

Every time Rex heard the song he flipped out. He wanted to pull over, rip the damn radio out of the dash and beat it to death with a hammer. On a weekend trip to a Jersey beach with his girlfriend, Angie, he threw his transistor radio into the ocean. She thought he was mad. He was. And it was the Rugbeaters who drove him. The Rugbeaters were the hottest cover band in the Finger Lakes area. They had Steppenwolf and the Stones down cold. Rex was their roadie once. Set up the kit, tuned the guitars, sound-checked the mics. The Wells brothers, Jam and Yancey, fronted the band, playing bass and lead and singing. Sure they were real pros compared to Rex, but all they did was cover songs. Rex, though all he could do was strum a few chords, was a dreamer. The chords and melody came to him one night sitting alone in his apartment after a couple hits on a bong. He jotted down some lyrics and a title, "I'm for You, if You're for Me."

He played it for Jam and Yancey one night after a bar gig. They laughed and Yancey said, "Who do you think you are, John Lennon?" Rex didn't say anything, but quietly he seethed. They didn't like the song, ok, but why the snarky comment?

Rex got a real day job working construction and told Jam and Yancey he couldn't handle the late nights anymore. They didn't seem unhappy to let him go, and without so much as a thanks. Well, he got one thing out of it — Angie. He met her at a gig. And, man, was she a dish. A month later he and Angie went to hear the Rugbeaters at Arnie's Roadhouse. Yancey stepped to the mic and said, "Hey, we got something original we've been working on, we call it 'If Not for You, There'd Be no Me.'"

Rex only needed to hear a verse. He didn't know what to do. He grabbed Angie's hand. "Damn it, that's my song. We gotta get out of here now." Angie had been a bit of a Rugbeaters groupie, but now she was on his side.

Well, it turns out, Scepter, a new label out of the City, was looking for new bands. They sent a scout to hear the Rugbeaters and he recommended giving them a contract. They recorded the song in a real studio in the City and Scepter released it. The Syracuse University radio station picked it up and the next thing anyone knew, everybody's favorite bar cover band had a regional Upstate hit. A Binghamton DJ told Rex the band probably made 40, 50 grand on the song — his song.

Rex tried to confront Jam and Yancey. Called them, numbers changed. Went to their old half double on Rand Street, moved. Drove out to the family farm a couple times. Never anybody around. Went to a few gigs, tried to get backstage. Stopped by bikers.

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“They pay ‘em cash. Small bills, dirty money,” Rex said.

Angie's brother Butch didn't get it. “Whatya mean dirty?”

“No permits, no advertising, no checks, no tickets, no paper, man, except for the money, singles, five, tens, 20s maybe even some 50s, all collected at the door day-of. No advance sales.”

“How do they get away with it?”

“Ever been to the Wells' family farm? It really is the middle of nowhere. 15 miles back a dirt road off 29. No neighbors for five miles. They cut a grove back there with a buffer of woods all around. Parking in the cow fields for hundreds of cars. Been running this “Rocktoberfest” thing for five years. Nothing but word of mouth. There's a buzz. Local cops gotta know, but they don't give a shit.”

“How the hell do you know all this?”

“Didn’t your sister tell you? I was a roadie for the Rugbeaters for eight years. I know what happens at their parties. It’s a regular Woodstock lite.”

“How much you figure?”

“Last year they sold 2,000 tickets, \$20 a piece. That’s 40 grand right there. And they sell beer and weed.”

“So what? You make it sound like there’s like 40 grand laying in a pile ripe for pickin’.”

“Pretty much.”

Butch raised an eyebrow. “No security?”

“Yeah, bikers. They pay em ‘em beer and weed.”

“How do we get around that?”

“Don’t worry, man, I got a plan.”

“What’s the plan.”

“Born to be Wild.”

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In the Fest office, really a trailer home backed up to the stage, Geoff sat at a folding table separating cash it into piles by denomination. Josh sat next to him counting and banding it.

Dan ran the dough back from the front gate every half hour between 7 and 9 when they closed the gate. He’d sit in one of the two folding chairs opposite Geoff and Josh while they pulled the money out of his shoulder bag.

“We’re making a killing man,” Geoff said. “Closing in on 50 grand. We still have two joint sellers out there and we’re still selling tons of beer. Only two halves left in the beer tent. They have orders to get back here at 11.”

“We’re shutting down the music at 11:15,” Josh said.

“We can’t pull the plug, they’ll be a fucking riot.”

“Not pulling the plug. The Rugbeaters are going to close with a big jam with the other bands and the natives are going to go wild.”

“Yeah and, hopefully, the natives will be worn out and go home.”

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Getting in was easy, Rex and Butch just paid at the gate like everybody else.

“20 freaking bucks, what a rip off,” Butch said

Rex just looked at him shook his head and laughed.

They snaked their way through the crowd, stepping over muddy sleeping bags and around pow wows, checking out girls in cut offs and halters and stopping to take tokes on joints passing by. As they got closer to the stage they could hear the Rugbeaters playing “Start me Up,” but were walled off by a 20 deep mob of stoned, drunken, screaming dancers.

When the song ended Yancey talked into the mic, some “hey how y’all doing” shit. Gave Rex and Butch just enough time to jostle their way to the front row stage left. To their right three huge, dirty, mean-looking, drunken bikers stood with their arms folded and their backs against the stage. Yancey yammered on and finally yelled the magic words into the mic. “This one’s going out for our favorite bikers, the Vulcans.”

Rex said “oh yeah” to himself, as the Beaters broke into “Born To Be Wild.” The bikers turned toward the stage raising their beers and banging their heads while the dancers went wild, spinning, jumping, air guitaring.

