

Getting in Tune

CHAPTER 1

THE RINGING in my ears seemed to be coming from deep inside my head, a piercing sound interrupted only by percussive thunderclaps of pure pain.

Ring. Bang! Ring. Bang! Ring. Bang!

Trying to shield myself, I shoved balled-up fists into both ears, but it didn't help. Pete Townshend, wielding his cherry-red Gibson SG like a tommy gun, loomed above me, windmilling power chords from *The Real Me*. I winced at the stack of Hiwatt amps pointed right at my head and strained to watch his bloody fingers attack the strings.

But what was that annoying ringing? Feedback?

The ringing suddenly stopped, but the pounding continued until Pete paused and looked down at me. "Look, mate, it's simple." *Bang! Bang-Bang!* "C minor, B-flat, F. Down the neck. Bloody easy. Sounds hard, but John and Moonie are doing all the work, see."

Bang! Bang-Bang!

A grin spanned his mug; tears of pain ran down my own.

"It's *this* chord, man," he insisted, showing me his twisted version of a C minor. "You play it like you mean it, you turn it inside out and shake it, and the birds'll come rushing up, right? And the joint'll be packed, and everyone'll think you're the Ace Face. It'll be just like the Marquee in '64, mate."

I tried to speak. I tried to tell Pete that I didn't believe, like he did, in the Universal Chord, the harmonizing combination of notes, pure and easy, that would connect us to everyone else. Or maybe I did. I wasn't sure. But I knew I believed in the other angle, the dark corner of the quadrophenic personality that we shared. *Can you seen the real me? Can you? Can you?*

Pete rubbed his big geezer nose and shook his head. "C'mon. You'll suss it, mate, just like the Who always did. Just bang these chords. And then John does his bass run and Roger comes in. Like this."

Once again his arm swept around in an arc, and I -cowered.

Bang! Bang-Bang!

And then the ringing started again. I jerked away and my eyes popped open.

Shit, the phone.

I blinked away layers of twisted dreams and squinted at the alarm clock. Ten o'clock in the morning. Townshend disappeared, but the phone kept ringing. I knew Mick wouldn't answer it. The last time I'd seen him, he was passed out on the couch with the TV test pattern

reflecting on the lenses of his glasses.

Struggling against a mess of sheets, I shoved out of the water bed and staggered into the kitchen. I stumbled over a growing pile of empty beer cans next to the refrigerator and searched the cluttered tile counter for the phone. The ringing continued to assault my brittle, dehydrated brain. I flung aside a week-old newspaper with Jimmy Carter's smiling face on the front and grabbed the phone.

"Hel—" I coughed, clearing stale Budweiser from my throat. "Hello."

"Daniel Travers? That you, man?"

I didn't recognize his voice, but the nasally twang sounded vaguely familiar. Was it Pete himself calling to finish his tutorial?

"Uh, yeah?" I answered cautiously.

"Hey, this is Rick Astley with Big Country Productions. How you doin'?' Didn't wake you up, did I?"

Tightening my grip on the phone, I steadied myself. No dream, this was real. Rick Astley worked for a talent agency in Denver and booked rock clubs throughout the western U.S. He was Big Time. I remembered talking to him a couple of months earlier after sending him one of our demo tapes. He hadn't seemed interested in us then.

"I've been up for a while," I lied with another dry cough. "How're you doing, Rick?"

"I'm cool, man. Hey, how's your band? What d'ya call yourselves? The Killjoys? Where'd you get that name, anyhow?" He sounded like he was speeding on caffeine. "You guys been playing much lately?"

"Yeah, sure." I struggled to keep up with Rick's DJ-like patter. No time now to get into the band's name. With my free hand, I brushed long strands of hair away from my mouth.

Rick took a sucking breath and was off again. "Listen, Danny, one of my bands canceled out on a gig I booked for 'em next week, and I was hoping you guys could fill in. I listened to your tape again, and I think you're ready for the job. You interested?"

Wow. I tried to think. What would Townshend do? He'd do it. No doubt. Maximum R&B, on and on, mate.

"Danny-boy? You there?"

Danny-boy? "Sure. What's the gig?" I braced my hand against the green Formica of the kitchen table. Bread crumbs stuck to my palm.

"This is the deal: It's five nights at the Mai Tai Hotel in Puente Harbor, up in Washington. The gig starts next Tuesday and runs through Saturday night. You get a flat \$750 for the week. You want it?"

"Next week?" Holy shit. I squinted at the TONY'S MUFFLER SHOP calendar tacked to the wall. "You're talking about November 2? *Next* Tuesday?"

He laughed. "Let me spell it out for you, man. November 2, 1976. Five days from now. Got it?"

I swallowed and tugged at the elastic waistband of my boxers. Maybe four years of playing the boonies of Northern California would finally pay off. But now my brain really locked up on me. Where the hell was Puente Harbor? Did we have any other bookings that week? Would the Blue Bomb, our '66 Dodge van, get us there in time? Shit, the damn thing sometimes broke down just backing out of the driveway.

Astley's voice cut through my foggy thoughts. "Danny, you still with me? You want the gig?"

"Sure. But where's Puente Harbor?"

"Look, it's not too far from—where are you?—Reedley?"

"Creedly."

"Crudly?"

"Right," I said, giving up. "We're a couple hundred miles north of San Francisco."

