

The Music of Otis Troy

I met Otis Troy in 1996, in Madison, Wisconsin. I was tending bar at the Evermore, on Main Street, and he was drinking gin.

He was black, about forty years old. His head was shaved down to the scalp and his arms were enormous. He was built like a pro wrestler. He sat in his wheelchair, telling me all about it.

"They got me, Mike. Shot me in the spine. I'll never walk again." He talked about his former life as a gangbanger on the south side of Chicago: the money, the drugs, the danger. "A Hundred and Thirty-Third Place and South Corliss," he said. "Altgeld Gardens, the meanest shit in the world."

"They ever get the guy who shot you?"

"Yup," he nodded. "Garret Cain found him the next day. Shot him in the head."

That wasn't what I'd meant. I wondered who Garret Cain was, and Otis told me that Cain was his homeboy, his number one motherfucker. A thug's thug. "An assassin," Otis grinned.

'Shit,' I thought.

The back door swung open and three much younger black men walked in. They stood by the cigarette machine, waiting, and Otis wheeled himself over for a chat. One of them looked too young to drive. He spun a basketball on his finger.

It was midnight. The other six or seven people along the bar drank nice and easy. The new summer air, tinged with the stink from the lakes, blew in through the front screen door. I walked back and forth, chatting, trying not to look in Otis' direction.

Otis' friends left. He rolled back to the end of the bar, where a piece of the bar top swings down to let the bartender in and out, and called me over.

I made him a new drink and wondered, casually, who the other guys were.

"Those my cousins, Hampton and Benjamin," Otis said. "And the one with the basketball, he, uh, he my nephew. Handle."

"How come they didn't stick around? Don't they like white people?"

"Naw, man," Otis laughed. "They just had to go. You know."

Some time passed.

At one-thirty I gave last call. The last two customers shook their heads, eased out of their stools and left.

"I'm ready!" Otis announced. He reached up above his head and banged his glass on the bar. "Git me again, boy!" He rolled his chair to the men's room to empty the urine that ran down a plastic tube and collected in a bag on his ankle.

I poured him some more gin. Then I took the pans, the spatula, tongs, etc., back across the room, from the grill into the back kitchen, and set them all to soak in the sink.

I came out and found Otis staring up at the digital jukebox, which hung on a wall, two feet over his head.

"Mike!" He waved at the machine. "Play a song, man! Play it!"

I put a dollar bill in the slot. "What do you wanna hear?"

He slugged down half his drink. Burped. "Whatcha got?"

I started flipping through the selections. "PJ Harvey, Dead Kennedys, Boozoo Chavis, Doc Watson, Blondie, Charlie Parker, Hole..."

"Uh huh, uh huh," he said.

I kept reading. We finally settled on Otis Redding.

"I've been missing youuuu'," sang Otis Troy. He closed his eyes, threw his head back

and roared. He was a horrible singer.

I started throwing bar stools upside down onto the bar top.

Otis finished the song and rolled over to the bar.

"Hey," he said. "Can a brother get another?"

"Sure," I said, as the next song played.

I made us both a drink. I walked around the bar, sat down and joined him.

Handle walked in through the back door a couple minutes later. He leaned against a table behind us. "Here's my ride," Otis said.

We watched MTV Cribs on the television hanging above the grill. The sound was turned down. It was the episode about the mansion that a famous baseball player lived in. The MTV host and a camera crew followed the ballplayer as he led them through one dazzling room after another. The show went to commercial.

"Be nice to live in a house that big," Otis said.

"Wait'll I sell my book," I said. "I'll get rich. And I'll have seven bathrooms, in my guest house, that are bigger than that motherfucker."

Otis chuckled so hard that he spilled his gin. It gurgled out of his mouth. "Word," he said.

When the show ended, I clicked off the television and put another dollar in the jukebox. We listened to the music, looking up at the pressed-tin ceiling, where four strings of Christmas lights flashed and danced on.

