



NOISE DRAMA AGGEE

MY LIFE
AS A
ROCK
R'N'
ROLL
UNDER
DOG

'HARROWING, FUNNY & 100% TRUE' - GINGER WILDHEART

JAMES KENNEDY

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For Mum and Dad

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INTRO

SOUNDCHECK

I know what you're thinking. 'Wow, another music book that opens with a hangover scene. Yawn.' But hear me out, this is not that story. And as far as hangovers go, it was a good one...

With my brain begrudgingly getting its shit together, my first visual clue was the ceiling – just two feet above me and smeared in red clay and boot prints. To my immediate left, the dashboard of our poor, rented transit van was also entirely smothered in clay, as if it had been appropriated by a tribe of hairy, grunting Neanderthals – which it had. My last memory was of us innocently having 'a few quiet ones'.

Full terrain scan. OK, so I slept in the front again. Gear stick in my back, I'm fully clothed (sunglasses and boots still on) and the entire cabin, it seems, is daubed in sticky, wet clay. Still, my cramped boudoir of despair and I have survived each other for another night. There's no sign of movement from the back – the other beasts have yet to rise – so it's time to figure out what the actual fuck is going on and where the actual fuck I am. I've taken to gaffer-taping used towels and dirty t-shirts over the windows as curtains, and now it's time to peel them back and face the fear. Today is going to hurt.

I emerge from my mobile cave, recoiling from the morning sunlight like a wilting vampire, to see the entire contents of the van's cabin strewn all over the road. CDs, clothes, empty beer cans, maps... Ah, now I remember – France! We're in France! But the problem with living out of a van is that you have to do *everything* together. I can't explore the town and leave the other guys without a key, nor can I lock them in. And under no circumstances can I wake them up. So, I wait.

It looks nice here. The sun is shining. It's green and idyllic. And there's the boat we're playing on tonight! As to what happened last night, I'm still drawing a blank. Another one of my increasingly standard blackouts,

although I have that familiar and uncomfortable feeling that it probably included making a complete wanker of myself and offending half of Lille. Nice people walking their dogs are now crossing the road to avoid the clay-covered madman in his rubbish-tip playground, but I'm past caring. To say this tour had been a tough one would be the piss-take of the century. It's been beyond slapstick in its scale of unrelenting, soul-shaking injustice. And that manager of ours? I'm going to fucking kill him when I get back. Oh no, that's right; he was going to kill himself...

'I don't need this right now, mate, OK? I did something stupid and I'm in hospital.'

'I know, man, but we need the money.'

'Don't you hear what I'm saying?! I did something *stupid*, OK?! And I don't need *this* right now!'

I knew he was bullshitting. I felt bad for thinking it but, deep down, I knew. That bloody American band would be on my arse again in a few hours nagging me for their 'fucking money, bro', and they cared even less for our 'suicidal manager' sob story. I can't wait till it's all over. As soon as I leave the stage tonight, I'm heading straight for Calais.

Sucking the warm dregs of someone's bottle of water that I found in the van foot-well, I hear groaning from the back. They're up! Bollocks, the moment of truth. The Fear gives me another good, solid yank and I brace myself for yet more stories of my embarrassing drunken puerility. First out of the back – Glyn Bateman on drums.

Glyn was the new guy in the band. Kind, genuine, hilariously gullible, a serious believer in the most outlandish conspiracy theories, one hundred and ten per cent enthusiastic about everything *all* the time and an absolute animal behind the kit. When Glyn isn't taking pictures of everything, banging on tables, ranting about aliens, losing his man bag, downing litres of milkshake or 'spanking skins' (playing drums) – he's asleep. And when he sleeps, his body is possessed by the devil.

There are people who snore and there is Glyn. The soundly sleeping drummer has no awareness of his person being used as a channel for Satan of an eve, but anyone who has slept in the same building as him, let alone a van, will testify to the torrent of twisted screams, deranged groaning and

tormented wailing that come from the boy as he slumbers. Frustratingly, this also means that he's way more supercharged than the rest of us every morning, having slept like a little demon baby while the rest of us toss, turn, and cry all night. Hence, I now sleep in the front.

This morning, though, I swear he's avoiding my eye, talking under his breath and being evasive. Or maybe I'm being paranoid. I ask a leading question.

'Good night last night, eh?'

'Uh, yeah, I think. How are *you* feeling?'

Shit. I knew it.

'You were pretty upset last night, man,' said Matt, climbing out of the back of the van and psyching himself up for an Evian shower. You've never had an Evian shower? Oh, it's where you strip down to your pants in a crowded public place and pour freezing cold drinking water over yourself with one hand, while frantically trying to lather up with the other. It's preferable to showering at many service stations, believe me.

Matt Warr on bass. Where to begin! Not only my best friend and long-time accomplice in all things alcoholic and loud, not only the best musician in the band, who pulverises stages like Godzilla, but one of the most loyal, considerate, and hilarious people you will ever meet. A deeply devout disciple of the Church of Metallica and a practical prankster of professional calibre, Matt's other Top Trump powers include a seeming inability to get drunk no matter what the poison, an encyclopaedic knowledge of irritating movie one-liners, and being the member of the band most popular with the ladies. He also has the curious knack of making Glyn Bateman believe literally anything he says.

'You were pretty upset last night, man.'

Of course I was pretty upset. I've been pretty upset for years! But last night, the final thread of my final thread snapped. I could guess what had happened easy enough. I'd taken my broken heart, my exhausted reserves of morale, patience, hope and attempts at good leadership; all my bottled up years of anger, disappointment, resentment and frustration; I'd taken all of that – and hit the lovely town of Lille like an emotional Molotov atom bomb desperate to blow. I then got colossally, unashamedly, nastily

hammered. After getting kicked out of most late-night bars, I'd crawled 'home' and done the transit van equivalent of trashing my hotel room. If Donald Trump were tweeting this, he'd end it with 'SAD'.

These limp, hopeless displays were becoming too frequent now. I tried so hard to keep it all together, but the last scraps of my human faculties had completely burnt out. I was less than nine stone in weight, an insomniac; I'd been pissed every night for over a decade, I'd cut off my family, ruined a long-term relationship, was being a dick to my band mates, being even worse to myself; I was broke, I hated my life and I regretted the day I ever picked up that fucking guitar. I was angry, bitter, frustrated, and saw my life as one consistently, pointless cringe-able fuck up. This was not the dream I had been sold.

And yet only a few days ago I was the frontman of a kick-ass rock 'n' roll band, jumping around a giant outdoor stage. On a beach. In the peak of summer. By the sea. In Italy!

I know.

Last night's impotent outburst was just another warm-up, a mere rehearsal for the full-scale meltdown soon to come. It was a long time coming but when it came, it came complete. The stark, crashing demolition of not only my dreams, and my life's work, but my very sense of self and meaning. Everything I'd overcome, everything I'd achieved; discarded like a carcass.

It was the best thing that ever happened to me.

* * *

What follows is not another clichéd tale of rock 'n' roll debauchery (sorry) or of triumph over adversity (you're welcome) – you've heard all of that before. And you already know about 'the other guys' – that exalted one per cent who monopolise our airwaves, pages and screens; the guys who make the big bucks with big promo budgets. The guys who've been all the way to the top. Nope, this is the untold story about the rest of us. A story of a vast legion of super-talented, hard-working bastards whose masterpieces you will never hear, but who – driven by an unstoppable passion for *something*,

anything – lead lives that are rich, not in pounds but in stories, wisdom, excitement and service. It's a story about why you learn better lessons from good losers. Why it really is about the journey. Why failure is your friend. Why motivational self-help is bullshit. Why music is the best, and why, in the end, it's all rather simple.

Our story takes place during a very specific and unique period in the music industry's history; a period that affected the lives of an entire generation of artists, and that CNN called 'music's lost decade'. So, make your way across that sticky venue floor, come hang backstage and let me show you the *real* music industry. We'll meet goodies and baddies (mostly baddies), heroes and villains (OK, just villains), gun-toting label execs, suicidal managers, life-saving surgeons, drug-fried PR guys, con artists, models, therapists, hopeless romantics and drummers (I'll explain). There may also be heartbreak, brotherhood, love, and betrayal – and definitely way too many hangovers.

We may even learn some things.

CHAPTER 1

HASH AND BEANS

Right, then. Who the hell am I, anyway?

I guess it makes sense to start...well, at the start. But if you're like me, you find being dragged through some stranger's treasured childhood memories for several chapters a horrific way to kick off a book, and speed-read through to the juicier stuff. So, I promise to make this easy on both of us and rattle through it.

I was born on 15 March, 1980, at the Heath Hospital in Cardiff, South Wales, UK – the Land of Song, Tom Jones, Shirley Bassey and male voice choirs. I know, I know, you thought I was younger! The era following this momentous accident was one of long red-brick terraces, TVs that were bigger than the car but only had four channels, anti-Thatcherism, cassette tapes, football on asphalt, smoking in church, miners' strikes, street parties, tragic clothing and punishable, ozone-destroying hairstyles. To be honest, my childhood was pretty cool – huge apologies for the lack of tales about my 'traumatic child abuse' and 'drug-addled, vacant parents' etc. I'm gutted, too; selfish bloody parents ruining a good story. I have an older sister and a younger brother, with me planted squarely in the middle, seven years either side. My folks were young, working-class parents and when I was one year old their flat burned down, so we moved from Cardiff to Barry Docks, where we stayed until I was eight.

We moved house a good few times around Barry, but all of my memories stem from the last house we lived in on George Street. It was a regular terraced house at the top of a really steep street, which made it perfect for playing that popular Eighties kids' game, 'Skateboard Down The Hill as Fast as You Can Without Getting Killed by Traffic'. It was here where, one evening, startled by the forced entry of the local police while cooking beans for our tea, my mum quickly threw the weed they'd come to catch her with into the pan. Only, she was too late, and they'd seen her do it. This earned

her her first front-page feature in the local newspaper, under the classic headline: ‘Hash and Beans for Children’s Tea’. We were so proud.

There was a ‘park’ down the side lane called The Patch. The Patch was unlike any park I have ever seen, in that it was made exclusively of concrete, steel, broken glass and dog shit. Many joyful afternoons were spent there, running from bullies, collecting injuries and mud-bombing the ginger kid’s house. It was here I earned my first nickname. I had no idea what it meant and no idea where it came from, but the older boys gave it to me, and I owned it with pride. From then on, I would knock for my mates to come out, rocking my Beatles bowl haircut and introduce myself politely to their parents...as ‘Jock Strap’.

‘Hello, Mrs Jones, I’m Jock Strap. Can Steven come out to play with me?’

I was always drawn to things of a creative and solitary nature, even in the early years. I loved drawing and creating my own comic books, writing stories, singing, dancing, and I was addicted to Lego. We had this old wooden box filled with random odds and ends of Lego parts, and I would build my own toys from them – my *pièce de résistance* was building the big red truck from the *Mask* cartoons (another addiction), complete with moving parts. Looking back, I realise that I’ve been doing something similar my entire life: building for myself the things I didn’t have. I used to wear my pants on top of my trousers, clip a bathroom towel around my neck with a wooden peg and patrol the streets as a mini, multicoloured Superman – to the distress of my long-suffering teenage sister, who at that time was very much into boys, perms, and Madonna.

There was always good music playing around the house and I am thankful for having cultured, lefty, weed-smoking atheists for parents, continually blasting Pink Floyd, Zappa, Kate Bush and Stevie Ray Vaughan. Books were everywhere in our house, too; my mother reads voraciously, and she encouraged me from a young age to do the same. And I mean the heavy-duty stuff – Orwell, Huxley, Blake, Solzhenitsyn, Pilger. Neither of my parents had any qualifications or a professional job, but both were – and are – sharply intelligent, resourceful and resilient people, who

did the absolute best they could as young parents on a low income to provide for their family.

We were far from middle class, but we always had food on the table, shoes on our feet, and lots of fun. My dad (Aitch, real name Howard) was a bit of a Del Boy: he always had a new ‘scheme – I mean, job’, a new car, a new guy-who-knew-a-guy, and both of my parents had a curious ability to master a wide variety of trades when needed; plastering, building, carpentry, plumbing, car repair, you name it. My mum (Sal, real name Sara) had avoiding bailiffs down to an art form; even I believed the house was empty as we hid behind the sofa. My dad could turn into a qualified legal authority every time he got fined for anything – and always seemed to get off. Somehow, some way, we always got by.

Don’t get me wrong. We were definitely The Simpsons, not The Waltons. Despite the romantic portrayals of working-class life in our culture, there is no glory in being poor. It’s hard. My parents would have these volcanic arguments, usually about money, and I’d lie in bed crying under the quilt, trying to block out the din of desperate screaming, slamming and breaking of things coming from downstairs. I remember an all-consuming feeling of confusion, guilt, and powerlessness. Whose side should I take? Why can’t I do anything to help them both out? How can I ask for things for school without adding to the stress?

Now I’m older, I can see it for what it was: two young parents, doing their best but drowning under the pressure, with no instruction manual and ‘not a penny to scratch their arse with’, as my mum says. But at the time, it was my first paralysing realisation that the world outside could be unfair, and not rigged in the favour of good people or those in need. It was the planting of the seed that I would *one day*, by whatever means necessary, save my family from this grind and be able to look after us all. That I should not be a liability and that instead of asking for things, I should help. That seed would yield a monster.

However, it was time for the reign of Jock Strap the Invincible to end on the mean streets of Barry, as we once again relocated our eccentric caravan of characters, and this time to somewhere *very* different...

I've no idea where they found this place, but it was a long way from Barry. Not, as I later came to understand, in terms of distance (only thirty-five miles) but in its essence. After eight years of living in the throbbing, graffitied heart of a congested, industrial, urban city, we moved to somewhere called Little Mill, and Little bloody Mill is in the middle of bloody nowhere.

Constructed entirely from fields, it had no post office, no school, no clubs, and a grand total of zero shops. ZERO.

It had a pub.

And. That. Was. All.

I have often wondered whether my dad moved us all out there to be as hidden as possible from someone connected to one of his many 'schemes – I mean, jobs'. You never knew with him. Anyway, it turns out that moving out of Barry at that time was a smart move.

Looking back, living in leafy Little Mill sent my life in a direction it would not have gone had we stayed in the gritty city. Our new house was one of ten houses that were joined in a semi-circle at the top of a mile-long lane from the main village. Only one of the families there had someone near my age, and recreation now involved taunting cows, roaming the woods, and not getting killed on the railway line that ran through our garden. The house was part of an old, converted farmhouse with odd, higgledy-piggledy-shaped rooms; some small and pokey, and some with ceilings ten metres high. It had log fires – even the kitchen oven was powered by one – and unlike the little concrete slab of a garden we had in Barry, the garden here was a field in its own right, although it was not connected to the house; it was opposite, across the street. The place had character, for sure.

From the tall, imposing red-brick strictness of Barry's Jenner Park Primary School, I was now the new kid at a charming little bungalow called Goytre Fawr Primary School, in the quaint neighbouring village of Goytre. In the class photo taken that year, as all the other kids stand proudly sporting their school uniform, I can be seen right up front, sitting on the floor, and wearing jeans. So, to answer your question; yes, I *have* always been this cool.

Being the new kid in town is weird, especially when you're a city boy randomly plonked into remote, alien, pastoral land. The kids there enjoyed activities such as 'rabbiting' (you know, butchering bunnies and pulling their guts out by hand) and setting fire to woodland – oh, and there was this one kid, let's call him Bernie, whose favourite game was to kick the living shit out of everyone. His welcome gift to me was to throw me in front of a moving car. This new world was gonna take some getting used to.

