

Screaming Down the Highway

Music makes me see through walls. Gravity means nothing. I can lift up everyone around me. All things fall away, and a melody emerges.

Just minutes ago I was there, harvesting the moment; capping the creative spark. Now I'm back, piloting the van, playing it back in my mind as I drive. Gears grind up the ramp on this overcast afternoon. I'm suspended here, racing down the lane, with the ugly Boston sprawl far below. A gold Charger appears, trying to speed up and pass me, smug in its 84 horsepower buzz. It's just like that Chuck Berry song, the one John Lennon borrowed for the beginning of "Come Together", where flat top comes up behind, movin' up slowly, so he puts his foot down and starts to roll, til he hears the cops coming, then he lets out his wings and becomes airborne. In Chuck Berry's world he was always screaming down some highway, riding on a wild cloud of crazy electric energy. He discovered a strange life force off in another dimension and brought it back for all of us.

Sometimes, on a rare day, I'm allowed to have the tinniest echo of it for myself.

I can't wait to show the band the song I've just written. We're doing a gig down in New York tonight, and I'm on my way to pick them up. I turn into the trash-strewn parking lot and a rat squeals and explodes under my front tire. As I pull up to the space and stop, there are a few appreciative whistles for the rodent mauling. I wait as they wheel the gear in. All loaded, it's back down Harrison and up onto the freeway again. I keep my cool. There will be plenty of time during the ride ahead.

Screaming Down the Highway

Alexander, our new lead guitarist, is talking about winning some money betting on a horse that had the same name as his grandmother, out at Suffolk Downs. He's young, just recently dropped out of Berklee College of Music, which is what people tend to do when they realize they'll never find what Chuck Berry heard at any school. Alexander already plays too many notes for everyone's taste, but we also know he'll get sick of trying to impress and become lazy and sloppy like the rest of us, once the miles and the booze and late hours start to add up.

Rasta Mike, his dreads tied back, is sitting shotgun and cleaning some dope with the inner fold of a Sergeant Pepper's album. Bass players are always the ones that understand something secret about gravity. They know how to use it to their advantage.

The drummer Leo is on his back on the van floor, groaning conspicuously, the only one of us that got laid last night. He's the best looking, attracts women like dandruff, like they're some sort of nuisance that he has to keep brushing off him. He's notorious for bashing the snare drum harder than anyone else in town, and that's something we're all pretty proud of.

Malley our second guitarist has traces of vomit on his silver shirt. We got him from the Rail Splitters, a real pro punk outfit who had a hit song called "Murder the Smurfs" but then split up. Having Malley gave us some cred, we instantly moved up two slots closer to headliner, and it got us a huge show with The Clash a few months ago.

As we merge onto the raised highway, the radio is playing a reggae-tinged song by a band we opened for last week in Providence, and that had treated us like dogshit, hogging the stage so we couldn't get a soundcheck. Rasta Mike reaches over and shuts it off.

"Hey," Alexander shouts from behind. "I was liking that."

Screaming Down the Highway

“Yeah?” Rasta Mike says. “Well that’s the asshole who put his cigarette out on your arm.”

“Oh, that’s *those* guys?” Alexander says. “How’d they even get on the radio?”

This somehow seems to be my cue. I start to sing.

“Oh Jesus,” Malley says, wearily.

Rasta Mike smiles and looks over at me.

“Maybe you should just shut up a second and listen,” he tells him.

The thing about a melody, it’s the shortest distance between two points: the inside and the outside. I feel them inside me like children ready to be born. And I know they will emerge alive, unlike words, which take the long road, and often get sick and die on the trip.

I sing the song I’ve created. When I finish, there is silence, something that always seems to happen.

It’s because I never talk, so it comes as a shock when people hear my voice.

Going silent has been my personal choice, the logical thing. Dad taught me that words have too many moving parts, and should be kept inside the head where they can be controlled. Every time I try to speak he’s there, punishing me, hurting me. It’s why he now lives in a place where lightning bolts crackle and the ground simmers. Sometimes I hear him on the radio, howling at me from far away.

Screaming Down the Highway

“Was that it?” Malley says, a few seconds later. “Sounds like, I don’t know... a dying walrus?”

“Shut up,” Rasta Mike says. “Have some human decency.”

“Why?” Leo shouts from the back. “The guy’s our driver, he’s not even –

“You shut up, too.”

He winks at me. Rasta Mike has my back. He believes.

“Sing it one more time,” he says, and glares at the others, daring them to challenge it.

I glance down at the speedometer: thirty miles an hour. No wonder. You can’t experience rock and roll standing still. And so I jam my foot down on the accelerator and start to sing again.

“Hey! What the fuck?” Alexander shouts.

This is good. It’s having an impact on them. The speed has crept up to seventy as I continue. I’m nearing the chorus, the best part. Soon we’re at a hundred, the van is rumbling, I can feel it singing along, and the cathartic screams of my bandmates add to the ecstasy. Now we are in this together, and they are feeling it like I’m feeling it here riding on the power, blasting it all open...

And suddenly I can speak, because at this velocity I’m free.

“Don’t worry,” I tell them, as their shouting fills my ears.

Screaming Down the Highway

“I can lift all of us.”

And soon we are sailing over the embankment, out into the air above the city, and there before us is the great black opening, a vast rip in the sky filled with stars, and we're returning to the place where all of music was created.

Finally, we're truly a band.