The Evermore sat near the western end of Main Street, four blocks north of Lake Monona and six blocks south of Lake Mendota. The neighborhood, a twenty-something mix of students, slackers and recent graduates, stood within walking distance of the UW campus and the state Capitol. It was lively and a little run-down.

I'd been in Madison for a couple of years. I had stories in the mail, rejection slips pinned to the wall. I came to the Evermore from the Easy Water, over by the Oscar Mayer plant. I left the Easy Water when a dude named Tim Court started talking about shooting me. Nobody else believed him, not even after he came to the bar with a gun a couple times, but I'd had enough.

I lived with my buddy Madeleine three blocks away in a two-story house full of junkies, strippers and musicians. The Evermore was my getaway.

From lunch until dinner it was peppered with old-timers, mostly Italian-Americans, who remembered when the neighborhood had been partly industrial, with single-family homes.

By '96 the factories were empty, of course, and the sturdy, once-proud houses, chopped into makeshift apartments, had slid into neglect.

The regulars talked about the good old days. Then they went home to dinner.

Except for Fred, a custom furniture maker. He came in after dinner. He'd moved to Madison to join the revolution, in the sixties. When the smoke cleared he stuck around. He played in two city pool leagues for a couple other taverns, and I didn't know anybody that could touch him. He beat me, he beat the other guys; he was our undisputed champ.

He and Otis went out to the alley and smoked weed all the time. Then they'd shoot pool. Otis had had to come up with a new striking stance after he'd been shot. He still didn't have it down. He had to hold the cue stick over his shoulder like a javelin to get the proper bridge angle.

When the stick hit the cue ball, the spin was distorted, and the ball wobbled around on the table like it wasn't round anymore. He hardly ever hit the ball he was aiming at.

Fred always beat the crap out of him.

A bunch of Tibetans hung out at the Evermore too. There were thirty or forty of them. They came in in twos and threes, hung out in small groups. They liked to watch shows about big cats on 'Animal Planet'. Most of them had served in the Indian and Chinese armies, and a lot of them had three jobs. Their hands were rougher than sandpaper. They knew how to say 'pitcher', 'half-pitcher' and 'the King'. They all drank Budweiser. One guy drank on Tuesdays between six-thirty and seven. Another guy drank on Wednesdays from four-fifteen until five. You could set your watch to it. The lucky ones were still bringing children, spouses and parents over to America, so they all drank very carefully.

Except on the day that their god, the Dalai Lama, came to town. The Lama had a gig at Camp Randall Stadium that spilled out into the streets. They drew Buddhists from all over the world. After the ceremony, two school buses emptied in the lot of the warehouse across the street and a hundred Tibetans, on fire, stormed into the Evermore. They got shitfaced and almost wrecked the joint.

We got a lot of students, too, which really fucked up the program. When they showed up, I carded the hell out of them. I told them 'don't sit on the pool table, don't kick the wall, get outta the back kitchen, quit smoking dope in the bathrooms'. Which they failed to appreciate. They'd call me names, and leave, and we'd have some peace around the place.

Then a cute young couple would come in and fall in love with the ancient phone booth with the folding glass door, the old-school Budweiser signs, the majestic walnut backbar. They'd

come back two nights later with eleven skinny friends and act like total assholes and here we go again. I'd kick 'em all out.

That was about it. On most nights that summer it was just me and the guitar from sevenish, when the Tibetans would go home, until ten or so, when a few night owls would crawl in. I'd put a couple bucks in the jukebox, choose random songs, see if I could figure out how to play the next song before it ended. I usually got the chord progressions right away, a few of the licks; grace notes.

One night two young guys came in. One of them was wearing a Wisconsin t-shirt and jean shorts; the other guy had on a polo shirt and khaki shorts. They smiled sweetly, called me sir. They started drinking. They put money in the jukebox and played some rap songs. Then they went over to watch Fred run the table on Otis.