I've come to realise, though, that kids have an unrivalled ability to adapt. Kids just get on with it; it's adults who are the problem. Kids are also fickle. It wasn't long before my old friends were long forgotten and I had a new crew, a new, larger, greener 'patch' and a new normality had taken root. We were far away from any extended family, so it was mostly just the five of us – and that was fine. For a kid, country life was actually cool! I'd go exploring in the woods, discovering rivers, and climbing old bridges. One day, I was kicking a football around in the garden when the whole of the sky suddenly went blood red – spontaneously, and as far as the eye could see. By the time I'd run across the street into the house to tell my mum, it had gone back to normal again. Over the years this happened many times, and I later learned that it was caused by a nearby arms factory that did tests in the area.

Soon, it was my ninth birthday, and life changed forever.

* * *

It wasn't the third shot of Jack from the stripper's bosom that did it but... I'm joking, this was way better. Dad went out and rummaged through the boot of whatever car he had that week, and re-emerged in the living room, where I was waiting eagerly for my birthday bounty. Except he was carrying a very unexpected item. Now, I can't remember what I'd wanted for my birthday but more than likely it would have been whatever sweatshop-made, unethically marketed and grossly overpriced piece of plastic evil was being bashed into my defenceless eight-year-old brain through the TV at the time. So, I was thrown a curious curve-ball when my Dad handed me...a guitar.

It was one of those little Spanish ones. I'd never played a guitar and as far as I can remember, hadn't expressed any desire to do so. Hmm, interesting. I wasn't sure where this was going but I was raised to be polite, so I humoured him and feigned intrigue. It turned out that along with his closet legal/ plastering/ plumbing/ building/ car repair/ quantum physics/ leper-healing talents, my dad could play a bit of guitar, too! I can't remember any of my other childhood birthdays except this one, and this moment is crystallised fondly in my mind. My dad took this thing – which as it turned out, he'd nicked from somewhere in a desperate effort to get through yet another bloody kid's birthday – and with two fingers made it go:

'Doo do dooo do doo do dooo do.'

It was the blues. I was mesmerised. Transfixed. Curious. My little nine-year-old pupils fully dilated. How is he doing that?! Two fingers, two strings, two frets. Hell, I can do that! Let me at it, let me at it! Aitch patiently showed me the ropes and I picked it up almost instantly. In the true, fickle nature of kids, a guitar was now all I'd ever wanted. I played that damn riff over and over (and over), maybe a thousand times, and the fact that I could actually do something with this thing made me feel like I'd just discovered a buried superpower. Like I'd just discovered fire from rubbing sticks. If my dad hadn't shown me *that* riff, and if I hadn't been able to pick it up *right away*, that guitar would have been in a charity shop by the summer and the rest of the ensuing Greek tragedy would never have happened, so, thanks, Dad...I think.

I have often wondered what might have become of me had I not chosen the path I did after this pivotal, obsession-triggering juncture – perhaps I would have got a 'proper job' or had an actual career doing 'something useful'. But sometimes the poison chooses you, and the distinction between blessing and curse is debatable. Either way, it was a magical, life-changing moment – and what were those little frets at the top for?! I can't remember much else about that year other than the relentless, callous water torture of 'Doo do dooo do' all day and all night. My poor family.

While I'd always loved music and it had been a constant presence in our house, supplying a soundtrack to the dysfunctional, improvised theatre of

low-income life, the idea of *making* music had never occurred to me. Having a natural talent for it was a rare gift; something I wouldn't come to understand or appreciate until many years later. For over a decade, I was blissfully unaware that many people would give their right arm to be able to play an instrument – although that probably wouldn't help their cause.

I have never fared well with formal teaching and I'm self-taught in everything I do. I lasted a respectable total of one guitar lesson in school before deciding that I knew better. Fortunately, there was a guy in the village called Sid. And Sid could *play*. Sid was your archetypal rock guitarist: unemployed, stoned, long hair, devoted worshipper of Hendrix – and he had a prosthetic leg. He'd agreed with my parents to show me some stuff, so off I'd trot down the long lane to the village, little Spanish guitar in hand, to sit in Sid's smoky living room and watch this guy do things with a guitar I'd never dreamed imaginable. He had a 'whammy bar'. He was bending the strings, wobbling his fingers back and forth, hitting the fretboard with his other hand – and he was doing it all with his eyes closed, his head waving around and silently mouthing something with every note, which I just assumed was him channelling the spirit of Jimi. I wanted in.

Sid wasn't a teacher and didn't know *how* to share his mystical secrets, but he was totally cool with having this mop-topped, woolly jumper-wearing, polite little nine-year-old sit and watch him do his thing. I would just sit there, silently studying his every move as his fingers danced across the fretboard, eagerly making mental video tapes of the shapes and movements which I would try and replicate later. Basically, I learned by interpreting what I thought I saw, rather than by being formally shown anything.

After a few sessions, Sid obviously thought I was ready for the big one. He let me borrow a VHS tape with some guys on there called Joe Satriani and Steve Vai. Those who know will know what that means. Another crystallised memory: Sid's two hands outstretched, bearing the grail. A well-worn VHS tape illuminated in a dazzling yellow halo. The clouds parted and a thousand angels sang 'Highway To Hell' in perfect chorus. Running home, bagless guitar over shoulder, I breathlessly punched in the tape and sat on the floor about a foot from the screen. I'd never seen or even

imagined anything like it could be possible. These guys were aliens. More than merely playing the guitar, these leather-wearing, cool-looking motherfuckers made it squeal, scream, sing and cry. Staring up at these guys, legs crossed, it was as if my spirit had floated upwards to a new dimension of limitless wonder. They had gizmos I'd never seen, operated things with their feet, swaggered around the stage like kings and produced sounds I'd never heard before. Silently and motionlessly staring upwards, my tiny mind had been blown forever. I knew right there that my path in life had been pre-ordained and nothing else mattered any more. God had spoken to me. I was A Guitarist now.

Except there was...well, a bit of a problem.

CHAPTER 2

HEROES WALK AMONG US

‘I think this poor fellow is very unfortunate in having bilateral cholesteatomas. I have explained the nature of the surgery to Mrs Kennedy and I cannot give her any idea as to whether one will be able to restore any functional hearing or not.’

Four days after my tenth birthday, our local doctor received the diagnosis from the hospital specialist. I’d been having this smelly discharge from my ears since the days of Jock Strap the Invincible, but our GP in Barry said it was ‘just something that kids got’. Turns out I had huge tumour-like things growing inside each of my ears, which were rapidly ravaging their way through my hearing apparatus. I don’t recall being that bothered about this news, but my heart breaks in hindsight for my poor parents, told that their ten-year-old son, who had only just discovered an insatiable passion for music, may never hear again. I needed serious surgery and I needed it quick.

‘I AM LISTING HIM TODAY TO COME IN AND HAVE THE RIGHT SIDE DONE FIRST’, said the surgeon’s report in capitals and, indeed, it wasn’t long before I was setting up camp at the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport. I was to spend a *lot* of time at this place over the next few years. My guy there, Mr ITG Evans, was a short, older gentleman whom I remember as: 1) looking like the teacher from *Back to the Future* and 2) always having a circular mirror thing on his head.

The operations were to be heavy-duty affairs and involved cutting the skin around my ears so that they could be pulled out of the way, giving access to the middle ear, where the offending articles were hiding. I’ve still got the scars. The middle ear is a minuscule cavity, housing three tiny, fragile bones, and if any of them becomes damaged it’s game over, so this was a delicate procedure which required me to be under a general anaesthetic for many hours at a time. Sporting the little half-dress with the

arse out the back, I was wheeled to the operating theatre in my mobile bed by two friendly doctors – one Indian and one Scottish – who chatted with me about which beers were my favourite. It's quite surreal nattering with people from an upside-down perspective, as they race you through a strange building in which you can only see striplights and air vents. I did my best to be polite and do as I was told, but in truth, I was petrified. I can still remember doing the countdown, muffled through my face mask.

Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. *Zzzzzzzzzz.*

I can honestly say that I have never felt worse than when waking up after a general anaesthetic – except maybe the time I tried to match drinks with my brother. Disoriented, hungry, hurting and gasping for water, which you aren't allowed to have. And there is a noxious, rubbery smell which consumes all your senses for at least a day, as if the chemicals are escaping through your every pore. The dehydration was the stuff of nightmares. Again – my poor parents. It must have been unbelievably upsetting, having to sit there and deny their ten-year-old boy water, as I begged, complete with big, thick bandage around my head. Eventually, the nurses would relent and give me a weird pink liquid in a plastic cup. I was supposed to paint it on my lips with a little sponge, but I would try and suck the liquid out of it instead. The memory of that torturing dehydration still makes me shudder to this day.

The first operation was an enormous success, though! I came out the other side with sixty per cent of my hearing still functional, despite the initial fears that I might lose it altogether. What was needed now was much rest and recovery. I had to stay in hospital for quite some time, with a heavy, bulbous bandage around my head, and I couldn't do much outside of my bed due to a newly acquired lack of balance. Thankfully, as would continue to happen through the rest of my life, I had music and books to save me. It was here, of all places, that I discovered Led Zeppelin and, as if by magic, my woes instantly dissolved. I began dreaming of all the things I was going to play on my guitar once I got outta Shawshank.

There was still my left ear to go, though, and it wasn't quite so plain sailing this time. The surgery on my left ear went exactly as the first, but after recovery it transpired that the cholesteatoma had come back, so I had

to go in again for a *third* operation. There were complications this time, too, which left me on a life-support device. It was all rather frightening, but I'll say it again – the biggest victims here have got to be my poor parents. I can't imagine how they must have felt, having to just wait and helplessly witness all of this. Long story short; I recovered, and this time the damn cholestea-thingamajig was a goner. As before, I came away with sixty per cent hearing in my left ear intact. The only difference was that the double surgery had left me with a loud, windy sound which hissed away constantly, day and night. It's still there now and it never, *ever* stops. There is no cure for tinnitus – once you've got it, you've got it. And it can get worse. Some sufferers have even taken their own life to escape its distracting, sleep-depriving, maddening evil – yet most musicians choose to inflict this lifelong misery upon themselves because wearing earplugs is uncool. My way of coping with it is to consider it 'normal' and not something I want to get rid of. As if it's the perfectly standard background hum of being alive.

However, aside from my new buzzing friend and XL-size ear canals, I came away from the whole ordeal better than we could ever have imagined, and I owe all of it to the absolute genius of ITG Evans and our beloved NHS, without whom I would most certainly have been deaf, or worse.

People who sing, or pretend to be other people, or argue about laws that don't really exist, or dump corporate waste in rivers; they all enjoy far too much space in our culture. Musicians and actors aren't saving lives, politicians are often on the make, and many business leaders would be behind bars in a sane society. Who is it that truly does the heavy lifting in society? Who forms the real fabric that holds civilian life together where we need it the most? Are we calling Piers Morgan, Kanye West, or any of the Kardashians when the kids' room is on fire, when nan needs her treatment or Fido needs the terminal walkies? No, it's the nurses, firefighters, volunteers, care workers, police, bus drivers, doctors, teachers, trades people, soldiers, ambulance drivers and...you get the picture. All those nameless heroes who every day and night are working stressful jobs under difficult circumstances and usually for way too little pay, security, support or respect.

Somewhere along the line our values seemed to go all squiffy (I blame the Eighties, although it's worse today) and being grossly wealthy, famous for nothing and airbrushed beyond all human recognition became the new benchmark by which we all became measured. To be 'normal' was to have failed. Yet, these are the people we should champion most in our society, and it is to them I have owed my life on several occasions. The NHS in particular is such an important and essential public asset, which every day falls further under the snake-shaped shadow of private interests. All of us have a duty and a responsibility to ensure, at all costs, that we NEVER lose it. I, for one, would certainly not be here were it not for the NHS, Mr Evans and the incredible nurses and staff at the Royal Gwent Hospital – but please don't hold that against them.

I was so keen to get the hell away from the Royal Gwent and get back to being – by now – a teenager that I never got to thank ITG Evans for saving my life. This calm, reassuring, kind gentleman – utterly world-class at his job – may no longer be with us, and it is a weighty regret of mine that I never tracked him down and thanked him personally. I hope at least to honour his genius by continuing to use these miracle lobes of mine to their fullest potential.

* * *

While all this 'going deaf' malarkey was going on, I'd started at high school. Caerleon Comprehensive was almost an hour's bus ride away from Little Mill. The bus would speed through winding lanes and passing villages until eventually arriving at the historic and painfully picturesque town of Caerleon. From there, there was a further walk through a long fosse encircled by Roman remains before we got to the school. Soon, these handy ancient ruins would be the private venues for first snogs, first smokes and much hiding from class.

All in all, my operations and recovery periods lasted for over two years, with ongoing check-ups for another three, so much of my time at high school was interrupted. Luckily, I was never much of a school kind of guy anyway, and I used the excuse of my oh-so-fragile ears for such Brucie

Bonuses as avoiding getting my arse kicked by bullies, getting out of PE class and regularly ‘not hearing’ about the homework. Physical education, I quickly learned, was basically a racket whereby the smaller, weedier kids like me were used as practice cannon fodder for the school rugby team. The first time I stood there clutching a cold oval ball on a colder March morning, as a pack of bloated, salivating hyenas stampeded over me, I learned an important lesson – and it had nothing to do with playing rugby but everything to do with avoiding it.

The downside was that I was down by nearly half of my hearing now and I hadn’t figured out yet how to navigate life at this new, lower volume. I did miss things in class, and when you mishear things (or don’t hear them at all), people don’t assume that you’re hard of hearing, they assume you’re thick, ignorant or arrogant. At the same time, you don’t want to make a special case of yourself, you want to be ‘normal’ and doing things the same was as everyone else is doing them. You don’t want people to have to make special accommodations for you, and you don’t want to make yourself a burden to be around. So, foolishly, instead of acknowledging my new needs, I pretended they weren’t there and battled on through. No hearing aid, no learning aids or special allowances, nothing. Not even a mention of my hearing problems – unless it was to my own heinous advantage.

It wouldn’t have mattered anyway. I wasn’t interested in Bunsen burners or maps, I was interested in rock ‘n’ roll – and by now, I could play. I’d been teaching myself for a good many years and I was into the proper players like Vai, Petrucci, Satriani and other blokes with funny names. Music at school sucked. I had to play *Eastenders* on a recorder, for Christ’s sake! I did try and show interest, but Mrs Andrews wasn’t familiar with Reign in Blood. Or Slayer. I stopped going. My disdain for school and teachers reached such depths that I earned my class’s ‘Record for the Shortest Time in Class’ – an accolade that I have possibly made up. It went like this.

Pupil enters classroom.

Mr Scuse: KENNEDY!

Kennedy: Yes, SCUSE?!

Mr Scuse: Right, that’s it, GET OUT!

Pupil exits classroom.

I was always getting busted for, among other things, not wearing the school tie. Once I was almost strangled by a teacher who lifted me from the ground by a tie that I'd magically acquired upon arriving at the headmaster's office – the place he'd just sent me for refusing to wear said tie in class. There was another guy, who looked and behaved just like the PE teacher from *Beavis and Butthead*, complete with bursting vein in forehead and military vernacular, but dressed in tweed. Finally snapping at my cocky disinterest, he screamed at me so hard that his voice broke and made a hilarious, whimpering, squeak, which of course I mimicked theatrically right back at him, to a roar of laughter from the class. He fucking lost it; it was like a 'Nam' flashback or something. Colonel Tweed began violently torpedoing books at me from behind the cover of his open desktop, with genuine intent of harm. Clawing his way to me, he clutched my needlessly oversized school bag and frantically lobbed it over his head, nearly breaking the neck of the kid behind; a kind of improvised variation on a mic drop. He then grabbed me and threw me through the door into the hallway, where he proceeded to throw me from wall to wall, through *another* door, and punch me in the chest as I finally landed in the outside world. There was a lot of throwing. My Mum went ape shit. The problem was, on the day she had it out with the headmaster, he took immense pleasure in telling her that I was skiving off school as they spoke. I ran away from home that day.