"Yeah, well, you just head north up I-5 and turn left at Seattle. You'll figure it out. It may take you a couple of days unless you bomb straight through."

Beads of sweat inched their way out onto the skin above my eyes. "Look, Rick, we want the gig for sure," I said, already fearing the band's reaction, "but I need to talk to the other guys to make sure everybody's free. Can I call you back later to confirm?"

"Sure, man. But I need to hear from you today or by no later than first thing tomorrow. You guys would be doin' me a big favor, and I'd remember it."

Big Country Productions could book us anyplace. This was it, the break I'd been waiting for. My hungover brain tried to burn through the vapors in an effort to get itself around what was happening. The door to my future had been suddenly flung wide open and the light was blinding. *Can you see the real me?* My heart slammed against my eardrums.

"You tracking me?" Rick asked, clipping each word. "I need to hear from you by tomorrow morning, right, man?"

"Right, right," I spit back at him. "But what's this place—the Mai Tai?—what's it like?"

"Piece'a cake, man. Great place to break in on the Northwest circuit. That's why I'm giving it to you guys. Hendrix played there before he became big. And Heart played it when they first started out."

"Hendrix and Heart?" My pulse kicked even higher. "So it gets a pretty hip crowd then? We could do some of our originals?"

"Uh, probably not a good idea, friend. You guys aren't big enough, yet. Just stick to the covers." He then paused, and when he started again, his cadence shifted, slowing as if he needed to better consider his words. "Look, the Mai Tai gets the usual rock club crowd, you know? Locals, cruisers, maybe a few chopperheads, people like that. You play some hard rock, stuff they know, and they'll dig you."

I pushed down my disappointment. I knew we were ready to do our own stuff. But something else he'd said caught my attention. "What's a chopper—" I started to say.

“Hey, get back to me by tomorrow, O.K.?” He now sounded impatient. “I’ve gotta get goin’.”

“Yeah, sure. We’re playing a gig tonight. I can talk—”

“Cool. Call me by ten. If I don’t hear from you by then, I’ll have to give it to someone else, O.K.?” Then the line went dead. Wait, did he mean ten o’clock his time or my time? Was Denver in a different time zone? Did it matter? My head continued to pound, and I dislodged another strand of hair from the corner of my mouth. And what the hell was a chopperhead?

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I SAT SLUMPED in a cracked kitchen chair, trying to regulate my heartbeat while gazing around at the kitchen of the decrepit house Mick and I rented for \$95 a month, when Mick shuffled in, weaving his way toward the counter, his way-too-long blue-flannel robe sweeping the floor behind him.

“Who the bloody hell you talking to so early?” he said, squinting at me, fingers sorting through his tangled black shag of hair. “What time is it? It wasn’t me mum, was it?” He struggled to the stove, fumbled with the knobs, and finally turned on the heat under a rusted teapot.

For some reason, Mick’s accent sounded particularly fake this morning, perhaps because Townshend’s had been drilling away at me all night. The chords from *The Real Me* suddenly banged against my brain, and I pushed them back, but I could still hear them echoing around in my skull.

“You’re not gonna believe it,” I said. “Remember when I sent out tapes to those talent agencies? The one in Denver just called and wants us to do a weeklong gig in some town in Washington. Next week.”

Mick’s eyes widened, blinked, and then returned to their usual squint. “Sod off, mate.”

“I’m not kidding. It’s some place Hendrix once played.”

The eyes widened again. Without his glasses, Mick’s pupils swam in a watery sea of red instead of their usual ponds of glass-muted brown. He searched the pockets of his robe for his black-framed glasses, without which he was legally blind. Mick claimed he didn’t need the thick, corrective lenses, but I knew he was full of shit. Even so, I could never tell how much he could see, with or without the glasses. He slipped them on and leaned against the counter.

“You’re daft, Daniel,” he observed with what we both knew was great insight. “And where are your bloody clothes? Please, nothing kinky for me today, thank you. Too early. And I need a cuppa first.”

I ignored him, gazed out the window, and focused on a brittle orange leaf clinging to the limb of an old oak behind the house. Slowly, as I watched the leaf pull away from its mooring and blow happily away, I fully realized the opportunity being offered to me: I could leave Creedly behind. Unlike Townshend, I had no true guru or avatar like his Meher Baba to

guide me through life, but I did have ol' Pete, and he'd just have to do. A smile worked its way through the fumes of last night's six-pack.

"You know what this means, don't you?" I said.

Mick, in the middle of spooning instant coffee into a plastic 49ers mug, glanced at me. "We're going on holiday in our undies?"

"We're getting outta this stinking town."

He snorted. "Oh, sure. For a week, maybe."

"Maybe forever, if we're lucky."

"Uh-huh." With shaking hands, he poured lukewarm water into the mug, dropped in two aspirin, and stirred the coffee with a dirty fork. "Before you start picturing yourself on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, you might want to consider that the others might not be so keen on the idea. I'm not even sure I'm up for it."

"Are you outta your mind? This fuckin' town is a dead end."

Mick shook his head in response and shuffled off toward the living room. "I'll be in here dying on the couch if you need me." But the blue robe with the cigarette burns in the sleeves reached the door before its occupant stopped and looked back at me. "Did you say Hendrix played there?"

"Yeah."

"Well, bloody hell."