Two regulars sat at the bar. They argued about lightning.

"I'm tellin' ya, it comes down from the sky," one of them said. "I've seen it."

"Nope." His pal shook his head. "It comes up from the ground. For real."

"Here, ask Mike," the other said. "Hey, Mike."

I gave the question some thought. Leaned down on the bar. "Well, that's a question for Zeus, who...you know...gathers the clouds."

Then I heard the sound of a pool cue being snapped in half and here comes Otis, wheels burning, chasing the two younger guys, who ran for it, not smiling. They banged the front screen door open. "Otis!" someone hollered, but he kept going. There was a loud clatter, a lot of swearing. We found Otis outside on the ground, sprawled at the bottom of the three concrete steps that led up into the tavern. The other two guys were gone.

"Punk-ass bitches," Otis growled. He sat up, looked at the shards of the cue stick in his

hand and flung them away. He was steaming.

"Jesus, Otis," Fred said. "What'd they say to you?"

But he wouldn't tell us. It took four or five guys to help him into his chair. He rode around to the back door and rolled inside the bar. Eventually he calmed down. He chose another cue stick and Fred whipped him some more.

Another time I went down into the basement to get a case of beer from the cooler. When I came back up to the bar room I saw eight or nine young, thin black men, wearing designer clothing, Timberland hiking boots, cologne, hooded sweatshirts, new spotless sneakers. They stood around Otis over by the pinball machine. He talked. They listened, nodded and left, and Otis wheeled himself back to the bar.

"Those my nephews!" Otis grinned. "They up here partyin'. Grillin' and chillin'. You know: a little road trip, get out of town."

"You got a lotta nephews," I told him.

"Yeah, boy," Otis agreed. "We family."

I saw a lot of them after that. They came in in twos or threes, or ten at a time. Some of them I started to recognize; some of them I saw only once. They usually didn't stay long: either they met Otis there, had a brief council, and left, or they came in and waited for Otis. Then they'd talk for a couple minutes and go.

They were waiting one time and Benjamin, wearing a silk shirt, pleated shorts and Italian sandals, with a gold toothpick in his mouth, came up to the bar.

"Got quarters for the pool table?" he asked. He pulled out a thick roll and peeled away

hundreds and fifties until he got down to a ten. I gave him some change and stepped out on the floor to watch.

They played Last Pocket, where you have to put the eight ball into the pocket that your last ball went down. They played One Rail, where you have to bank every shot. They played one-handed, they played Cross Corner, they played games that I've never seen, before or since. "Southside!" one of them hollered as he sank a no-look shot.

Which rang a bell. I'd lived in and around Chicago myself, before I moved to Madison. I'd shot a lot of pool too, and I knew that when you play with a stranger you first have to agree on a game. All of the white people that I'd played with in Illinois preferred eight-ball or nine-ball, and most of them insisted that they wouldn't put up with any 'Southside shit'. They said it with a sneer, as if any assumption otherwise was a family and cultural insult. I'd always wondered what the term meant. I thought that it referred to a lower class of pool, but after watching Otis' nephews play, I realized that the different games grew out of an intense rehearsal discipline which demanded that you spend several hours, every day, with a stick in your hand. For years. It was fun to watch.

I played with one of Otis' guys, Hampton, quite a bit. When it was slow, or on my nights off. He showed me one trick shot after another, talking about angles, friction, Pythagoras. I never figured out what he meant. He kept talking and shooting and talking and shooting and beating me like I'd never played before. I found out that he had a degree in Physics from the University of Illinois-Chicago. He'd grown up with most of Otis' nephews and was taking a year off before deciding upon his next course of action.

"I can't believe you went to UIC," I told him one night. He'd broke the rack. The balls rolled free, perfectly distant from the rails and each other. They sat on the felt like oils on a

canvas.

"Oh yeah?" he said. "You never met a brother with a degree? What: you think a black man can't go to college?"