'How was school today, love?' Mum calmly and knowingly enquired through the phone box handset.

'Yeah, great, mum, I learned loads!'

'Son. I'm going to ask you one more time. And think about *why* I might be asking you this.'

Fuck the tweedy, throw-you-around-the-place guy; my mother's calm, controlled demeanour was ice-cold and terrifying. Might she actually...kill me? I sprinted out of that phone box and took to the nearest horizon with more resolve than Forrest Gump on speed. After about an hour of running, it was getting dark, I was getting hungry, and the fields just led to more

fields. It was time to face the music. I wish. Time to face a titanic ass-whipping, more like.

I would frequently truant. Either hanging about the hallways or in the woods, drinking with mates. I would raid my parents' drinks cabinet at night, but not so much that they'd notice. I'd pour just a little of each spirit into a plastic Coke bottle, eventually accumulating half a bottle of a disgusting and lethal cocktail. I was basically drinking methylated spirits. One morning, unable to cope with the prospect of another monotonous day at school, I started swigging from the bottle on the school bus. Literally paralytic in geography, I asked if I could go to the toilet, and never came back. I'd also taken an interest in the little mushrooms that grew around the village and, by the age of fifteen, I was frequently chomping those salty, slimy fungi and lying in the grass, staring skyward as spaceships passed through me. There wasn't much else to do.

The guitar, though, that was serious business. My parents knew when I was awake because they'd hear the amp switch on. As soon as I got home again, the same. This was *waaaay* before the internet, free YouTube lessons, music scores and help forums, so I taught myself by studying the finger patterns of mythical legends on grainy video tapes. Play, pause, rewind, repeat. Then I'd go to the magazine shop and take mental photographs of all the wonderful notation inside those unattainably overpriced, glossy scrolls of sexiness, before getting kicked out. Kids today don't know they're bloody born, whatever that means.

We had a neighbour who had every Bob Dylan album on vinyl, and I made it my mission to copy each one onto cassette. I designed tape sleeves for them all by hand, complete with track listings and info, and because this was analogue piracy, copying meant having to listen to the entire album as you stole it. Then I'd set my alarm so that I could get up in the middle of the night and record (on more clunky VHS bricks) whatever late-night music festivals were on TV, and I'd make compilations of my favourite music videos, intercut with random snippets of whatever tragic Eighties movie I'd recorded over. I guess it was my teenage version of drawing comics and Lego building – the perfect passion for a guy who liked to do his own thing, by himself. I was a ravenous sponge for anything and

everything that made a sound. I didn't care for genre, fashion, or being cool, I wanted to hear ALL of it.

My musical idols also taught me about life. I didn't listen to teachers, but I would totally listen to Eddie Vedder. Bands like Rage Against the Machine, Pearl Jam, Public Enemy, Sex Pistols, Ice-T, Manic Street Preachers – they taught me that being intelligent, well-read, questioning authority and fighting for the underdog was the *right* thing to do and, more importantly, that it could even be *cool*. It was thanks to these guys, not school, that I started taking a more active interest in my mum's sprawling book collection. It was also thanks to these guys that my volatile teenage years didn't send me down a different road – music gave me focus, ambition, identity, and a safe retreat. It was food for my soul. A tasty, heart-warming, life-affirming ear hug that made me want to fight the power, avoid the yellow snow, and imagine no possessions, man. And everyone needs that, don't they?

One day, my dad asked me to help him with something at my uncle's office in London. I did nothing all day – just hung around waiting for instructions that never came. I was well miffed. Finally, we left, but instead of heading home, we went across town to meet some guy, in a strange, dark little flat, to 'look at something'. Great, *then* can we go home?! Dad and this mystery man didn't seem to know each other, and after a brief exchange of suspicious mumblings, the mystery man opened a mystery box. Dad said, 'Is that the one you wanted?'

Peering inside, I saw her. Her rounded black curves swooping in geometric majesty. Her long, glistening neck morphing effortlessly into that exotic, slender body as if sculpted by Michelangelo himself. An extra pickup? And what does *that* switch do?!

It was a thing of unspeakable beauty. A twenty-four fret, flying bridge-having, gizmo-loaded masterpiece of engineering genius. It was a Fender Stratocaster. With a whammy bar.

Ole Aitch undoubtedly haggled on price while I...well, I cradled my new baby with a depth of protective love I didn't know I had in me. Shit just got real.

Back at school, I was a frustrating paradox. I was in the bottom class for English, yet I was reading Orwell and Chomsky in the canteen. I was fascinated by history but only when it wasn't taught by someone called Sir or Miss. I was – and have always been – better at things when I figure them out for myself, so school for me now was just a waiting game. I knew I wanted to go to music college and be among 'my people' so I scoured the brochures in the careers office for suitable places. I'm unstoppably proactive when I *want* to do something, so when I saw that I'd need four grade Cs or above to get in to Crosskeys College, it became my life's mission. Come exam time, I focused on the four subjects I was least likely to fail and completely ignored the rest. My maths teacher bet me a tenner I'd fail maths – and won the bet.

My time at Caerleon Comprehensive wasn't all bad, of course. High school is a place of self-discovery, finding yourself and losing your virginity – but my hearing issues happening when they did perhaps set in motion a relationship with school which never recovered. It's only in later life, since I've worked with hearing charities and hearing tech companies, given talks on my own story and learned a lot more about the subject, that I've realised just how much my hearing struggles have shaped me.

For example, nobody ever told me to do this, but when you speak with me, you'll notice I'm staring at your lips – and it's not just because I fancy you. I instinctively lip-read. I need to be able to see your lips because it's a complementary input for the bits that I don't hear. There's also a lot of 'filling in the gaps' to be done, so while I'm taking in what you're saying through my ears and my eyes, at the same time, I'll be processing everything for the most likely context options. This multi-layered communication effort is incredibly tiring and sometimes it's easier to just zone out and retreat into your own world – which gets you labelled as ignorant. Being in my own world was often an easier option for me because I had friends there. Friends with names like Jimi, Kurt and Frank, who I could turn up as loud as I needed with a volume control. By the time I finished high school, my naturally solitary nature, compounded by my hearing problems, had made me quite an introverted and shy guy, despite my innately rebellious and principled will – probably because it was easier.

This draining, extra-computing power which people who are deficient in one of their senses need, merely in order to communicate, has many social and cognitive side effects that society doesn't sufficiently recognise. Please bear this in mind, kind reader, next time you chastise your child (or anyone); maybe they're not being thick, anti-social, stubborn, or disinterested. Maybe basic social interaction is more difficult for them in ways you could never understand, and it's just easier for them to be by themselves.

Despite all this, there were two life-changing discoveries to be made at high school. One was, obviously, girls, and the other was what it felt like to play in a real rock 'n' roll band in front of a real audience. Sextion 8 was my first ever band, formed with three of my mates, and we played covers by Green Day and Nirvana...and Green Day and Nirvana. We rehearsed at an olde-worlde village hall in the twee little village of Llangybi (because it was halfway between us all) and our debut gig was, ironically, at school, in the gym. It was exactly like those clichéd Nineties music videos where the uncool band of nerds plays the school gym hall – and it was fucking bedlam. Tons of people showed up, even the sports boys and bullies were moshing alongside the very people they'd ordinarily be shouting 'sweaty mosher' at and punching in the face. There were stage invasions, crowd surfing, booze being passed around, and extremely concerned teachers who kept jumping on the mic and sternly telling everyone to 'just...behave', before we'd blast into another song by Green Day (or Nirvana) with the room erupting again. And there were girls. Lots of impressed-looking girls. Man, what a rush. A rush of nerves, power, freedom and glory! I felt like the King of the World. I learned that day that simply playing guitar on stage had a trance-inducing power to make alpha males think you're cool and girls think you're sexy. I'd found my club. Sign me up to the entire programme, guv, I'm a lifer.

In my final year, I did the obligatory 'work experience', and managed to blag my way into working at Speed Music in Newport for two weeks. Excited at the prospect of playing guitars all day and chatting about amps with fellow rock stars, I in fact found myself cleaning the toilet, cleaning the fridge (which was worse), and making coffee for the real guys.

Unbeknown to me at the time, it was a perfect lesson for the realities of the music industry. Sextion 8 did a handful of gigs around Newport before, inevitably, we all parted ways to attend different colleges. By hook, crook and a little cheating, I managed to scrape my four grade Cs and, after passing the performance audition, was accepted into Crosskeys College to study performing arts. What a turnaround. On our final day at high school, everyone signed each other's shirts as a souvenir and collected all their books together as mementos. I set fire to my shirt. And my books, too. Never again would I have to wear that stupid, pointless uniform – or any uniform. From now on, it was black all the way, baby.

CHAPTER 3

A BETTER KIND OF EDUCATION

If you've done them right, your college years should be a blur, and my brief two years at Crosskeys College were, indeed, among the blurriest and best of my life. It was here that I was finally the person I wanted to be – surrounded by musicians, metalheads, girls, people who only wore black and were useless at sport. My people. And with much drinking, partying, and experimentation with other new-found pleasures, it was a formative period.

As I was still too young to drive, my journey to Crosskeys every day involved several buses, via Newport and Cwmbran. In Newport, I'd tour the music shops, play all the guitars I could never afford and devour as many music books as I could cram into my brain in one sitting. In Cwmbran, I'd steal CDs. There was this daft record shop by the bus station that stacked most of its stock right at the front of the store by its wide-open double doors, with the CDs still in the cases. I mean, come on, they were asking for it, right?! Before you get all self-righteous, it was a large chain store so, according to rules I just made up, that makes it a victimless, guilt-free crime, and one in which I indulged every week until they closed down. In those days, CDs were £17, which was more than my entire weekly food allowance, so fuck 'em. It was thanks to these dopey dudes that Jeff Buckley, Rage Against The Machine, Radiohead, Soundgarden and many others were now finally in my small CD collection rather than on raggedy old cassette tapes copied from mates.

After they closed down and ruined all my fun, I did buy the first Korn album and it meant not eating for an entire week in college (my Mum didn't know), so I have zero sympathy for the ferocious, self-inflicted crash that was soon to punish the music industry. The old-school industry fat cats had been rinsing us all too hard for too long, making music an unaffordable

luxury for the likes of me. Personally, I was glad when Napster came and ruined them all.

From there, I'd skip across to the public library, new CDs in hand, and borrow heaps of books by John Pilger, Tony Benn, Noam Chomsky and other light-hearted chaps, then grab a few drinks somewhere and take the final bus home. These years were an inspiring melting pot of new sounds and big ideas feeding my fertile teenage mind, and I washed them down with booze, weed and magic mushrooms. I *loved* magic mushrooms and I'd been casually munching them for several years; a perk of living in the countryside – they're everywhere.

My mate Rob lived in yet another nearby quaint country town called Abergavenny, and his parents would often be away for whole weekends with work, so we'd just stay there and munch our way through carrier bags full of the things. The beauty of mushrooms is that, unlike other drugs, you don't need any additional entertainment; you can just lie there, absolutely pissing yourself for hours, at nothing. Tripping in nightclubs is a bad move though – we did it once and it turned into that scene from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* where everyone morphs into those disgusting monsters. It was fucking horrific. We ran out of that place before our first drink had been served, to sink back into the warm, cosy, womb-like embrace of Rob's sofa, with its multicoloured galaxy of Artex wonderment above us.

I never liked coke, speed, ecstasy, or any of that stuff. I tried it all and I always just felt like I'd sobered up from a well-earned trip. I much preferred the stoned, trippy, hippy vibe. Plus, coke always seemed to come partnered with some shouty, opinionated, pain-in-the-arse bloke who wouldn't let anyone else get a word in edgeways.

Many revelations are had on mushrooms. A big one for me was seeing with my own eyes how those very same eyes could lie to me. They couldn't be trusted. One minute a wall was white, the next it was green. And not some artificial, druggy green – the wall was now perfectly and clearly green! As if it had always been. And then it would be purple. Everything else in the room would still be the same, except all the walls were now completely and rationally purple. It got me thinking that if my brain could

be so convincingly deceived by one of my senses into quickly accepting a radically new reality, how much more of this so-called world around me was merely a temporary projection of my brain's guesswork? Maybe *none* of this is real, man. Whoa!

I won't insult your intelligence, dear reader, by pointing out at this stage that I am not condoning the use of drugs. Besides, you're way worse than I ever was.

Weed was another favourite of mine. I grew up around weed smokers and I'd long associated it with smoky, romantic imagery of Hendrix vinyl, third eye-squeegeeing and 'deep' talks. I smoked the stuff day and night for almost a decade, and it was a very compatible accompaniment to the main feast of music, politics, philosophy and life that I was mainlining at the time. Drink? I'd been doing that quite extensively since high school, so that was a familiar friend already. Although I didn't need to concoct those lethal spirits disasters any more, thank god, because now, thanks to my trusty fake ID, I could get served real drinks in real pubs.

Alongside getting hammered and heartbroken, there were courses to attend, and unlike at school, I wanted to do these ones. I learned a lot. I was already a nifty little guitarist, but while I could sweep pick, double-hand tap, and do all the whammy bar tricks, I didn't have a clue what a scale was. College was where, for the first time, I learned music theory. It was also where I learned how to play as *part* of a band rather than just playing loudly *over* a band. The lecturers there were all cool and not one of them ever felt the need to punch me, strangle me or throw me, which was nice. I felt respected for my musical abilities and not for mindless adherence to what I saw as pointless rules.

Having been extremely shy throughout high school, in college I slowly started to come out of my shell. It was also where I met my best mate, the annoyingly talented Aled Clifford of future 'Henry's Funeral Shoe' fame (and if you didn't already know that that is the daft name of a seriously awesome band, then shame on you), and where I met my unfortunate and charitable girlfriend of the next seven years, Claire, who didn't know what she was letting herself in for. I also got to perform gigs (as part of the syllabus!) and radically sharpened up my playing.

Oh, and I got arrested for the first time. Nothing major, just me and my mate Elliott inconspicuously smoking giant spliffs inside a treasured local monument in Newport while playing guitars and singing. What could go wrong? Out of nowhere swung the riot van and we were stripped of our possessions, belts and shoes right there in the street, to the amusement of the growing crowd. Quick as a flash, I was in Pwll Police Station, forms filled in, photos taken, fingerprints inked, then – clank!! – and solitude.

The cell was grim. A thin slab of wood on the floor for a bed, a toilet and...no, that was it. I sat there for hours, and every five minutes it seemed someone far crazier, scarier, and more menacing than little old me was being wrestled into a similar cell nearby. These new guys weren't going easy either. There was shouting, kicking of doors, screamed threats about 'fucking killing all of you' and so forth. Oh, perfect, I thought. So, these must be the chaps who'll be stabbing me in the canteen tomorrow. Certain situations in life make you confront very quickly what you are and what you are not. This was one of them. I wasn't equipped for *this* world, I wasn't gonna last two bloody minutes in here! And I still had black nail varnish on!

Clank!

'Kennedy?'

'Uh, yes, kind officer, sir. Yes?'

'Your father is here, come with me.'

MY FATHER! Fuck it, leave me with the murderers. Sheepishly entering the interrogation room like a shrunken, guilty man led to the gallows, I was unable to look my dad in the eye.

'Give us five minutes, please,' he instructs the officer, firmly, and as the agreeing officer closes the door behind himself, a little smirk opens across my dad's face.

'Twat,' he says, swallowing a smile.

Never had being called a twat brought me such relief. He was amazing about it. Instead of bollocking me, he immediately launched into a quick-fire pep talk of what to say, what *not* to say and when to shut up. Follow these rules and you'll be home for supper. I followed them and I was.

In case you hadn't noticed by now, my parents are awesome. Not only did they sacrifice all of their own ambitions and dreams to give us three ungrateful bastards the best life possible; not only did they raise me on a diet of Zappa, Orwell, Floyd, Tony Benn, Chomsky, Hendrix and Dawkins; not only did they keep us away from churches, the *Daily Mail* and public schools, but they also took us to music festivals. That's right, thanks to my parents I saw the Sex Pistols, David Bowie, Prodigy, Ice-T, Radiohead, and Björk. But if you ask my parents, they'd still insist that we had a fucked-up childhood.

