.

They drank and laughed and touched each other all night a song written forever against time, and were married early in the morning at Shamrock City Hall while it was still dark out, and by the time the sun struck light she was carrying his seed and was glowing with warm waves from beneath her skin.

The session violinist was named Billy Dale, or B.D. or Beady and when he was told the news after their honeymoon in Paradise, California, he said in disbelief, "No you didn't. Gawddamn boy. You know where all that thing is been."

Thomas poured Caldera brand hot sauce into his whiskey and sipped it all the way down and refilled the drink, and was smiling.

"Goddamn boy," Beady kept saying, "You did not."

"I sure did."

Thomas and Penny-Dice bought a trailer in Leotie, Georgia and he inherited four of her sons each with a different father, as well as the one in her belly and he found and raised three hound dogs that had been trained to track anything with wings. Where they lived, at night at least three times a week the sirens screamed, and the dogs howled for the salvation of the criminal while he sat on his lawn chair with a cooler of beer on the duct-tape porch singing and playing the guitar. He never took them hunting and kept their kennels as abandoned prison cells and used for outside sitting, and taught them how to sing, and had them sing on the title track of his next record, "Angels Are a Country Song," and were on the cover too, a series of three water

paintings by Virgil Day, one where a dog is chasing a flock of white ducks with their wings flapping across a creek on a winter day where another dog tracks down drops of blood left behind from the imprint of a snow angel, and the third one in Thomas's lap with them smiling and staring at each other as though their souls were married many centuries ago and had traveled many miles to meet again.

The most successful track on the record was the steel pedaled and punk driven "Trailer Park Resurrection" with the chorus, "You shovel through my soul like I knew you would/And Jesus wants your heart 'cause it tastes so good."

"When I wrote and recorded that," he says during the podcast, "it took all of thirty-three minutes. I saw my Spirit come from inside of me to outside of me. I saw my mama giving birth."

Then came a long period where he suffered creatively and suffered from addiction and his marriage suffered too, separating and getting back together once at least every year.

For years he could not write another album and made a living singing at country fairs and country weddings, water parks and theme parks and trailer-park barbeques, college softball National Anthems and post-game shows in the outfield, southern small-school fraternity Tuesday night socials, low-key dive-bars and house parties for twenty-five dollars a night and all-he-could-drink Ole Chattanooga beer from a keg, low-country bluegrass festivals in a Georgia, Tennessee and Alabama Tri-County area.

He finally recorded a single that played on the radio for two months and the concert venues got bigger. They made posters and shirts of him and he signed albums and was interviewed by DJ's and journalists of serious prestige.

On a tour that was supposed to catapult him to stardom, he fell off the stage, drunk or on heroin many times, broke many bones in the act—including at the Grand Ole Opry and George Legend Show—and missed thirty some-odd shows altogether due to his addiction.

Most recently, there was a documentary made about him—after a string of failed albums he produced on his own, three tries of rehab, finally kicking heroin—called *The Violet Country of Thomas Diggs*, and was supposed to be titled with the word ‘Violent’ instead of ‘Violet’ but got overlooked in editing.

In the film, he tells stories to the crew over a few beers and a dumpster fire he has made from a day collecting trash off the street and from a junkyard, and images where he reads to his kids from Shakespeare and the King James Bible and Harry Crews before putting them to bed, and teaches his only begotten son, seven years old at the time, how to drive a stick shift Bronco, and helps him learn the piano on a carry-sized keyboard, both of them playing on the floor with their feet crossed. He and his wife spoke and sat on the dog kennels and shared drinks that he poured in paper cups, and they were petting the dogs and watched them run around the property, and they made each other laugh and he lit her cigarettes for her and said things that made her smile. He looked her in the eyes that drew in his soul to the natural world that she contained within, and he said, “See, look at me, I’m doing better. I’m getting well.”

“You are baby, and I’m proud of you too.”

There are a few clips of him snoring inside one of the kennels while it’s still daylight and still wearing his clothes. And him speaking directly at the frame of the camera. “Writing a song

means you got to bring everything you got inside you and make the song bleed, or the song will watch while you bleed out.”

The film includes the Mama’n’Dem podcast episode and a week after the interview Thomas was found dead. He had tucked his son into his twin bed and went outside to smoke a cigarette and noticed himself shaking and his lips quivering and his nose itching and he said goddammit and drove down to the Cerberes Motel.

He knocked on one of the doors and a man with only three teeth let him inside. He paid for the heroin and after he got high the man said, “Hey I know you. You’re famous.”

“No I ain’t,” Thomas said with drowning lungs.

“How much money you got, Joe Nashville?”

Thomas didn’t speak and the man reached around his waist and in his pocket for his wallet and Thomas tried to grab his neck and punch him, but swung slow and then slouched toward the door and the man came at him with a pocketknife and stabbed him three times through the spine and slit his throat for good measure, and cut off one of his ears for a Country-Gold souvenir, and counted the money, having killed him for thirteen dollars and thirty-three cents.

At the conclusion of the podcast interview he’s asked to play a song from his latest album and the song he performs still sounds to this day when it’s played like ghosts and dust, and its lyrics consider seven men and the passing of their soul in the spirit of a baton come into new hands, one a serial killer who says a prayer for his victims in tears, and one a banker who is murdered and who has a son that lives his life on the street without a job and without decency, one a man

who saves the murderer at a young age from drowning, two brothers who were separated at birth I and would live and die without knowing the other existed, and one who is a mute spending an entire existence trying to learn how to speak, and the chorus ends by comparing a man to many men, coming for mercy again and again.

He tells one last story before he plays his final song. "I'll say this then I'll just keep quiet. This is my first memory. I believe it is anyhow. Now it's gonna sound funny, and out there, but that's okay with me if it is with you. I remember bluegrass music and tall grass like a pasture, and old men in overalls, and women in white dresses. There was cows and chickens and a water color sky. I could not see my parents, or myself—my hands or my feet or my body. I was unseen, hidden behind this great orange glow. I don't believe I had been born yet. There was a creek there that ran with honey. People kept coming up with pails of honey. It felt that it was older times, but it could not of been too long ago because I remember it well. It seemed that I was fixing to come into the world from a version of Heaven, which also seemed to be what I was looking at. Felt that there was a curtain opening. Like where I come from is where I'm headed."