I told him that I'd gone to UIC myself, years earlier, for nine or ten weeks.

He walked around the table, pointing at pockets and balls. "But you didn't graduate," he said. All of his shots ran home. "Because you had a bigger better plan. You realized back then that eventually you'd move to Wisconsin." He dropped the eight, stood up and smiled. "And become a bartender."

"Don't you worry about my plan," I grumbled, walking away.

A couple weeks later a small group waited for Otis by the back door. Handle was there, absent-mindedly bouncing a basketball.

"Hey," I said. "Don't bounce that in here, please."

Benjamin rushed over.

"What you think?" he asked. "He gonna lose the ball, and knock over somebody's beer?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, you must be ignorant! This is The Handle!" he explained. "And a basketball will do exactly what he tell it."

"Sure," I said. "That's what they all say."

"Twenty dollars," Benjamin suggested. "Ten to one. Your twenty, my two *hundred*. Handle can dribble the ball between his legs, walking backwards, all the way around the pool table. With his eyes closed."

Handle's mouth hung open. He stared at Benjamin.

"Okay," I said. "Bet."

"*Bet*," Benjamin spat, and Handle took off, banging his friends out of the way, the ball bouncing in a tight V from hand to hand between his legs as he ran backwards around the table. It looked like something he'd practiced a thousand times. He made the final corner, spun around, bounced the ball behind his back so that it came up between his legs and caught it on the forefinger of his left hand. His hand made a little hop and the ball was a clockwise blur, perfectly balanced on his finger. He caught the ball in midair and palmed it. Then he opened his eyes.

"Do it again Handle," Benjamin said.

"No no," I said, holding up my hands. "Holy crap." I walked back behind the bar, pulling a ten and a five from my pocket. I took four wrinkled singles and some change from the tip jar and traded it all in to the cash register for a twenty, which I walked back around the bar and gave to Benjamin, who promptly handed it to Handle.

I looked at him. "You keep that up, kid. You're going places."

The weird thing about Otis' nephews, or cousins, is that none of them drank. Most of them looked old enough, yet they never even ordered a soda.

For a while.

One night some of the younger Tibetans came in with their girlfriends. The Tibetan women were hot and stylish. None of them would look at me or come within twenty feet of the bar. They stood in the back of the room or sat chatting at a table as their boyfriends ignored them. Pretty soon they would stand up and leave. They never stuck around longer than ten or fifteen minutes.

Then some locals wandered in. Some rockers, some cooks and waiters, some extremely

pierced and tattooed women.

Benjamin and Hampton showed up without Otis. They ordered drinks, mingled, had a good time. Benjamin came up for a refill and I asked him about it.

"You guys never drink in here," I said. "What's up?"

"Otis won't let us," he shrugged. "This is his bar. He told us if he ever see us in here, he'll whoop our ass."

"Whatta you mean 'if he ever sees you in here'?" I asked. "You guys meet him here all the time."

Benjamin shook his head. "We just meet him here sometimes to talk a little business. Sort of a council."

"Oh. Okay." I thought about it. "But you're in here now," I said. "And you're drinking."

"Hey I like this place," he grinned. "Plus, Otis already passed out for the night."

Fred called out from the pool table for next game. He stood there chalking his cue.

Benjamin went and racked and I was reminded again of what happens to somebody who's steeped in the Southside: they get really good at eight-ball. Fred broke the rack, sank a couple of balls and missed a long cut shot. Then Benjamin dropped eight balls in a row in about three minutes.

"Next," he said, and he reached for the chalk.

So Fred racked. He stepped out of the way. Benjamin sank eight shots in about four minutes.

And Fred, pissed, racked again. I'd never seen him lose a game, and here he'd lost two in less time than it took to get another drink.

Benjamin broke and dropped a couple. Then he tried a double combo bank shot. He

almost made it.