The late Nineties were a great time for music in South Wales, too. Local boys Stereophonics had just hit the major label jackpot and were blasting proudly from every pub, Manic Street Preachers were morphing into gods, there was Catatonia, Dub War, 60 Foot Dolls, Feeder, Super Furry Animals and the shamefully under-appreciated Ether, and a rich live scene for smaller, emerging bands who had good venues to play and a music-hungry public to play to. A TV documentary by the BBC just a few years earlier had predicted that my stomping ground of Newport was going to be 'the new Seattle'. It was an exciting time to be on the scene, an amazing time to be a music lover – and heaven for a young musician.

Even though I did try to do well academically at college, I still only scraped a Pass grade. However, since I also acquired a Grade 5 music theory certificate, I might just be able to blag my way into university – but I'd need a killer performance piece. My lecturer urged me to apply for the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff and, to be honest, I hadn't made any plans other than to become an awesome guitar player in a kick-ass band, touring the world and being all awesome and stuff. That particular plan hadn't unfolded just yet, so I applied. Maybe the Plant to my Page, the Jagger to my Richards, the Lennon to my McCartney, would be waiting for me at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in Cardiff. Maybe my lecturer knew something I didn't?

The Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama is a highly esteemed conservatoire, and very highbrow – at least, it was back then. I knew the place was posh and I knew on paper I might not look great, so I prepared two of my most impressive performance pieces: Django Reinhardt's

‘Nauges’ followed by Steve Vai’s ‘For The Love Of God’. That should do. Claire drove me and my trusty black Stratocaster to the audition and, miraculously, I nailed it. Both pieces went without a hitch and even though I guessed all the answers to the sight-reading questions, I lucked out. I’m a curiously unlucky person but sometimes – not often – you’re just *on*, and thankfully, that day was such a day. I was amazed to be accepted to study for a degree there, based not on my paperwork, but my practical ability. I seemed to be all right at this music stuff. My parents were so proud. Who would have thought – me, a little half-deaf boy from a poor family. Galileo Figaro.

I stuck it out for as long as I could, but the place wasn’t for me. It wasn’t my natural habitat, nobody there was into rock ’n’ roll and I was back to being the outcast again. I was back to writing essays about Mozart again. Improvisation was seen as anathema, all music written after 1850 was seen as substandard and when a lecturer took the piss out of me for tapping my foot in music analysis class, all the rosy-cheeked posh kids chortled in agreement. Apparently *real* musicians keep time by having a bloke wave a white stick in their face, not by tapping their feet.

‘I mean, what are you, a JAZZ musician or something?’ said the douche with the monocle.

That was it, I was done.

Snobbery and elitism are pet hates of mine, especially in the arts. Problem was, I’d signed up now. I’d banked the enormous student loan (I’m still paying for the bugger!), I didn’t like the idea of quitting, and my parents seemed so proud that I’d made it to this respected conservatoire, so I stuck it out another year. But I learned nothing there. Nothing at all. In their defence, for classical or theatre, I’m sure they’re world class – their gleaming reputation doesn’t come from nowhere – and this was a long time ago, but I wanted to ROCK and that was never going to happen here. Not in a million monocles.

It’s a shame because outside of uni this was one of my most stimulating and exciting periods, both musically and politically. I was soaking up *everything*. I’d become a huge Frank Zappa fan and from studying him I learned about polyrhythms, microtones, graphic scores, musique concrète,

and all this other far out stuff I'd never heard of. From there, I discovered classical heavyweights Stravinsky, Debussy, Ravel, Stockhausen, Schoenberg; jazzers like Allan Holdsworth, Eric Dolphy, Pat Martino, Miles Davis and Charles Mingus; electronic/noise artists like Squarepusher, White Noise, Aphex Twin, Merzbow – and it was swimming around my swede with the usual suspects of Queen, Radiohead, Pink Floyd, Megadeth and political hip hop. Alongside that, I was reading a ton of books on politics, science, philosophy, and lefty stuff like Pilger, Chomsky, Dawkins, Paine and Hawking, and I discovered what is still my number-one favourite book of all time: *The Demon Haunted World* by Carl Sagan. My recommended reading for everyone, everywhere. My mind was spilling over with lofty artistic ambitions, but I had no one to play with.

I yearned to be involved with something politically, too. For years, I'd refused to wear any clothes or use any equipment that was made in a sweatshop or had corporate branding. I took it to irritating lengths, calling the head offices of companies demanding proof of production and workers' rights as if I was some powerhouse authority on whose consent their future depended. It got to the point where I couldn't shop *anywhere* and I was impossible to buy for, so for many years all of my clothes and equipment came from second-hand shops. I was an opinionated, angry young pain in the arse. I wanted to join a political party but while Labour would have been the obvious choice, I hated Tony Blair with a passion (and still do) so I trialled the Socialist Alliance instead. If you haven't seen the film *The Life of Brian* by Monty Python, firstly, what the actual fuck is wrong with you and secondly, none of this is going to make any sense. Thirdly, stop reading and go and watch it now! So, the Socialist Alliance were basically the People's Front of Judea. After a few meetings of eating biscuits and talking about why all the other lefty parties were bollocks and why *we* were the one true saviour of mankind, I stopped showing up.

As one of my heroes, Tony Benn, once said: 'We need more socialists and fewer socialist parties.' Or maybe I made that up, in which case it's good and I want the credit. It's a pattern that still exists on the Left today – too many people have got romantic revolutionary dreams of being the poster boy, the clever clogs, the Che or the Chomsky, and it makes the Left

much harder to mobilise than the Right, who just want the immigrants out before supper. These guys didn't mention *action* once; it was just lots of intellectual talk, lots of smug self-congratulation, lots of slagging off other Left parties we could have been aligning with, and lots of biscuits. We had no chance of overthrowing Michael Palin like this! But under no circumstances would I ever join the party that had Tony Blair in it, so I just drifted solo in a non-affiliated cloud of rage – still fighting the power, but without a horse in the race.

Then, by chance, I found out that the RWCMD had an exchange programme with a popular music course in Neath College. At this point, I barely knew any more how I'd come to get tangled up in all this university stuff, but as one last effort, I thought I'd give Neath a go and see what happened. Fate works in strange ways, for if I had never gone to that snobby conservatoire gaff, I would never have considered the course in Neath, and then I never would have met Gareth Whittock. The course in Neath was much more to my style, but I'd got used to the idea of skipping further education and getting out into the real world. I had the goods and I was hungry to play. Recognising this, music tech lecturer Mr Whittock made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

Gary was one of those teachers who 'gets it'. With his long, wild mane of fiery red curls and his genius collection of wacky homemade musical instruments/time travel devices, this classroom Jedi didn't care if your work was technically correct, he cared if it was brave, creative, unique and had soul. If it was rough around the edges, even better, dammit! He was funny, personable, cool and just a little eccentric, as well as extremely qualified, knowledgeable and musically able. I thought he was fucking awesome. In my life, there are few people who have significantly affected my life for the better, and Gary is one of them. He was my first true mentor.

Gary knew I was hunting for a day job and planning my escape, but I didn't know that he'd been trialling me for one already. Sometimes he'd split the class – he'd teach one side and he'd have me teach the other. Other times, he'd leave the room altogether and see how I got on. I had no idea it was an audition – I was just being helpful – but before long, he dropped the big one on me. He had a private recording studio with good equipment,

space, privacy, and clients lining up, but he had no one to run the place and man the sessions. I would be on £18 an hour, have my own keys, use the studio as my own in downtime, manage my own schedule *and* get to quit uni. Was I interested?

Hmmm. Let me think...

I quit uni that very day and the following Monday I opened the doors to WhiteOak Studios for the first time.

CHAPTER 4

EVIDENTLY LEAFY TOWN

Gary wasn't looking for a techie know-it-all with a certificate, he was looking for someone who was open-minded about music who would rise to the opportunity. I was acutely aware of my lack of experience, training, qualifications – and hearing – and I wouldn't let him down. I couldn't let *myself* down. So, in early May 2000, a scruffy twenty-year-old kid from a tiny village was handed the keys to the wizard's palace. And it was here, dear reader, where my bedraggled career in music began its long, strangled journey.

I quit my degree course just before the start of the third year. Freedom at last! WhiteOak Studios was a hybrid digital and analogue recording studio built inside several, large horse stables in the pretty and sleepy little countryside market town of Crickhowell. The studio had a lot of character – skylights letting in rays of natural sunlight (unheard of in most recording studios, which are dark, windowless, depressing affairs filled with technology, farty men and little else) and thick, wooden stable doors leading out to a cobbled, grassy yard. Gary had filled the studio with weird and wonderful instruments from around the world, which brought even more colour and a feeling of creative wonder to the place. This was my new office.

My role there was...well, fairly much everything! If someone wanted lessons, I taught them. If they wanted to record an album, I did that, too. I had no experience in any of it, but I like a challenge, I love to learn, and I knew that opportunities in life were rare, so I said yes and worried about the detail afterwards. I was also sick to my back teeth of being skint, so having some money would make for a very welcome change, and I might *finally* be able to meet some like-minded musicians who wanted to dominate the world with me. I strongly believe that you learn best by just facing the fear, having a go and making mistakes, rather than reading about it forever; so I

said yes to *all* enquiries and threw myself well and truly in at the deep end. Luckily, I had the best mentor you could ever wish for, which helped.

The studio soon became a hub for a real mixed bag of metalheads, local rich guys, kids from elsewhere on government rehabilitation arts programmes, music teachers wanting to know what computers were, local bands, DJs and anyone who had nowhere else to fit in, from these isolated, postcard towns of chapels and fields. This contrasted rather hilariously with the world outside our gates. The local shop (note the singular) was an *exact* replica of the one from the League Of Gentlemen, complete with, let's say 'older' owners, who would glare fiercely at all who entered their dusky forgotten kingdom of questionable sell-by dates, their beady eyes intensely tracing your every move, as you nervously shuffled about by the crisps. Going in there stoned would send you on an immediate whitey.

Right across from there was the Cliff Richard Café. You read that right. Everything in this place – and I mean *everything* – had either Cliff's face, Cliff's videos, or Cliff's music on it. Enjoy your breakfast. A life-size, grinning cardboard cut-out of the man himself welcomed you in, whereupon you would experience a dazzling, multi-sensory overload of pure Cliff. He gawped at you from your place mat, your mug, your plate, the TV, the wall, the waitress's apron – I'm telling you, man, I've seen hell and it ain't pretty. Going in *there* stoned was a fucking psychedelic horror show.

For the next few years, I practically lived at that studio and, just as I had with the guitar, I taught myself how to edit, record, program, mix and produce by poring through magazines, getting things wrong, studying others and just *doing* it. Conscious of my hearing loss, I would quadruple-check everything I did against professional recordings. Before long, things were ticking along pretty damn nicely, and we were maxed out, too! A full diary. I also began teaching teachers. The type of guys who'd previously ridiculed me for playing a peasant's instrument, or worse – *tapping my foot* – were now being required by their masters to come to *me* and learn about all this computer stuff that had begun invading their precious institutions. And I enjoyed that.

For the first time ever, I was making some decent coin and life was good. What a difference! But I suspected my good fortune was going to end at some point, so, instead of blowing all the money I was earning on flashy clothes, partying and showing off, I spent it on developing my own home studio setup. I was wiser back then; this would be the last sensible decision I would ever make. Nobody could have foreseen the catastrophic crash that was right around the corner for the music industry, but when it hit, I was in my bunker, still able to make records on the small but capable home studio setup I'd had assembled before the drought.

Working on 'the other side of the glass', as it's called, gave me an extra appreciation for the essential roles performed by everyone else in the process of making music. Until then, it had all been about the leading roles for me; the axe-wielding, spandex-wearing show-offs. But as I quickly came to learn, the artist is a very small cog in a long line of nameless but super-talented and essential engineers, editors, assistants and techies who make the album, or the gig, even remotely possible. I was now functioning as part of that line, and was inevitably on the receiving end of many a cocky, not-so-talented local musician believing that God spoke to us all through their fingers.

Tip number one for upcoming bands: always be nice to your team. Unless you *want* to sound shit, of course. The fifth law of thermodynamics states: 'the bigger the prick, the lesser the talent', and it's something I would see confirmed over and over in different capacities to come.

Another fun insight I quickly learned the hard way regarded the diet of the studio engineer. Studio sessions don't run smoothly from nine to five with lunch in the middle; they run until they don't – and if everyone is 'vibing it, man', that can mean all night. Mere distractions such as food, air, and daylight come second. The hero here is our quick, convenient friend: the microwave meal. Unmemorably eaten at the mixing desk, while continuing to work, and accompanied by sickening amounts of crisps, jelly sweets, cigarettes, and coffee. What begins as guilt-free foodie freedom soon becomes torturous culinary cruelty. As all studio guys do, I started to pack on the pounds.

Everyone remembers where they were when 9/11 happened – I was at the studio. My mate Rob phoned me first, then my mum. I had been in a session, blissfully unaware. Racing home, I spent the rest of the day watching the news and bandying around pub politics with my dad. It was a chilling event, and one that changed the course of the world's political dynamics. There was a pre-9/11 world and a post-9/11 world. As a rapacious reader of leftist politics, I wasn't ignorant of the fact that similar tragedies happen all around the world every day, often with the invisible hand of Western imperialism lurking somewhere off-stage, but despite happening in a land far away, this particular tragedy seemed closer to home. Was it because the victims looked like *us*? The responsive (read exploitative) actions of the following years had a profound impact on me politically that would take years to shake off. Raised as I was, with a rigid belief in representative democracy, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 decimated all my faith in the system, the Labour party, protest and the vote. If the largest protests in our history, international illegality and complete lack of any provocation whatsoever couldn't stop the military-industrial complex slaughtering thousands in Iraq and Afghanistan in our name and on our payroll, then what was the fucking point in any of it? I was passionately anti-war and protested, campaigned, and lobbied – along with absolutely everyone else it seemed – and it looked as though the power of the people would prevail. When the behemoth trampled on, regardless of international law and the will of its people, massacring defenceless thousands in the process, it killed me. I hated Tony Blair and I still do; I hate him more than Thatcher, which, coming from a Welshman, is a lot of hate. I pray that I live to see the day that Ned Flanders/Ted Bundy shapeshifter stands behind bars, but the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq quickly smashed all that hate out of me like a punch to the chest, along with my passion, hope and action. What was left was a pacifying, cynical, disillusioned apathy. I stopped voting; there was no point. I stopped protesting; it makes no difference. I wrote off the entire system as rigged, corrupt and fascistic, which made me easy prey for the lure of conspiracy theories – a downward tunnel where I would spend many of the following years.

By now, my younger brother was an annoyingly nifty musician, too. Sticking to his tradition of outdoing me on everything, being a virtuoso drummer wasn't enough, so he mastered the bass in his spare time as well. The bastard. He would come down to the studio on free days and we'd mess about with different ways to mic up a drum kit or have outlandish jams in 7/8 and 5/4. My girlfriend Claire was a singer, so she'd come round and lay down tracks for bands, and I was able to wangle demos for most of my mates' bands too. The studio was also the perfect venue for gatherings of the mushroom-minded, with its top-of-the-range sound system, clear starry skies above and circus-y townfolk. And we utilised its gifts well.

