

New Rider

On the Purple Sage

I'd been told that the single women who follow acoustic music groups tend to be a tad more ... cerebral ... than the women who follow rock bands. So I was pleased to receive a call one afternoon from the country rock group, New Riders of the Purple Sage, asking me to play electric bass with them on a tour of the Midwest. The New Riders were related to the Grateful Dead, so Jerry Garcia would sometimes fall by and sit in. They also attracted their share of outlaw bikers and what some folks might call groupies. I accepted their offer with delight and dusted off my Fender bass. A genuine rock tour would be a first for me.

We arrive at the sound check for our first gig and I walk on stage to set up the Fender. Out in the room, a half dozen ladies are dancing to taped music. Except for the bartender and the sound man, there isn't a guy in the house, so I figure they're here alone.

As we walk on stage, the pace of their dancing picks up and what had been freeform hippie dancing becomes more focused; they all dance facing the stage now. We haven't plugged in yet, but it's like we're already playing.

The ladies' eyes, mostly closed before we entered, are now wide open, checking us out. We act like nothing is coming down, but we're aware that we are being watched.

As Patrick, our drummer, starts his sound check, the sound man kills the taped music. The gals stop dancing and scatter to the tables and the bar. None sit together. The bar ladies don't acknowledge each other. None of them drinks alcohol; it's all Pepsies and 7-Ups. They sip their drinks slowly and watch us.

When the five of us have finished our individual sound checks, we play a tune together. This brings the ladies back on the dance floor and they boogie full tilt to our music. They come closer to the stage now and their bodies move with language that any musician can read.

We return to the club for our show that evening and go down the back alley to avoid the crowd out front. Two guys from an infamous biker gang are waiting for us outside the back door. One of them has fists like wide-screen TV's and the other looks like his big brother, only meaner.

John Dawson, our lead singer, greets them with a cheery, "Howdy guys. What's happenin'?"

"Hey John, is Garcia going to be coming by tonight to play with you guys?" the smaller but somehow more menacing one asks.

We're in Chicago, Jerry lives two thousand miles away and just happens to be playing with the Dead this evening in San Francisco.

But John says, "Hey man, he might fall by tonight. Ya never know. But tell me somethin', where are your hogs, man? Ya got 'em parked out front?"

“Out front? Hell no. We parked 'em inside.”

“Inside? The club lets you park your Harleys inside?”

“No. The club don't let us park 'em inside. We just park 'em inside.” Now they rush back in to tell their friends that Garcia might be showing up that evening.

I turn to John. “Hey man. Do you always lie to guys who can kill you? I mean, telling them Jerry might fall by ...”

John shrugs it off. “They'll have forgotten by the end of the second pitcher.”

Inside the club, the room is full. When our first set comes, I walk on stage, plug in, and look out at the dance floor. It's jammed with people now, and it looks like most of the sound-check ladies are back. They're still alone, but dressed, as Chuck Berry sang, in tight dresses and lipstick.

The first set is a solid two hours and the crowd pounds the floor boards. The hard-dance dimension of good rock is here. The band has pumped the room and we exit the stage to the smell of 300 sweating bodies.

During the break, most of the band head for the dressing room. But I head for the bar, post myself on the only empty stool, and order a Coke-squeeze. By the time the doctor sets it up, one of the ladies who had been at the sound check is standing next to me.

One of the nice aspects of playing out — playing out in public — is the rapport female audience members establish with guys in the band. They've seen you play on stage and they feel they know you enough to approach you and start a conversation. I like that. As a basically shy guy, I don't meet women easily. As a performing player, meeting women is simple: you just hang out.

She says, “I noticed you playing on stage. You have a nice face.”

Please understand that most music fans, when they approach you after a show, will compliment the band or say

something about your playing, like, “You had a good groove going, dude.” The closest I’ve come to hearing a body part complemented was when a fan said to a fiddler, “Good left ring-finger, man; great independence.” Well, string players work on freeing the ring-finger from the pinkie- and middle-finger lock, so I understood. But when a woman tells a musician, “You have a nice face,” she’s not making a statement about his music; I think it’s a shade more personal.

“Why thank you very much. And how did you like the music?” I’m genuinely curious.

“That was nice too,” she says coolly.

“My name’s Bill.”

“Yes I know, Bill. My name’s Claire.”

After the last set, Claire is hanging around the stage, so I invite her back to my motel room for a bite to eat.

It’s 2 AM, I have no food, there is no room service.

She knows this, and she says, “Sure!”

As we head out, the two biker guys we met on the way in are sitting on their hogs just outside the front door, revving their engines. The bigger, meaner one says,

“Hey man, come here a second. I got somethin’ I wanna say to you.”

My heart stops. “Uh, ... sure man, what’s up?” I am desperately trying to think up some less-than-lame excuse for Garcia’s no-show at the gig.

He says, “You guys were the greatest. Boogie city, dude.”

“Well thanks, man. That’s very kind of you to say.”