Rex reached down pulled up the tarp hiding the stage under pinnings, pulled Butch by the wrist and they went in. Shit, a freaking maze of of 2 x 4 cross section supports, way more than Rex expected. The bass and drum thundered down on them as they picked their way through the stage infrastructure. Rex, lithe and 160 pounds, moved easily. He looked back and saw Butch. He wasn't moving. He was stuck in a cross section.

“You fat fuck, I never should brought you.”

“Shut up and get me the hell out.” They had to scream over the music.

Time was running out on “Born to be Wild” and Rex’s plan to get rich.

Rex got behind him, put his shoulder to his ass and pushed. Didn’t budge him.

“I don’t have time, you’re on your own.”

“Wait you can’t leave me here. I’ll squeal like a stuck pig.”

You are a stuck pig, Rex thought to himself, but said to Butch. “Keep your mouth shut and I’ll get some money to you.”

Rex crawled out the back of the stage, as “Born to Be Wild” faded out. Only one more song and 20 musicians were going to go to the trailer for their dough. Rex had five minutes, give or take, while all the bands jammed on “The Breeze.” Rex ran alongside the trailer, up the front steps, pulled down his ski mask and burst in the door.

“Hey, Dan, that you,” came a voice from behind a curtain in the kitchen down the end of the hall.

Rex ran, ripped down the curtain and jumped on the table where Josh and Geoff sat.

Three minutes. Just as he’d hoped, the banded money was piled on Josh’s side of the table. Geoff

was hitting on a joint. Rex kicked Josh in the chest he fell back to the floor in the chair, whacked his head stayed down.

Geoff stood up. “Hey what the hell?”

Rex put his hand in his jacket pocket said, “I got a gun.”

Geoff threw his hands up and backed away.

Rex shoved the money in his backpack and turned toward the hallway. A door flew open. A huge scary biker stepped out of the toilet looking down, hitching his belt, blocking the hall. He looked up in time to swing his forearm to knock away the folding chair Rex threw at him. He growled and ran toward Rex, but got his feet tangled up in the chair and went down. Rex grabbed another chair, turned and threw it through the bay window behind the table and jumped through the jagged opening just as Geoff, groggy from whacking his head, stood up and made a futile swipe for Rex’s legs. Rex landed on glass, cut up some, but he got up, scrambled under the snow fence and sprinted for the tree line and into the woods.

It must have been quite sight if anyone could see it. A lone figure wearing a backpack sprinting into the dark woods from a moonlit pasture, 20 musicians, some wielding mic stands, and a half dozen sloppy bikers running after him.

It was dark among the trees, but Rex knew the trail. His tach light would give away his position, but the Rugbeaters knew the trail, too. He switched the light on. He couldn’t afford to fall. He figured he was in better shape. Working construction and training for the Lakes Half Marathon was paying off. And he was sober — hopefully not for long. In a couple minutes he was 15-20 minutes ahead. He heard a distant roar engines. The bikers went back for their hogs.

The trail dumped him out on 29, the car was there were they had left it. But Butch had the GD key. He crossed 29 picked up the trail again on the other side of the road. He heard bikes coming up 29. He ducked into the woods 20 feet, crawled to the edge of the road, hid in the trees and peaked through the brush. Three bikes slowed as they approached the car. They stopped. Holy crap, Butch climbed off one of the bikes and waved like he was saying thanks. Two of the bikes road away slowly, shining flashlights into the woods. The third turned onto the trail.

As Butch opened the car door Rex game up behind him. "Open the other side."

"Jeez, you about gave me a heart attack."

Rex got in shotgun and put the backpack between his legs.

"How much we get?"

"We? I did all the dirty work."

"Hey, I couldn't help it. I wanted to go. I was stuck. And I'm helping you now ain't I."

"Will five grand keep you quiet?"

"Deal," Butch said as he pulled on to 29. Rex opened the backpack and counted a stack of banded money. A grand. He put five stacks in a plastic bag and put it on the floor behind the driver's seat.

"So what happened?"

"I broke a two-by and got out from under the stage. Went back out the front and fell in with the crowd walking out. Got to the main gate. Some bikers came running and gunning yelling about killing some asshole thief. I knew one of them from the Cat and Canary pool league. Told him I was out of gas on 29. He told me to hop on."

"Out of gas?"

“How was I supposed to explain the car out here. Told him my buddies were on their way with a gas can.”

“He bought it?”

“He’s a biker, duh. So where we going?”

“*We* ain’t going nowhere. Drop me off at the bus depot.”

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Jam counted the left behind money. A couple grand out of 50.

“It was Rex, wasn’t it?”

“Well, he had a mask, but yeah, Geoff is 95 percent it was Rex,” Yancey said.

“So what do we do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“We can’t call the cops,” Yancey said.

“We could look for him.”

“He’s probably heading out to California as we speak. Him and his girlfriend.”

“The Vulcans aren’t gonna give up.”

“They can’t find their own asses.”

“Besides, we did rip off his song.”

“Did we? That’s being generous. Yeah, he had an idea, a melody, some chords. We finished the damn thing.”

“Written any new ones lately, Yancey?”, Jam said, tapping a bundle of twenties on the table.

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There's a part of North Central Pennsylvania nicknamed "The Wilds." Endless mountains rolling with state game lands, national forests, and parks. There's even an elk herd, one of the few this side of the Rockies, and elk tourism is a thing around one of the little towns. A decent restaurant, winery, brewpub, a B and B.

Nice place to buy a little business with your girlfriend and call it the Antler Inn, sit on the patio and watch for elk, maybe write a couple songs.