Yup, I had it pretty cushy for a twenty-year-old college dropout, but I still didn't have a band! Guitar players were ten-a-penny, it was drummers and bassists everyone needed. The only bands who did want guitar players were indie bands, and I didn't want to stare at my feet with a stupid hat on. I wanted to be Frank Zappa, Roger Waters, John Pilger and Carl Sagan. I wanted to make cutting-edge, challenging, alternative music that fused experimentation, electronica and twenty-first-century classical techniques with kick-ass riffs, pounding drums and hard-hitting lyrics about *issues*, man! Every day, the music press was hyping some new upcoming band who were releasing a debut album, touring the world and living my dream; a young band from Devon called Muse were absolutely everywhere and my soul yearned to be part of it. I was becoming impatient and frustrated – I had ideas, a studio, a place to rehearse for free, and I could *play*. I'd done the apprenticeship. So where *are* you, guys?!!

I don't know why the penny didn't drop sooner (story of my life!) but after helping other bands out day after day, I finally said 'fuck it, no more waiting. I'll do what I've always done – I'll do it myself. Maybe if I just started making a record, then at least I'd be able to play some of my ideas to other musicians and see who gets it.' Every big transition point in my life has happened this way: long periods of stoic patience (always too long) followed by a sudden (and generally enormous) decision that I immediately and fervently set in motion. This one, however, unknowingly sparked the beginning of my life's single proudest musical moment.

* * *

I had a *big* vision for the type of music I wanted to make. I grew up enthralled by the power, energy and swagger of rock, but when I got into jazz, classical, electronic and alternative music, I started to find the safe arrangements of rock too limiting for my interests. Basically, if it doesn't have guitars, drums and bass pounding away while some dude wails about strippers and whisky over the top, it ain't really rock. Conversely, there was more scope in the alternative genres for interesting instrumentation, odd rhythms, unusual chords and sound-layering, but they were mostly a serious and miserable bunch of bastards and I didn't want to be that, either. Books had always played as big a role in my life as music, and I'd been very politicised since my teens but, outside of hip hop, none of the other music at the time had anything to *say* – it was as though rock bands stopped being angry when punk got comfy. So I was going to make an album, *the* album, that threw all of the things I loved into one giant, ambitious, uncommercial, multi-genre melting pot of seething, unpredictable musical indulgence, then stir in an angry dose of politics and season with filthy noise and pounding drums. This record was going to have it all. All the things I love. Fuck the kitchen sink; the kitchen's going in, too.

Now you can see why I couldn't find a band. Admitting defeat on that particular expedition, for now, at least, I put all my focus into making the record. The beauty of not having a record company, manager, co-writer, producer, or any other musicians involved in the making of your album is that you have complete and total artistic freedom. For the exact same reasons, it is also a curse. And digital technology was at a place where there were practically no limitations any more. No drummer? No problem, here's a drum program that'll do it for you. Need an orchestra? Just flick this switch and voilà: viola. Impatience is a wonderfully misguided motivator; I'd never even written a song before and I was embarking on a lofty mission to record an entire album, perform all the instruments, write all the words, edit, mix and produce the whole thing, completely by myself. And I'd have to keep it a secret. I noticed early on in life that every time I told someone that I was going to try something, they'd tell me that I couldn't,

that I'd fail, that I'm not good enough, that it was pointless. I think it's a British thing, and it sucks. I could never be arsed to argue with people, so, from a very young age I just started doing things without telling anyone. It makes things quite lonely, arduous and joyless, but at least it gets bloody *done* that way, rather than me still simply talking about it six months later, paralysed by other people's projected self-doubts. An operation of this scale and importance would have to be top secret.

I had a clear and complete vision in my mind for how the album would sound and how all of those radically different ingredients would blend into a cohesive whole, but there was a *lot* of work to do. I didn't know if I was doing it *right* or the easiest or the *best* way, but it felt fucking amazing to actually be *doing* it! It took a while, though. I still worked at the studio during the day, and I had a girlfriend, but I maxed myself out for a year and chipped away at the ole magnum opus any chance I got – writing and recording as one and the same process. I'd be delirious from working on it throughout the night, but I was stubbornly determined to turn my concept baby into an audible monster. I just wanted to hear it! The album that had everything I loved in one place.

Constantly tweaking, changing, adding, moving; I'd recorded three different versions of the album before it started to take form, and some songs had over two hundred channels of instruments on them by the end. Man, I put *everything* on that album. Backwards masking, sped-up tape, speeches from JFK and Bush over Latin rhythms, odd time signatures, noise, spacey effects, toys, electronica, heavy guitars – you name it, it's in there somewhere. There's not a second of silence anywhere on the album – all the tracks either morph, segue or spontaneously switch without warning into the next track. And the long, weird, dissonant guitar solo on track 2 was achieved using a technique called xenochrony, which I stole from Frank Zappa, which involves superimposing a recording made in a different key and tempo onto the track. Just *try* and play it.

The lyrics were the hardest. Writing lyrics is easy if you don't care about lyrics: keep it vague, make it rhyme, done. Writing good, hooky lyrics is a rare and sought-after talent that I don't have. Writing lyrics about secret cabals, consumerism, terrorism and religion, while making it rhyme *and* fit

the melody...well, that kept me up at night. There were pages and pages of the stuff assembled across my floor like the wall of a police incident room, and I would stay awake through the nights tiring over single words or binning entire sheets. And no, the irony isn't lost on me that I still lived with my parents in a twee village called Little Mill while I was concocting this dystopian soundtrack to the next workers' revolt.

There was also the small issue of my not being a singer, and it was a potential game changer for the entire project if I had to wait until I found someone who *could* sing. But I'm far too impatient for that, so when all the music was finally in place, and in the dead of night when no one could hear me wailing, I started recording the vocals.

The first time you hear your own voice played back to you, it's weird. 'I don't sound like *that*, do I?!' And while I was kind of in tune, I was basically attempting a poor man's Jeff Buckley and it wasn't really working for me.

Finding my own voice would take experience, practice and – more importantly – time, but I didn't have time, goddamn it! My sights were fixed firmly on the finish line and I was making a sprint for it. For the moment, I kinda felt more comfortable pretending to be Jeff Buckley, so I just rolled with it and finished the record as Jeff. People often ask how I started singing and have I 'always loved to sing'; well, now you know. I'd never sung at all until my first album, and it was only out of sheer necessity, not love.

It had been two long years in the making but by the summer of 2002, my Frankenstein was alive, and its creator was dead. I'd thrown every ounce of my heart, soul, body, and mind into the album – and remember, I'd been doing it all in secret, too. Nobody knew! I know, it's weird, but it worked. I did my absolute best to create a rock album that was worthy, unique, daring, and explored new possibilities for the genre. Every instrument, every single drum hit throughout the entire record, was either performed or lovingly programmed into the computer by me, one note at a time. Before I started, I had never sung or written a song, and the project had expanded into an all-encompassing black hole which left me unable to remember what life had been like before. I needed some closure; I needed some distance from it –

and I needed to set it free so that I couldn't fiddle with it any more. So, I sent copies out to music mags to see if there was anything of merit in this mad creation of mine or whether it was, in fact, self-indulgent shite.

The album's title was known to me long ago but I didn't have a band name (or a band) so I slapped a sticker on the front of the CD, simply saying: 'Kennedy – *Made in China*' and shoved some into Jiffy bags. And then I closed the book on it. Done. What the hell did I *do* with all my spare time before?! I fully intended on catching up on some quality time with my ever-patient and supportive girlfriend, but a week later, while I was locking up the studio one night, the landline started ringing. It was my dad.

'Hiya, Jim, I've just had a newspaper on the phone looking for you.'

CHAPTER 5

MADE IN CHINA

‘Mono has found the best demo of 2002, and it was written and recorded by just one man – James Kennedy, or Kennedy as he is known on record.’

Mono Magazine

‘There’s more invention here in five minutes than some bands manage in their whole careers. This guy is talent on a stick.’ *Total Music Magazine*

‘The sheer scope of *Made in China* is breathtaking. It’s not the fact that he can play and arrange so many components, but that he has not permitted himself to become ensnared by what is allowed in music making.’ *The Big Issue*

‘Probably the best, and by far the most complete demo we’ve had in recently. Eleven songs in just under an hour that could be released as a proper album tomorrow. Please, someone put out a record by this guy.’ *Buzz Magazine*

Holy shit. The reviews had come in thick and fast! And they were all... good? Both shocked and relieved, I had been braced for words like ‘pretentious’, ‘amateur’, ‘self-indulgent’ or just ‘meh’ – if it was even reviewed at all. All of this was a very welcome surprise. I knew every nook and cranny of the album far too well to judge for myself any more, so the sanction of strangers was a comforting nod that all the time spent in solitary confinement making the damn thing may not have been for nothing. Spurred on, I thought, ‘fuck it, I’ll send it to radio and see what happens!’

Within a week, BBC Radio 1 had played the song ‘Terrorists’ in full. One of the most noisy, proggy, and politically explicit tracks on the album, the song was hardly born for the airwaves, yet here it was, blasted into the earholes of thousands in all its ugly, shouty, swear-y glory. Other radio stations all over the world started picking up on the album, and word of this mystery album by an unknown village kid seemed to be spreading like wildfire. I couldn’t believe it! The album stayed at number one on Radio 1’s

Emerging Artists chart for six weeks straight, and in a quote that I exploited for many years longer than was kosher or relevant, they listed me on the page as ‘the warped genius’.

I liked the sound of that. It’s a quote that has squeezed its way onto every flier and poster (and into every conversation) ever since. All the attention was catching me totally off guard and none of it was part of any agenda. I’d never planned what I was going to do with the album once it was done but this unexpected response seemed too good to waste. I knew it would all pass as quickly as it had come, and I needed to strike while the iron was hot. I decided I would send it to record labels and see what happened.

My parents had a cool-looking chessboard at the house, so, in an oh-so-political inversion of the cover to the imperialist-porn book, *The Grand Chessboard*, by Zbigniew Brzezinski, I used a photo of said chessboard as the cover for my lefty-porn rock album. I designed a little inlay card, bought a forest of glossy paper, CDRs, Jiffy bags and one of those plastic plungers for sticking labels on, and I got to work. My bedroom became a sweatshop of one, with offcuts of paper covering the floor, printouts drying on every surface, and CDs cooking with intent in my little desktop PC. I bought a *Music Week Directory* and scoured its pages for record companies and music managers, writing up long lists of the people I would contact. I treated it like a day job: I’d get up early, sit at the desk and hit the phones all day. Once the first batch of unwitting victims had been agreed by phone, off I’d drive to the post office (the nearest being twenty minutes away by car) and post stacks of Jiffy bags out to companies in London. The front of each padded envelope bore a sticker with the ubiquitous and humble quote: “‘Warped genius’ BBC Radio 1’. It was all pretty damn exciting.

Yet still no band.

Once the first batch of Jiffys was sailing, I’d get cracking on the next. More research, new lists, more phone calls to arsey receptionists in London, more printing, cutting, sticking and plunging. I did fucking tons of them, and spent a small fortune on supplies and postage. This was long before the internet was much use; the days of bleepy dial-up connections, when physical CD demos were delivered to buildings in a van. These days you just email a link. Two weeks after the first batch had gone out, I would do

the follow-up calls. So far, it'd been nothing but win after win and I was feeling lucky – 'I'll do the big boys first', I thought. And so, with coffee poured and optimism engaged, my first call was to Warner Music.

'Good morning. Warner Music.'

'Hi. Is it possible to speak with Andy Gi...'

'Who's calling?'

'James Kenn...'

'WHO?'

'James Kennedy, I'm chasing up a...'

Click...

'Hello?'

Silence.

'Hello?'

Silence.

'Hello?!'

Did the cheeky cow just hang up on me?!

Silence...

And then, just as I was about to end the call: 'Hi James, this is Andy. Thanks for the call, it's *great* to speak to you!'

Phew! The receptionist hadn't hung up, she was just staying true to that age-old art of making musicians feel like an absolute piece of shit for having the cheek to phone them.

Andy (not his real name) was a nice chap and a huge player in the industry. He told me that he *loved* the album, couldn't believe I'd done it all myself and was eager to talk. Did I have any more material he could hear? Why, yes! Yes, I did! Was I free to come to London for a meeting? Any. Fucking. Time! Did I have any live shows coming up that he could bring some people to? Ah...well you see...I don't have a band just yet but I'm working on it and blah blah blah. Andy then wrapped up the convo politely, but I could feel his disappointment. Shit.

OK, that wasn't *bad* though? No, it was good. Yes, definitely good. Warner Music took my call *and* 'loved' the album. A good start. OK, next on the big-boy list: Sony Records.

Same preamble with rabid receptionist and then:

‘Oh, hi James, yes, I’ve literally just emailed you. I *love* the album.’

In the email, Gary (not his real name) wrote me a full paragraph about how he was blown away by the album, couldn’t believe I’d done it all myself and was I ever in London for a chat?

It was fucking unbelievable, it just kept coming! I was aghast. I thought breaking into the music industry was supposed to be...*hard*...but I seemed to be living the Hollywood version of it. In the space of a few months, there’d been mainstream radio play, rave reviews in the press, and positive interest from two big-time, major record labels. And all with no band, no video, no pictures, no website and not a single gig – in fact, nothing but a homemade CD cobbled together with badly-cut paper in a bedroom in a village far away. What were the odds! Then he hit me with the big one...

‘When are you and your band next performing in London so I can bring the guys from Sony along?’

Argh, bollocks! Another rusty penny began to fall. This ‘having no band’ thing was going to continue being a pain in my arse, even *with* an album. Call after call, email after email; the conversation went the same – they loved it, couldn’t believe I’d done it all myself and when was I playing London next with my band. Maybe I’d been a little naïve in thinking this was going to be that easy after all. True, I’d had an unimaginably impressive start, but it was time to find this fucking band, once and for all.

* * *

‘Kennedy is in the process of forming a band to be able to play live but whether they will be *able* to play the tunes on *Made in China* remains to be seen,’ came almost as a taunt from one reviewer. Putting a band together had become an urgent and distracting quest; time was now of the essence. The fat cats won’t wait for long and you only get one shot with those guys. It was making me tense. I’d driven around every town in South Wales, plastering the walls of studios, rehearsal rooms, music venues and music shops with adverts, as well as every online ad site and local paper. Reminder: this was before social media. Google the Nokia 6100 and feel my pain. But I knew they *had* to be out there somewhere!

Bits of interest started to dribble in, and I realised I'd made a rod for my own back with this album. This music *was* challenging. It wasn't a 'get stoned and jam, man' type of deal, and whoever came on board would have to learn a lot of unconventional and intricate parts. And they'd have to do it voluntarily, as I wasn't able to pay anyone. Whereas I was spending every waking moment on the band, they'd probably have a day job, maybe a family and other commitments to work around, and my project just wasn't a casual weekend bit of band fun. What most of these guys wanted was a jam buddy.

Things were still positive, though. The bloke from Warner Music called frequently for updates and I was back and forth to London every other week for meetings with managers, radio pluggers and labels. All of this was so new to me. Sitting in swanky board rooms at age 23 with all these big-city bigwigs bigging me up; there was a real feeling of something special brewing around my album, and I loved it. The skyscrapers, the bustle, the Tube, the iconic landmarks I'd only ever seen before on TV; it was all dizzyingly intoxicating for me, coming as I did from no-shop Little Mill. The local press was hyping me up as the new guy to make it for Wales (no pressure, like) and in my hometown everyone was rooting for me and seemed convinced that this was already a done deal.

On those long coach rides to London, I'd daydream out of the window about my impending life as a rock god and how I'd use my fame and fortune to help others. First, I'd buy my parents a house and put a ton of money into an account for them, so they'd never have to work, grind, or struggle ever again. After a life of sacrificing everything for the likes of me, they could finally enjoy a life of holidays and pampering. I'd sort my bro and sis out with a nest egg, too, set them up! Once the immediate fam was taken care of, I'd set my sights on loftier goals – my tireless charity work being a given, of course, but who knows, maybe politics? I'd certainly use my platform to speak for the voiceless, fearlessly challenge the powerful, and one day I'd probably be up there with my new mate, The Boss, singing songs about the plight of the working man. Maybe I'd be the voice of a workers' revolution in Peru and... Ah, bollocks, I missed my stop.