Fred sank a couple. Then he hid the cue ball behind two of his own, on the rail.

They went back and forth like that for about twenty minutes, playing defensively, always worried more about the leave than the actual shot at hand. Finally Fred made a long bank shot; a tricky combo; a careful cut, and looked down at the eight.

"Corner," he pointed. He banged the eight home.

Benjamin put three quarters in the slot, pushed it in and reached for the rack.

"No no no," Fred laughed. He put his cue stick away. "Your table. I'm too tired to play you again."

Benjamin protested, offering to play for money, to spot him balls, but Fred just sat down, caught his breath and sipped his beer.

And so it went. Otis' nephews hung out. They came in for their meetings. Otis showed up almost every day and sometimes, late at night, I'd see Benjamin and Hampton and a few of the others.

Then Benjamin got busted with a sack of cocaine.

"You'll never see him again," Hampton said, and I never did.

This was right about the time that the t.v. news and the papers were full of stories about the sudden increase in gang activity and drug dealing in downtown Madison. I hardly mentioned it to Otis or Hampton, but I had my suspicions about all of them being related to each other. And they never brought Garret Cain with them, so I tried not to think about it.

Most nights, around bar time, one of Otis' guys would show up. It was always one of the newer, younger kids, who hung back shyly, waiting for Otis to finally quit hollering, and then he'd

wheel him home.

One night nobody showed up. Otis passed out in his wheelchair.

My roommate Madeleine finished her drink and looked at Otis. "Now what are you gonna do with him?"

"I'll take him home myself," I shrugged. "He lives in that new building across the tracks. Apartment 206."

"Shit," Madeleine said. "I'll take him. C'mon, Otis." And she grabbed the handles on Otis' chair.

She came back in about ten minutes, laughing her ass off.

"You shoulda seen it," she said. "We're about halfway there and Otis wakes up and freaks out and whips out a knife. He's reaching around, trying to stab me."

"What?"

"I get him to the parking lot," Madeleine said. "And he dropped his knife, so I bent over, picked it up and gave it back to him. And what does he do but start trying to stab me again. It was hilarious."

I shook my head. "That fucker."

We had a couple more and shut it down.

A couple weeks later I was taking out the trash and I got jumped by six punks that I'd been kicking out of the bar for months. They came at me with pipes and baseball bats. I pulled a broken cue stick out of a dumpster and fought back. Two of them went to the hospital. I got beat up pretty good myself and when the cops arrived, I was the one that they arrested. They charged me with

assault with a deadly weapon. I had to hire a lawyer and spent the next six months waiting for the goddamn trial.

But it was still a nice Fall. The leaves turned gold and orange and red. The clouds slowed down and the heat cooled off.

And Otis drank his gin. His nephews came and got him. The old-timers told stories, the Tibetans watched t.v. and everybody sighed, and relaxed.

And one night nobody came in but Otis. I played guitar, and he sang, and we got drunk. I closed up early.

I put my guitar case on Otis' lap and wheeled him home. He rang the buzzer and I reached for the guitar.

"Hey, Mike," he said, and he put his hand on the case. "Come up tonight. Come up, boy, and kick it."

"Okay," I said, and up we went.

He unlocked the door to the apartment and pushed it open. I wheeled him inside. I took the guitar from Otis and set it on the floor. He rolled himself off to the bathroom.

Twelve or thirteen young black men, some of them cleaning or aiming pistols, shut up and stared at me.

"Hi Mike," Handle said. He handed me a bottle of cognac. I took a swig and handed it back. Then he took a chug. Somebody gave me a seat on the couch.

Rap music blared from the stereo. One of the guys rolled a spliff as big as a cigar and set it on fire. The Courvoisier went clockwise; the Hennessy went counter-clockwise. Somebody else

rolled an even fatter joint, and lit it. Bottles of Heineken and Beck's appeared. It was pretty fun.