Having escaped death, and with an able-bodied woman on my arm, relief is not the word here; I feel like I’m leading a charmed, rock ‘n’ roll life.

Claire and I arrive at my room, I slip the Do Not Disturb sign on the door knob, and we settle in for our duet.

There comes a point in an evening such as this when it becomes understood between a man and a woman that they

are going to ... to do the wild thing together. It begins after reaching the horizontal, but before clothing has disappeared. It's an interlude where people reveal things about themselves, explain themselves, to each other.

Claire says, "I'm a freshman at the University of Chicago; haven't declared a major yet. I love music and I love to dance, but I don't play an instrument. So I don't think music will be my major. Maybe English."

And then, after we've shared our first kiss, she says, "I've never done this before, ya know. I'm not a groupie or anything." She says it in an accusatory way, as though I've called her on it.

"That's good, Claire, I didn't think you were. I've never done this before either."

I'm not sure what it is I haven't done before that I'm about to do now, but it feels like the right thing to say, and Claire seems glad to hear it.

When you've gotten up at 7 AM, traveled all day in a compact car, eaten deep-fat-fried food for lunch and dinner, and then put out a large amount of sweating energy playing loud rock for four hours, sustained social activity, at 3 AM, is something that can elude you, much as you wish it would not. So our time together is not so record-breaking. I don't mention it to the guys, and I don't imagine Claire writes home about it either.

She leaves at light; we've been together maybe three hours. She has an English Literature class at 8 AM and does not want to be late.

I never learn her last name. I never hear from her again.

At seven that morning, the phone rings. It's Richie, one of our two roadies, with a wake-up call. This is another day of driving — some 300 miles due west and south — a fast-food lunch on the road, short naps in the car, a sound check at six, dinner at a greasy spoon, and the first set at nine.

When our last set is over, I go over to the bar for a soda. This time, one of our guitarists tags along.

“What’s up, man?” I ask him.

“I saw that you got lucky last night. I’m just sticking with you to see if some of it rubs off on me, man.”

“Sure. But I’m tellin’ you, I didn’t do nothing. I just sat at the bar and hung out.”

“OK, Bill. I’ll just sit with you and hang out too.”

In a short while, two young ladies come over and ask us for our autographs. The detail of bringing pen and paper to this signing has escaped them though, so we settle on a pencil stub the bartender gives us, and two drink napkins.

I end up talking with Debbie. She is a sophomore in college, an art history major. I ask Debbie if she’d like to come with me back to my room — no pretense of food this time — and after a demure heart beat, she says Yes.

The moment of we-know-what-we’re-doing-here seems to arrive sooner, as do the true confessions.

Debbie says, “I feel kinda funny being here. I want you to know I’ve never done this before. I’m no groupie or anything like that.”

Her words are so similar to Claire’s that I almost laugh out loud.

“Uh, ... well, that’s good, Debbie. I didn’t think you were. And I want you to know I’ve never done this before either.”

I feel badly about the white lie. Whatever it is I’m saying I haven’t done before, I *have* done before, and just last night.

Debbie leaves at dawn. I don’t get her last name, and I never hear from her again.

By the third night, the entire band — David, Patrick, John, Buddy, Allen, and the roadies, Richie and Bernie — follows me to the bar after the second set.

“We’re sticking with you, Bill; you’ve got the touch,” one of them says.

"I'm telling you guys, I don't do anything. I just park myself on the stool and wait."

"Yeah, Bill. Whatever you say. But our buddy here got lucky last night and he *never* does."

So the eight of us are sitting at the bar, eight big guys hogging one end of the bar. If the bar were a boat, it would be sinking. The room is emptying, there are no females in sight, and I figure my chances are from zip to zero.

But no, eight ladies who had been sitting at a table around the corner from the bar, incredibly, like out of a movie, come over and start chatting. It feels like boy-girl heaven. For a moment I consider switching to electric bass permanently.

One of them sidles over to me. "Hi, my name's Patty," she says. "I really enjoyed your playing, Bill. You've got great hands."

Another body parts person, I imagine.

But here she takes my left hand and spreads it out on the bar, palm down, fingers splayed. She plants one of her hands by my thumb and the other by my pinkie. Then Patty holds her hands up in front of us, maintaining the length of my hand's span between her hands.

She smiles broadly. "Not bad, Bill. Not bad at all!"

We burst out laughing.

"What's this all about?" I ask her.

"I'm a nurse."

"A nurse?"

"Well, a student nurse. And in nursing school they taught us that there's a strong correlation between the size of a man's hand and the size of his ..."

She never finishes the sentence.

I believe that as we've driven southwest, deeper into the American heartland, the women have gotten faster. This is the most forward gal I have ever met. We turn and walk to my motel room, no questions asked.

The small talk isn't small, it's nonexistent. But when it

comes to true confessions, I decide to take the lead:

“I want you to know I’m kind of new at this, Patty. I’m no rock star or anything. I’ve never done this before.”

“That’s OK,” she says. “I’m kind of a groupie. I love music. And I just *adore* musicians.”