Yet despite all the good will, everything still hung on me having a damn band. If I'd had a band ready to go, I might have snagged a major deal pronto. The whole thing was getting me down as I felt a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity slipping through my fingers. Auditions continued to trickle in but my music conflicted with so many of the usual musical tribe distinctions that it just wasn't working out – there were techie players who could do all the clever stuff but were too cool to keep the easy bits simple and then there were the 'feel' guys who sounded awesome smashing their way through a rock chorus but couldn't play a 9/8. Time was getting on. I needed someone who could do *all* of it, and do it with style. It was already looking bleak, but then leafing through the music mags one afternoon I saw a frenzied feature about a brand new band who'd just released their debut album through Universal and were being hyped as ground-breaking visionaries for their mixing of genres, odd rhythms, use of noise, heavy rock riffs and electronics. Why, that sounds like *my* record! My stomach sank. With all this dicking around, I'd been beaten to it. The band was The Mars Volta, an American band who would quickly become big in the alternative rock world, win a Grammy, and be considered one of the world's best modern progressive rock bands. However, it was in this very same magazine that my ad was read by Carl Peel.

Carl was a barbarian. A wild animal who had to be literally leashed to the drum kit with an electronic click track to restrain him from smashing and screaming his way through the set like King Kong on cocaine fighting wasps. A stocky, chirpy Valleys boy, a few years older than me, with a big hearty laugh and a giant personality, Carl was a healthy counterweight to my intense, work-focused seriousness. And he was fucking awesome. No worry about attitude or technicality with this one; Carl would tear that 9/8 a new one and leave it whimpering like the blandest of 4/4s. He was hilarious, excitable, kind, completely politically incorrect and didn't take anything too seriously – except drums. He was a breath of fresh air and we got to work immediately. There are many jewels hidden in these valleys and although it had taken me a year, I'd just found one. Halle-fucking-lujah.

But as God giveth with one hand, he taketh away with the other. After a solid four-year run at WhiteOak Studios, Gary made the decision to

downsize and shut up shop. For me, it was the end of an era. I'd gone in a naïve, starry-eyed student and come out approaching my mid-twenties, an experienced engineer with my own album. It had been good for me. I learned a lot, I grew a lot, I made a ton of new friends, and I was genuinely upset to have to move on.

It was sad seeing the studio dwindle into a deserted, empty shell of its former glory, as equipment was sold off. But good times, man, good times. It had been good *to* me, too. When the fateful day came to close the doors for the last time, I was double-relieved that I'd had the rare good sense to spend my earnings building my own, modest home studio set-up. And thus, my hunt for a drummer was replaced by the hunt for a job.

Rehearsals promptly began at an old Masonic Lodge in Caerphilly, which made an interesting setting for my alternative, conspiracy rock, with its regalia-clad walls and framed groupings of shifty-looking old blokes with funny handshakes watching us play. We were joined on our first practice by a bass player who shall remain nameless, as he only turned up once and was never heard from, by anyone, again. I met him by accident a few years later and he told me rather proudly that he missed the second rehearsal because he'd gone on a year-long drinking bender from which he was still recovering. Thoroughly rock 'n' roll.

Brace yourself, dear reader; we will meet many similar douche-bags along our journey. Be warned. Carl and I, however, trucked on regardless, slamming in several rehearsals a week and quickly getting battle-ready. We were also becoming good friends and being around Carl started to bring me out of my protective shell. So, tempting fate, I took a punt and booked some shows, and as if by some bizarre law of attraction, we were immediately contacted by another bass player. Mat Jones was a mellow surfer-type dude from the city, complete with sandals, whom we speedily brought on board. The three of us made for a colourful mixed bag of mismatched shapes and sizes, but finally, by the grace of God and the command of Satan, we had... a fucking band. Well, we had a fucking band with no name, and I was given an interesting reminder of this fact by the arrival of an email one morning from a legal firm informing me that: 'Unless you cease using the name Kennedy, we will consider you to be passing yourself off as our client.'

Uh, excuse me to fuck? I read it a few times, perplexed. It seems that in all the hype and press surrounding ‘Kennedy – *Made in China*’ I’d inadvertently drifted onto the radar of the management of classical violinist Nigel Kennedy. Apparently, he had some kind of mystical monopoly on my surname, and I had to change it, or else. As ridiculous as this was, I did want to change the name, anyway; it was a band and it needed a band-sounding name, not some fella’s surname. Everything cool was already taken and I wanted something that said ‘unique’ – a new, exclusive word for a new, independent sound. A word that wouldn’t be on page ten in a web search. After drawing up pages of invented words, created for their sound and look, rather than meaning, I settled on Kyshera.

Now that things were finally falling into place, it was time to stop smoking weed and munching mushrooms like jellybeans, and it wasn’t that hard. I just kinda *stopped*. Now that something more important had come along, it was easy to let go of those things that I knew would get in the way. And I’ve never gone back. However, there still lurked within me a demon who needed frequent offerings and, in truth, all that happened was that my vices changed. Be it drugs, smoke, girls, work, booze, food or beating myself up; my addictive nature wasn’t going anywhere.

I’d lucked out with a job, too, which was perfect timing. It was only ‘a temporary measure’, just ‘a little something to tide me over’ until rock stardom beckoned me to its glamorous bosom of glory. So for now, far from glamour, glory or bosoms, I was to be an admin clerk at the NHS accounts department in Pontypool, and if you look up the words ‘drab’ and ‘doom’ in the dictionary, you’ll get the picture. I’d gone from being the main guy at a cool recording studio to belligerently processing invoices for expensive golfing weekends (‘networking’) for the health services’ piss-taking upper echelons.

And I was struggling.

‘JAMES!! You’ve *got* to shout at him, Jen.’

Working at a recording studio where *everything* is loud, I’d forgotten that I had a significant hearing deficiency. Being in an office, with people whispering at me from behind cubicles amid a cacophony of phone calls, keyboard clicks and computer fans, was becoming a belittling, daily

embarrassment. The long-forgotten perceptions of me being thick, arrogant, anti-social and rude had resurfaced, and I soon started hating going to the place. But I needed the money and I needed a job that was flexible for the band. So, I hung in there, putting up with the comments and telling myself that it wasn't forever and that soon rock 'n' roll victory would be mine. But after just six months in the place, the practical and emotional difficulties caused by my hearing became too much. I quit and went on the dole.

It is my belief that nobody wants to be on the dole. I mean, I'm sure there are a few pervy fetishists who get off on being patronised by hateful jobsworths who are too socially unenlightened to be of any help to the less fortunate, but I think it's fair to say that *most* people don't want to be on the dole. I hated it. Straight away they treated me like a useless, lying, scamming cunt, but it was only another 'temporary measure'. And I did want to find a job, I just knew I couldn't have one anywhere quiet, and for some reason I still wasn't ready to tick the box that said: 'any disabilities: hearing / sight / mobility'. I guess I didn't want special treatment, I wanted equal treatment – even to my own detriment. So, I punctually attended all my fortnightly lashings at the Jobbie and tripled-down on the band. The band *had* to be my escape out of here, man. For sure, I'd had a slow, bumpy start and, by pop culture standards, at twenty-five, I only had two years left before the preferred suicide age, but there was life in the old horse yet and now that I was finally able, I was going to play every damn toilet this great, grey land had to offer.

CHAPTER 6

WHY DO WE DO IT?

There is absolutely *nothing* that compares to the rush of performing live. Those who have done it will know what I mean. For those who haven't, it's impossible to faithfully describe it, but I'll try.

Imagine if you will:

The subtle anticipation begins days before the gig itself, always at the back of your mind that 'it' is coming. The preparations have been made, rehearsals done, guitars re-strung, equipment packed, sick days blagged, directions and load-in times sorted, and mates nagged to come. When the fateful day arrives, the entire day revolves around the gig. After meeting up at someone's house (almost always the drummer's, for reasons still unknown to science) to cram a truckload of heavy equipment into the back of someone's hatchback, the road trip begins. Side note: despite the popular misconception that musicians are a bunch of work-shy hippies, most of a musician's time is spent lugging, lifting, and packing heavy equipment. And we're experts at packing – if you want to know how to get the back line of Wembley Stadium into the back of a Fiat Punto, ask a musician. Anyway, you are now officially off duty from the real world. Your only responsibility *in life* is to make it to the gig, kick ass and be awesome. No boss, no dress code, no fixed abode, no rules. Excitable and preferably distasteful banter abounds, and after battling your way through hours of traffic, crap service-station sandwiches and the bass player's Eighties metal playlist, you arrive. Everyone else is sitting at work, and yet here you are ramping the pavement outside the Dog and Whistle on a cold Tuesday afternoon in Camden, not giving a fuck.

The frantic 'load in and move that damn car' routine begins – which means parking five miles away in the nearest residential area and getting lost. Heart already racing from the manic hurtling of amps and drumkits down dark, dingy stairwells and the panicked re-parking of your poor,

buckled Fiesta, you now enter the calm before the storm. Back at the venue, you pick an amp to sit on and you wait. Every venue is awesome. Despite being a cold, dusty shit-hole that smells of sweat and bins, with sticky floor, peeling walls and electricians that will kill you – to you, it's a thing of beauty, history and wide-eyed wonderment. A thousand stickers of previous vagabonds adorn every visible surface (some you recognise) and in this quiet, mechanical light of day, the venue is a world apart from the bouncing, beery dungeon of dreams it will become in a few hours' time, illuminated by stage lights (the ones that work). And speaking of lights, they're hot. Real hot. Performing under them takes practice in and of itself.

For me, arriving at a live music venue is like the smell of a new book. And just like the opening pages of a new book, I see that empty room as a place of imminent new adventure and exploration. As the other bands begin dribbling in and the mysterious 'sound guy' begins huffing and tutting at stuff, the excitement starts to creep in again. At this point, it's all about getting a soundcheck – because no one wants the dreaded 'line check', which means the sound tech will be getting your levels right *during* your set and no one will hear the vocals until the third song. If you're lucky (and pushy), you'll get a soundcheck – which means setting up *all* your equipment and doing a run-through – but then there's the problem of what to do with your gear. The stage is barely big enough for *one* band – and there's five on the bill tonight! Creative stacking of amps and sharing of drumkits helps but the 'stage' area is now reduced by about eighty per cent – meaning that all your awesome rock stagemanship will have to be confined to a square foot. You've now got half an hour until the doors open, so you stuff another plastic corner-shop sandwich in your gob and get battle-ready.

The question of whether anyone will turn up only feeds the adrenaline and excitement brewing within you as the lights go down and the first band blasts its way through an awful-sounding combo of line check and empty room reverb. You watch the clock – in forty-five minutes, it's *our* turn! The minutes take hours and you pace the room and mentally violate the stage with all the things you're gonna do up there when you get your chance. There's now about twelve people peppered throughout the room (most of

them in the other bands) and your phone pings away with the last-minute excuses from people ‘unable to make it tonight, man, my leg’s fallen off’ or whatever. By now, you don’t care: hell, I’m gonna sonically smash this empty room to fucking bits, let me at it! And then, the moment you’ve been waiting for: ‘Thanks, London, we’ve been Satan’s Sphincter and you’ve been awesome’. We’re up.

This is the moment the entire day has been building up to. This is what we all came here to do. Thousands of hours of practice, countless callouses, broken strings, punched guitars, bleeding fingers, hand cramps and tears have brought you here – and by now, you don’t care that there’s hardly anyone watching, this is for you. You need this. As the drummer counts off the first song, a foggy cloud of bliss forms around you like loving armour and for the next twenty-five minutes you’re in Nirvana. (The spiritual kind, not the band.) In this moment, you are free. But it’s fucking hot under those club lights, and trying to contain your pent-up, animalistic release in that square foot of doom only adds to the aggression of it all. You’re up there together, a gang, representing *your* band and *your* songs with your comrades – you’re possessed and you’re fucking blasting. You’re allowed to do anything you want up there and people will think it’s awesome. ‘Normal society’ may not get it, but we do. It’s a drug. No. I’ve done drugs and it’s *way* better than that. Sex, perhaps?

I guess it’s what the Quickenin feels like in *Highlander*. Electrifying. Exhausting. Sexual. Religious. It’s an intense, aggressive workout at the gym *and* a night out clubbing, condensed into twenty-five minutes. A dizzying cocktail of excitement, fear, ego and passion. Complete physical and mental dopamine bath. And then it’s over. Ringing with sweat, heart pounding, body rushing with endorphins, there’s no time to crash, you’ve got to get *all* your equipment off the stage within ten minutes so the next band can get on! Your set may be over but it’s still go, go, go. Before you can chat to anyone, grab a drink, or catch your breath, you’ve got to get your damn stuff out of the way – no one knows where, just get it moved NOW! But it’s dark, there’re cables under foot, things to trip over and drunk people to navigate around while carrying an amp bigger than you – the whole thing is intoxicating – and shit, is that *my* bag I left up there?

Now you'll have to wait until the end before you can leave – which of course you don't do because you ALWAYS watch and support the other bands.

You feel like a king. Like an undisputed champ. Like...well, like a rock star. And it feels good. Your body and soul needed that. Physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually revived. Carrying your collective high home with you, you sink a few beers, rescue your vehicle, do the load out, stop for late-night chips, big each other up, blast more cock rock and fight the inevitable post-gig system crash that always happens when there's still two hours of driving to do, before finally getting home around 4am (if you don't break down and they haven't closed the roads). The alarm for your day job will go off in three hours but you can't sleep. You played to twelve people, it cost you money and a day off work to do it and now you'll be dead all day. Was it worth it?

I told you it was impossible to explain.

* * *

Kyshera did our first gig at the legendary TJ's nightclub in Newport, South Wales, on Thursday 10 March, 2005. You read that right, it took TWO years to set up a band to play *Made in China*, but hey, that was all in the past and now it was time to fucking ROCK! TJ's was a local icon. An institution and a rite of passage for bands everywhere. Oasis, Muse, Green Day, and Coldplay all cut their teeth on TJ's stage and local legend has it this is where Kurt proposed to Courtney.

It was a long, square-shaped room with a low, cave-like ceiling, a *proper-sized* stage, and it had stunning sound and lights to boot. At that time, TJ's was THE place to go, the Mecca of the South Wales music scene, and the place where I'd spent all of my weekends as a student, so debuting our show there was a huge honour for me. The audience for that inaugural show was already in the bag, since it consisted only of our friends and family, but the set itself was so over-practised and regimented that we struggled.

It was an important lesson: rehearsal rooms are controlled environments; live gigs are not. But we got through it. Another thing I hadn't expected was

that our wobbly twenty-five minutes of attempted sonic GBH would leave me sleepless. The sheer rush of it all, the build-up, that distinct mix of nerves, excitement and adrenaline, the physical workout, the heat, the sweat, the lights, the volume, the smells – man, that first gig left me reeling, and I was hungry for more. Lots more. After loosening our set a little, our second warm-up gig was at another classic local venue, the Cardiff Barfly, on Monday 4 April. It would be the first of *many* gigs we would play at this underground, tunnel-shaped rock den. The difference between those two shows was off the chart. We were learning from our mistakes fast, and honing our weapons for a full-scale invasion of the big city. Also on the bill that night was a funk rock band from Cardiff called Alison's Op, who featured a fixating and monstrous bass player by the name of Matt Warr. You will meet again.

Behind the scenes, I'd been squirrelling away, having a website built, setting up a Myspace page (Myspace!), getting photos taken, and all the other jazz one must do if one is to truly exist. And I booked us a pile of local warm-up gigs to get us sharp for our first gig outside of Wales on 21 June at the swanky Carling Academy – in London. We'd got our first slot in the capital, on condition of 'bringing a coachload from Wales', and I made sure that every bloody A&R person, agent, manager and label boss in all of London got a free ticket.