"Mike, man!" Hampton jumped on the couch and hugged my neck. "Mike, I saw that shit! When you fucked all those white boys up: baby, that was you! That was all you!"

Several others shut up and stared at me. "That was you? Was that him?" they roared, and then everybody loved me.

"I got in a lot of trouble," I told Hampton. "They wanna give me six years. I had to hire a lawyer."

"Man, we saw that!" Hampton said. "From the balcony! We was shoutin' and carryin' on; that was beautiful, boy!"

"That was straight gangsta," another said. "We was gonna take those white boys out, but we was drunk and didn't wanna hit you."

"I'm glad you didn't accidentally shoot me," I said. Everybody laughed.

"How much of it did you see?" I asked Hampton.

"All of it! They came at you, you picked up that stick and bam, baby! It was on!"

"Well you know," I said. "My lawyer wants to hire a private investigator. I'm gonna need some witnesses who'll corroborate the fact that I was attacked."

"I'll do it! I'll *do* it!" Hampton said. A couple other guys wanted to be a witness too. They asked me what I wanted them to tell the investigator, and we practiced the story.

Then the roughest dude I've ever seen came out of one of the bedrooms. He had a thin black scarf wrapped around his head, he was shirtless, and his arms were bigger than Otis'. He had three small black 'x's carved beneath one eye. Skulls, guns and knives were tattooed up and down his arms. The words 'P STONE LOVE' were etched across his chest in huge, fancy script.

He had a thick diagonal scar running across his throat, a mouth full of gold and silver teeth and a look on his face that shut the whole room up. He held a Skorpion machine pistol in one hand.

"Turn that shit down," he growled.

"Okay Cain," Hampton said. He leaped up, turned off the stereo.

'That's him,' I thought. 'Garrett Cain.' I quit having fun. I was scared, too. I stared at the floor; saw him, peripherally, coming at me. He waved the pistol in my direction. "Who the fuck...hey!"

I looked up; saw him smiling.

"Is that a guitar?"

"Yeah," I said.

He walked over and stood in front of me, holding out the Skorpion. "Lemme play your guitar," he suggested. "I'll trade you."

He pulled the guitar from the case. I carefully set the pistol on the coffee table. Someone else jumped up from a chair and Cain sat down.

He started finger-picking a pretty, three-chord progression. He played it over and over, humming, nodding his head. Tapping his feet.

Nobody breathed.

"'He was born in the summer of his twenty-seventh year'," Cain sang, in a sweet, strong tenor that held the notes without cracking and never strayed out of key. The song sounded familiar and reassuring: I knew that I had heard it before, and that I liked it, so I almost relaxed.

But I also knew that the guy singing the song had killed the man who shot and crippled Otis. That made it really weird.

So I just listened. I tried to name the song before I could remember it.

Otis wheeled himself into the room with a crooked grin on his face. "Hm de la, la de da, da de dum," he hummed, and a couple of his friends smiled, as Cain continued finger-picking and singing.

'John Denver,' I guessed. Some of the others figured out what song it was too. They began to laugh and shout.

"'And the Colorado Rocky Mountain Hiiiiigh'," Cain sang.

'That's it,' I thought.

"'Rocky Mountain high....Colorado'," Otis sang.

And Otis' nephews laughed and clapped. The joint went one way, the spliff went another, the bottles went around and when Cain got to the next chorus everybody in the room sang it at the top of their lungs, out of key, getting the words wrong, not caring.

And Cain played some more songs. The nephews sang along. Otis hollered himself hoarse.

And I played a couple, and everybody got wasted and Cain gave me a big hug, when I left.

I tried to hurry home so I could write this down before I forgot it. But I was too drunk to walk. So I stumbled and veered, just as wobbly, lost and dicey as the pool table cue ball whenever Otis hit it. I fell, twice, with trees, cars and stars wheeling in dizzy constellation. I passed out on the couch, on the porch, and the moon went and sank between the lakes.