We couldn't have been more prepared. Days off work were wangled and we headed up to London nice and early to avoid the traffic, blasting our pre-battle ritual music of tragic Eighties cock rock, with fliers printed and cut, CDs pressed for the merch stand, and obligatory shopping bags full of shite petrol-station sandwiches and jumbo bags of Revels and Coke. We were off! Our noble steed – or 'VOJ', as it was known, after the first three digits of its registration plate ('Where's the VOJ?' 'Who crashed the VOJ?' etc) just about managed to rattle its way there, whereupon we encountered our first lesson of the day. There's no parking at inner city venues. So, parking in the first place we could find, which was about a mile away and cost a small fortune, we had to lug our drumkits, amps, guitars and merch through the busy daytime streets in several runs, hump it all up several flights of stairs and squeeze it all into our tiny allocated corner of the room. And then

wait. Soundcheck was at 4pm, which always means 6pm. We splashed out on a coach that was currently chauffeuring our friends and family over from Wales to show the industry fat cats that these Welsh boys had a fanbase, dammit, and we'd just been promoted to the headline slot, so the stars seemed to be aligning in our favour. Tonight was the night. After all the years it took to get here, tonight was the night the industry was finally going to witness Kyshera live – and we were going to blow their fucking skulls open.

Other lessons were learned that night. Firstly, everybody wants to play London, and the promoters know it. The headline slot on a weekday, we soon discovered, is the shit slot – in London, everyone has left by 10pm. The promoter must have sensed our naivety and dumped us with the slot that no one else wanted. Secondly, never bring a coachload from Wales. The 'coach' was a rickety old prison bus from the 1920s with no heating, driven by a bloke who'd never been outside of Ponty. He got insanely lost and when I eventually found him, he looked as if he had PTSD. His poor cattle, I mean passengers, looked like they'd been through the mincer, too, and several of them begged us to take them home in the back of our van, which was saying something. And thirdly, the whole 'bring a crowd with you' expedition was additionally pointless because industry may *say* they're coming, but they're not. Basically, we played for half an hour to our domestic audience but in a faraway land, at great cost, to no industry, got ripped off by the promoter (who disappeared before giving us the promised 'fifty quid for petrol') and after the subsequent packing down and multi-block lugging of heavy equipment and several-hour drive home, broke down on the M4 and got into bed at 6am the next day. Were we bothered? Were we fuck. Did we do it again? Does the pope shit in the woods?!

Now that we were finally gigging, excitement around my music seemed to ignite again. It had taken *ages* but, touchingly, the support and goodwill were still there. I could see no fatal barriers with the industry now, either – I had the album, a kick-ass band, all the peripheral stuff and tons of gigs – so now it was just a matter of steamrolling our way into as many lugholes as possible. I booked us onto everything. We played everywhere from large festivals to pubs, clubs, private parties on mountains, the backs of lorries,

car parks – I had to make up for lost time, so we hit it hard. And every gig we did, we got that little bit tighter, nastier, louder, and scarier. Carl had cymbals behind his head that he'd upper cut while screaming like a wild man and I'd started trashing my gear in a stupor of pure endorphin overload. Everything we did on the stage was a hundred per cent real. Nothing was planned – we couldn't *wait* to get up there and when we did, we were like caged, rabid dogs finally let loose on our captors. It was transcendental.

Mat was a lot more chilled, and started bailing out of gigs quite early on, but Carl and I ploughed on regardless, as a two-piece. We did so many gigs like that, most people thought we *were* a two-piece band – yet we made the noise of ten men. We were becoming good. 'The Mighty Kyshera' was how we were introduced by MCs and other bands, and we were starting to feel rather mighty when we hit the stage. A kind of knowing confidence.

At last, the very thing that had been my hindrance for so long – making complex, genre-confused rock – was now an advantage because, live, it really stood out. Yes, we had random electronic sound effects appearing from nowhere, yes, I abused my guitar as much as I played it, yes, the drummer changed tempo and time sign every three and a half bars – but we were very fucking loud and very fucking different.

Still clinging onto my previous interest from the capital and eager to get some of them to just see us tear it up live, I continued to make playing in London a priority and sending out personal invites to tons of industry types for each show. As a result, we ended up developing a bigger fanbase there than in Wales and the number of days Carl and I spent driving up and down the M4 is not worth thinking about. But, man, we had some fun! Soon, we had to part ways with Mat because he just wasn't as bonkers as me and Carl. He didn't want to get home from London at 5am on a Wednesday, and I don't blame him.

Back home, we were part of a new generation of bands on the scene; a uniquely diverse melting pot of eclectic, creative, talented guys and gals who prided themselves on their differences rather than any homogeneous genre-defined scene. Over the course of the next few years we had the privilege of sharing stages with the likes of the Donde Stars, SAL, Magic

Dog, First Among Equals, From Mars, Cripple Creek, Alison's Op, The Stopmotion Men, The Kennedy Soundtrack (no relation, but good friends of mine) and so many other truly brilliant bands. Talented, committed, hard-working artists who wrote some of the best songs you've never heard. This was just before independent live-music venues became an endangered species, too, and I'm so thankful that I got to play so many venues across the country steeped in sticky rock 'n' roll history, such as TJ's, Dublin Castle, Barfly, Riffs Bar, Lomax, Non Zeros, Borderline, Nottingham Rock City, Water Rats – many of which are sadly no longer with us.

We started making amazing friends around the place. Regulars at your gigs quickly turned into lifelong friends and we'd be offered floors to sleep on, helping hands, food, booze, parties and general support in so many places. There were, of course, also those gigs where you play to no one – Camden Barfly in our case, where even the sound tech walked out, leaving us manically playing to ourselves – but if you haven't done that at least a few times, you've had it too easy.

Those early days were some of the most fun and exciting for me because it hadn't all become too serious yet; we all had an innocent self-belief that this was just the start of great things to come, and every gig, every road trip to a new town, every new audience, every after-party, was a thrilling new adventure. Most of my weekends were spent this way and weekdays (and nights!) were spent doing the other stuff – calling labels, trying to get reviews and radio play, booking shows, printing CDs – and my personal relationships soon began to suffer. My life had a new element in it now. We'd only been gigging a few months, but we'd been going hard and the band was immediately dominating all available space in my life, emotionally and mentally. It takes a hell of a lot from you to do all of the things needed to run an active, busy band with no budget or professional help, and as with everything in life, there are things that get lost in the trade-off. Even when you're there, you're not entirely present, and my personal life started to suffer quite fast.

This became a shocking, urgent, and devastating wake-up call not long after our first London show, when I spent a rare night off with my then-girlfriend, Claire, at her parents' house. We'd been together for seven years

and Claire was (and is) a bubbly, lovely, infinitely positive person who, although we were from very different backgrounds and had very different ideas for our future, had patiently supported me and my music since day one. She would have got a house together, got married and had a family years ago if it weren't for me and my dreams of stardom. So, she waited, and now things were finally kicking off with the band, she hardly saw me at all.

That night was meant to be about us – pizza, beers, movies, and chill. Claire had an amazing family and, after my usual doorstep banter with her adorable mum, Linda, we locked ourselves in Claire's room for some long overdue 'us time'. We were woken the next morning by her father screaming from the next room. Linda had gone to sleep that night and not woken up. It all happened so fast. Claire ran in to help, I called the ambulance and waited for them outside. The paramedics arrived quickly, but those few minutes were a painful, unjust eternity. My whole body was paralysed by shock as the sudden jolt of confusion and helplessness overloaded my senses amid the chaos and crying. I can't even begin to imagine what Claire and her father were going through.

As much as I loved her mother, I had to contain myself, for she wasn't *my* mother and I needed to be on hand. But why Linda? Why Claire's family? As the paramedics tried everything, Claire and her father sat downstairs as if already knowing the outcome. It was to no avail. Linda had been in good health with no medical conditions. I had been joking around with her just a few hours ago. It transpired that a random fault of the heart is what took this wonderful, kind and funny angel away from her lovely family, but if we can find any solace in it at all, it's that she left peacefully and painlessly in her sleep, in her own bed. Life can change in an instant.

Obviously, everything went on immediate hold, and I moved into Claire's house. They were incredibly challenging times. Conscious of the fact that it wasn't *my* mother who had left us, I tried to conceal my personal distress and be strong, helpful and supportive to the family, but I was way out of my depth for a situation that raw. Intense fluctuations of anger and crippling sadness, often enhanced by alcohol, would be commonplace in the house.

After a few weeks, some events spiralled out of control that ended in Claire's father and I having an almost physical confrontation.

Despite my best efforts, it became clear that I was woefully unable to provide any sort of help that was actually needed, and it was then that my childhood insecurity about financial and structural powerlessness made a significant comeback. Not being able to take a load off anyone made me feel emasculated. I felt like a loser. I couldn't take Claire away from it all for a bit, not even to my own place for a few nights of escape, because I didn't have one. I was on the dole. The best thing I could do was get out of the way.

Humans have an awe-inspiring ability to heal and adapt, though, and after a few months, life slowly began to rebuild, as it always does. I had to confront the fact that I tended to coast in life, to be too comfortable and let the years drift by me. No longer was it good enough to be a good musician and a nice guy, it was time to get my shit together. When the band regrouped a few months later, it had a much more personal purpose. My own family was constantly in some financial difficulty or other, and it scared me shitless. I started to feel that the talents I'd always taken for granted because they came so easily were actually a rare gift, and that I had a duty and an obligation to use them to help those around me. I was sick of feeling like a boy. I wanted to be able to help and support those who had done the same for me.

Kyshera had a fierce few months on the scene, followed by an abrupt few months completely off the radar, so I hit the bookings again and made an oath to myself that I wasn't dicking around any more, this was serious. The dole bullshit would have to go, too; I needed money if I was going to do anything of use, so I quit the jobseekers nonsense and took a job doing door-to-door surveys for a large market-research company. Soon we were back on the club trail, feverishly hammering stages around the country in an attempt to pick up where we had left off. I felt I could now justify being away gigging because I'd given it a more purposeful and adult objective than just kicking arse of an eve – but however you justify it, being away is still being away.

Claire's wounds weren't going to heal because I had 'a plan'. She needed someone there, and while I was off playing some pointless shit-hole somewhere, she found that someone. I didn't find out until just before Christmas, but after years of playing second fiddle to my music, Claire, at her most broken, had found someone who put her first. I could hardly blame her. Unfortunately, I found out by accident before she had a chance to tell me, and what could have been a respectful breakup became something much worse.

I failed to contain my pain despite the far bigger issue of what Claire was going through. And the guy turned out to be a complete fucking prick who was taking advantage of her vulnerability, so things were extremely complicated for all involved for quite some time. Seven incredible years together came to an end so suddenly and so messily. Sadly, music was one of the reasons why.

Shortly thereafter – and like an absolute douche-bag – I began an epic streak of sleeping with as many women as possible. Spiteful, vengeful, mechanical sex. I was overwhelmingly sad and angry. My already well-defined self-image of being an underachieving, broke, pointless waste of space was only stoked further by the guilt-laden comedowns of these shallow, desperate acts. The band had only started gigging seven months ago and I was beginning to think it was cursed already. We continued doing our thing and I did my best to keep on track with the mission, despite my well and truly fucked state. We had no bassist, no money, no backing, no interest, and the band had already cost me my girlfriend – but we rolled on regardless, gig after gig, mile after mile.

The shows were taking on a whole different meaning for me now, too; they were an escape from my outside reality. Even if there was hardly anyone watching us (a frequent occurrence), for that brief time I was on stage, I was no longer a failure. I was a guy in a kick-ass rock 'n' roll onslaught with my trusty Fender Strat in hand – and loving every fucking second of it.

Claire and I continued our relationship as friends, as we do to this day, and by the spring of 2006, life was settling down again. At twenty-six, I still lived in Little Mill with my parents (yes, I know, piss off) and, as well as

doing the door-to-door job, I was doing odd jobs for my dad's current venture – manufacturing all the mobile handsets for some big security firm. I have no idea how he blagged that one but basically our kitchen became a sweatshop, with me and my mum, complete with face masks, grinding and soldering components together, which I'd then deliver by the van-load to some factory in Brighton. You've got to admire his hustler spirit. His next scheme was computer repairs. Or was it industrial supplies? I lose track.

Anyway, I was putting in the hours with the door-to-door guys and starting to earn a few quid and, after auditioning nearly thirty-five bass players, Kyshera had found its man. From Cardiff, Joe Cicero was a highly experienced player, popular on the local scene, with all the technical ability we needed but infused with a cheeky, funky style which added a whole new flavour to mine and Carl's broth of brutality. He had a penchant for hitting the fire alarm as we left venues, so we'd be exiting one end of the club as everyone else was flooding out of the other. Excitable post-gig musicians, usually assisted by chemicals, really do some stupid shit. We were back in business! I'd written nearly another album's worth of material during the time the band had been active, and had also re-recorded some of the songs from *Made in China* to a higher standard to release as an EP. We continued to gig incessantly – anywhere that would have us, we'd be there – and every time we played London, I made sure the industry knew about it.

But the industry seemed to have gone very quiet. None of the guys who were originally interested were even around any more; then again, it had been several years since the original interest. But as a band, we were fresh on the scene and everywhere we played, the reviews were glowing!

Over the course of one, albeit fragmented year, we'd been hitting it hard, had a great live show, we were professional, reliable, getting good press and radio, had a good online presence and were building a supportive fan-base around the country. We were, in fact, doing all the things they say you're supposed to do. Hard work, consistency, and being nice, they say, always pays off. There's no such thing as luck, they say. Well, there is certainly such a thing as bad luck – and 'they' don't know what the fuck they're talking about.

CHAPTER 7

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

When the crash came, it came hard. A CNN Money report would later call it ‘Music’s lost decade’.

Collective sales of CDs, vinyl, cassettes and downloads worldwide had fallen from \$36.9 billion in 2000 to \$15.9 billion by 2010. The historic fall of the music industry had started. Swathes of record companies ditched the bloated gravy train quicker than rats from a sinking hedge fund, and shortly thereafter the world’s music was supplied almost exclusively by just *four* mega-companies, or tentacles thereof. And these mega-companies weren’t taking any shit. They certainly weren’t signing edgy, alternative, political bands with strange names – they had kids to feed, dammit, expensive kids.

We all know the story. Out of nowhere, some pesky nerds imposed a file-sharing scourge called Napster upon us all. Then, some grotesquely rich but definitely ‘altruistically motivated’ music superstars kicked off about it, lawsuits ensued, big money won but the poor, innocent music industry never got over the trauma, and it’s all been to shit ever since. Emerging artists like us had followed the stories at the time, but what none of us realised was that we were caught in the middle of a historic transformation of the very business we were trying to traverse.

In all transitions there will be collateral damage, and we were too busy printing CDs, drawing fliers and doing the old-school stuff to realise that we were it. The storm had been brewing for years and it seems almost inevitable now, but at the time we were all still following the old model: do gigs, get a deal, make millions, become a heroin addict, buy an island. Bands like Muse, Coldplay, Stereophonics and the like were the last of the bunch to slip through the old-school label machinery before the doors slammed shut. Those of us who were just a few years behind them would never get that chance. The music industry was plunging faster every month, and nobody knew what to do about it.

So businesses did what businesses do: they fired people, closed departments, cleaned out low-selling artists from their roster, found bizarre loopholes in their contracts which enabled them to make millions by suing and screwing their own artists, blamed other people and accepted no responsibility for their role in the mess. Neither did they see the coming zeitgeist as an opportunity. Nope. Slash, burn, sue, cut, sell, blame – and sink. And how did *that* work out for them?

It hardly happened overnight. Remember that Korn CD I had to go without food to afford? That's what the music industry had been doing to music lovers for decades. Do you know how much it costs to produce, print, package and ship a CD? Brace yourself – it costs less than a pound. Let me repeat that – the CD that you see on the shelf in the stores, costs less than a pound to make, *in its entirety*. My Korn CD cost me £17.

For far too long, the music industry and a tiny upper echelon of artists had been getting sickeningly rich by inflating prices way beyond what was affordable for most music fans. Most of the artists didn't fare much better either, including many household names who, despite a seemingly successful career, spent their entire lives in perpetual debt to their labels and unable to leave. Screwing the artists and fucking the fans was the business model, and they got away with it for much longer than you might believe.

The music industry has always been something of a 'fiction' industry, not just because of the vast discrepancy between the glamorous lifestyle it promotes and the desperate reality behind the façade – but because of the fact that its whole shaky structure is loosely glued together by bullshit, exploitation, marketing and a ton of dirty tricks. Wanna learn some of them? I'll give you some of the classics.

How would YOU like to be in the Top 10 music charts? That would be awesome, right? Well, it's dead easy and you need only two things, and talent isn't one of them. First, you need a warehouse full of CDs and second, you need a fucking ton of money. Got that? Cool. In that case, all that's left to do now is to take your fucking ton of money and buy all your own CDs. Every week, each country's chart company compiles their charts based on sales figures for that week's music releases, and if you can artificially sell (I mean, 'buy') enough thousands of your own stock, you'll

force your product up the ranks. Once you're in the Top 10, all the radio stations will play your song, exposing it to millions of listeners, many of whom will then go out and make further purchases of your song, sending it up the charts even higher on legit sales. All you did was set the ball rolling and force it into public view.

This continues into the digital age. Remember all the fuckery involving the Jay-Z album that was given away for free to the first million buyers of the latest Samsung Galaxy? Did that million count towards the chart figures if said million people didn't really buy the album, but the phone? As it turns out, they did, instantly granting the rapper yet another platinum album. A million 'units' were indeed sold – albeit to a total of one customer. Same blag, different dollar. And with streaming and online content, it's even easier for labels with large reserves of cash to force their content to the top of newsfeeds and trending pages where its presence will guarantee a snowball of real activity.

There is no shortage of rumours out there about the dodgy practices of the industry's good ole days, including the bribing of retailers, chart-boosting via the release of the same song in multiple formats, double albums being counted as two sales, labels reporting 'units shipped' rather than 'units sold' and so on. I missed these gory glory days so I can't vouch for any of this stuff personally, but I wouldn't be surprised if they happened somewhere at some point.

Oh, and here's another. Have you heard of the radio payola controversy? It's outlawed now but is still the way things work in practice. Right up until recently, record companies would straight-out *pay* radio stations huge sums of money to put their song on rotation. The station would also be plied with gifts, drugs, women, trips, use of the company plane, good times and, hey presto, we got ourselves a hit! It's doubtful that the artists had much knowledge of the questionable machinery behind their success. They probably believed it was all down to their talent, bless them. Other scams included bottlenecking the entire supply chain to the music stores so that your favourite high-street store could only have access to the releases sent over by the major labels. And isn't that called a monopoly?

I'm sorry to break the bad news to you, but your favourite artists aren't necessarily successful because they're good, they're successful because someone somewhere pumped a ton of money up them and wangled some dodgy fuckery behind the scenes. That's not to say that any of the artists in question *weren't* talented, hardworking, and deserving of their success, but that their talent and hard work had nothing to *do* with their success. It's an industry just like any other. And, to the guys in the boardroom, your favourite artist is nothing more than a product.

Surely you'd have to be good to get signed in the first place, though, wouldn't you? Regardless of the fuckery? Not really. Music is an art form, not a sport, so there's no score board or measuring system for what's good or who's the best. It's subjective. And most of the corporate suits haven't the foggiest idea about music, or whether something will sell or not, so they operate on a policy of 'throw shit at the wall and whichever shade of shit sticks, sign up a barrel-load more shit that sounds like that'. It's a lottery draw of 'twenty bands in – one band out'.

Think I'm being flippant? Major labels sign hundreds of acts every year, hundreds – how many do we ever get to hear? A variation on this theme is the familiar reality TV competition, whereby the public become attached to the personal journey of some poor bastards who get exploited for good ratings figures, and whichever one wins gets to have their one hit single before being immediately and forever forgotten again. Those shows were never about finding talent or building long-term careers; they were only ever about making quick injections of rescue cash for an industry whose business model was mental.

We assume that every band who gets signed to a label hits the big time, when really, it's just that we never hear of all the flops who also got signed by the same label that year. A label will sign and finance a whole bunch of artists, and whichever one happens to stick is rewarded with becoming the label's work mule for the next ten years, to pay for the losses made by the flops. Why do some artists flop and others stick? It's just the cold law of probability, baby. I learned way too late that it's such a bleak, soulless cattle farm, and that's why so many seemingly successful stars end up with

addiction issues, topping themselves, broke, or scribbling slave on their face.

That is the industry of old. The way it always was until very recently – and good riddance, I hope I hear you say! The problem for my generation of artists was, when the old guard choked out, there was nothing to replace them, and the next half a decade was a musical no-man's land. No labels, no signings, no sales and no alternative. It's easy to blame the arrival of the internet, file-sharing and digital formats for the death of the music industry but really, they're nothing more than just the cold march of progress. When the car came along, there were a whole bunch of pissed-off horseshoe moguls bemoaning the theft of their livelihoods by this fancy new technology but, victim or not, the world, the universe, the consumer and certainly the market, doesn't give a fuck – things keep moving and that's just how it is.

The music industry's insane, stubborn reluctance to embrace the changing times has become a thing of industrial folklore, and many other branches of industry which were later affected by the same trend (movies, software, etc) were able to learn from our industry's mistakes and co-opt the new technology for their own benefit. Our lot didn't do that, the fucking dickheads. As I've said, there will *always* be collateral damage in any transition, and for the music industry, it was my generation. It was many years before the dust settled and a new digital model appeared, and during that time, nobody – not the bands, not the labels, not the economists nor the fans – knew what the fuck was going on.

Personally, I'm all for this brave new digital-music world. Adios to that greedy, unimaginative, exploitative corporate cartel who monopolised what all of us were allowed to hear for far too long. Fuck 'em. Back then, if you couldn't get a record deal, your career was over. An artist back then could *never* afford to make an album by themselves and release it independently. It was financially *impossible*. Case closed. These days you can make an album on your phone and release it online the very same day without it costing you a penny and we should not downplay the empowering significance of that.

It took some time to get here, though, and we lost many good artists and songs in the process. I know because some of them were my mates. But for those of us who managed to stick around long enough to come out the other side of the storm, it's better now than it was before. We have the ability to create, record, produce, release and promote our art, all from our bedroom with no interference, censorship or bullshit from third parties, and share it with the world for hardly any cost. How we make any money doing this is the new problem. And how to get heard above the cacophony of everyone else doing it, is the other. The new model isn't perfect and there are serious issues around the value of music today but for the artist and the fan, it is much better than it was.

Social media is not only an incredibly powerful tool in the hands of the artist, but an essential tool in the hands of the disenfranchised everywhere. Everyone is now a documentarian with an audience, and the muscle of surveillance is no longer exclusive to power. The police have to be a little more careful these days, knowing that the roadside kickings of old would now be live-streamed by someone to the entire world within seconds. And remember the Arab Spring, otherwise known as the Twitter Revolutions? Plus, social media brings us closer together. It's much harder for a racist parent to pass their hateful bullshit on to their child when their child is chatting regularly online to other kids from all over the world. And if you feel like an outsider, these days your peer group isn't limited to your street – you can connect with like-minded people online, and these relationships are in some ways even more authentic than the ones we have in real life.

So I'm unquestionably a fan of the revolution that's happened during my lifetime, although there is a slightly bitter aftertaste that my career had to take one for the team. At the time, though, I didn't have the benefit of hindsight to contextualise the broader movement that was underway. I was just following the rules of the old world – get gigs, get on the radio, get some press, get noticed, get signed – and wondering what the fuck was going on. One minute, every major label is on me like a rash, the next minute: 'the number you have called does not exist'. Or maybe I dodged a bullet.

With Joe now in the ranks on bass, Kyshera continued blitzing the gigs through 2006, playing festivals, clubs, forests, wooden pallets, attics, bowling alleys – anywhere there were people. Oblivious to the industrial tsunami detailed above, I took out a credit card and hired a PR company to help us get some press. They were just as ignorant of the changing times as I was, and told me we'd need: a release (single or EP), a promo video, some new photos and a bio. I took out *another* credit card and got to it. They said they'd help us find a manager, act as our manager in the meantime, promote our gigs, get us in the mainstream mags and lots of other exciting stuff.

I'd driven to Bath to meet them in person and all seemed legit. This would be a big step up for us and I was happy to take a gamble on that; credit cards are magic money, anyway, aren't they? I'd already done the 'Kyshera EP' so, to the tune of several thousand pounds, I got a video made in London for lead single 'Superstar'. The cost of pressing up a thousand CD singles, new photo shoots and the PR dude was easily another few grand on top and, for the first time ever, I was in debt. I was still knocking on doors doing surveys by day, which didn't bring in enough money to cover my debt payments, and soon I was on a slippery slope. I had no idea I was digging myself into a hole that had no gold left at the bottom of it any more.

After seventeen eventful years, my parents decided to move from Little Mill to the Valleys town of Caerphilly and I, at 26, moved with them. Still having to make a choice between spending my peanuts on the band or spending it on rent, I figured I should triple-down on the career, so, yes, I was *still* living with my folks. It was sad leaving the village where I'd spent my adolescent years. I'd celebrated my eighteenth and twenty-first birthdays at the little pub there, gone through college and several relationships, and had all my ear operations while living there. It was where I became a guitar player, where I wrote *Made in China*, where I had my first play on Radio 1 and calls from labels, started gigging – all in that remote, tiny little village in the middle of nowhere. I had many great times and still hold many cherished memories of the small, tight-knit community there. Good, salt-of-the-earth people with whom I spent many important years of

my life. Had I not lived there, I wouldn't be the person I am today and it's very doubtful I would be making music.

My last hurrah there was an attempt at dating one of the girls from the neighbouring village who had moved to Cardiff. I am useless with directions: even if I've driven to a place a hundred times before, I will still not know the way. On my first journey to her place, I drifted through a crossroads while impatiently looking the other way and ended up flying, literally, over a pedestrian island, ripping my wheel clean off and ending up jack-knifed across a busy junction. If someone had been waiting at the lights, I would have killed them. I certainly killed the car; it was a wreck and had to be craned out of the road by a truck. I caused miles of tailback in all directions, my car looked like it had been bombed and I, miraculously unscathed, was only concerned that I was late for my date.

I explained my pressing predicament to the police and, after laughing in my face, they kindly agreed to drop me off at her house. It didn't occur to me that this wasn't a great idea. I arrived at the poor girl's house in the back of a police car, lights flashing, neighbours twitching their curtains and carrying with me everything that had been on my back seat: a bottle of wine and my guitar. We didn't date again.

It was time to move nearer to civilisation, and in Caerphilly a whole new series of adventures and dramas would unfold. We moved into a beautiful old chapel which stood alone at the top of a hill. It needed a lot of work, but it was stunning. Wide, open, unevenly shaped rooms with original woodblock flooring, an aura of history and a rickety old plastic upstairs conservatory, which was either perishingly cold or a sweat box. It was unique, dysfunctional, flawed, and charming: the perfect fit for the Kennedys. Within walking distance there were such mod cons as a bus stop, a twenty-four-hour petrol station, several shops, a post office, pubs and, not so far away, a train station. For us it was like moving to New York. I'd been chatting online to the singer of another upcoming local band, a heavy pop punk band called SAL, who were fronted by a powerful, colourful, and quirky female singer by the name of Cat Southall. It began with us trading contacts for the live scene and we'd started chatting from there. As it turned out, Cat was currently living in Caerphilly, so we arranged to meet in

person and hang out. A few days before Christmas '06, just after the house move, Cat and I met for a few drinks at a ludicrously trashy bar, complete with drunken karaoke wailing and much macho posturing from beta males. It was a perfectly bizarre setting for what would unfold.

CHAPTER 8

BOOM AND BUST

It was only supposed to be a casual drink but after half an hour in this shitty karaoke bar, infested with posturing 'roid boys and squawking tan-streaked monsters, I'd fallen truly, madly, deeply in love, and I wasn't prepared for it. This girl was *amazing*. Magnetic, hilarious, quirky, kind, intelligent, stylish – and the singer in a punk rock band, dammit! (I purposely saved the fact that she also happened to be insanely gorgeous till last, so you don't think I'm a dick. Too late?) Man, we just hit it off like we'd known each other forever. It was immediate. We laughed, drank, traded band stories, talked music and closing time came way too soon, so I invited Cat back to mine – which was a bit maverick, given I'd only moved in a few days before, everything was still in boxes and 'back to mine' really meant 'back to my parents' house'. But back she came, and we played music till the early hours, drank wine, and just talked and talked. I was reeling, giddy with the rush of my every emotion swooshing around like an enjoyable panic attack. What was happening?! The next morning I dropped Cat off at her place, fully accepting that she'd probably never want to hang with a loser like me again, but I was just thankful for that one, unbelievable night – and prayed she'd accidentally left something behind.

I'm not sure if it was good, bad, or exceptionally awesome timing, but a few weeks before that I'd also met Stefan Hinc. A brilliant photographer and a regular on the scene – picture a young Javier Bardem with ubiquitous camera around neck and half-smoked cigarette hanging from mouth and you'll get the vibe. I booked him to take some promo pictures of the band and he dragged us around a variety of 'interesting' locations for the shoot, including a network of underground, rat-happy, Chernobyl-esque tunnels beneath the local hospital, and a curious terraced house that had hanging pig heads and bloodied walls inside. Naturally, we became instant friends. Stef had recently inherited a semi-detached house right in the heart of Cardiff

city centre and was looking for a housemate, so I told him to stop looking and moved in a few weeks later. It was soon to become carnage central.

2007 kicked off proper with the usual blizzard of gigs, but the radio plugger I was paying was doing absolutely fuck all. I'd given them everything they asked for, and spent a ton of money for the pleasure, but not a single review or radio play of any worth ever came in. I'd done more by myself. After six months of nothing but expensive promises, I pulled the plug (pun intended) and shortly after that, their website and email address conveniently disappeared. Now the problem with PR is, you still have to pay them even if they don't do anything. They accomplish this magic trick by saying: 'hey, we did our job, we took your stuff to market but no one was interested; that's not our fault – how will you be paying this month?' This was a serious pisser, not just because of the lack of activity they'd got us, not just because I was now back to struggling to do all the PR by myself again, and not just because I'd plunged myself thousands into the red for bugger all, but for the months of progress lost to us while I was assuming these guys were doing stuff. I would love to say it was a lesson learned but for some reason it was a lesson that I would go on to learn again and again (and again).

So, I'll spare you the same plight.

Tip number 2 for upcoming bands: never, under any circumstances, *ever* pay for PR. If you want to throw money away, you can give it to me.

We did some killer gigs that year, though, like playing Guilfest for the second time (where Joe was nearly arrested for public pissing), Cargo in Shoreditch, Cardiff University, Borderline (one of our faves) and tons of others. I kept hammering them in the book and Kyshera kept hammering the stages. However, it was becoming noticeably tougher to get gigs. Venues were feeling the burn and starting to shift their focus towards cover bands and tribute acts to keep their doors open. Many had already closed down. 'Pay to play' had made a comeback. It had begun. Winter was coming.

But for now, it was still summer, and we managed to land a slot at a large, outdoor biker festival on the island of Anglesey. After the five-hour drive through the breathtaking, mountainous beauty of South, Mid and

North Wales, we arrived at a ginormous aeroplane hangar that they called...‘the stage’. Holy shit, this would be by *far* the biggest gig we’d ever played. With a Glastonbury-standard lighting rig and a speaker system you could hear from the mainland, thousands of leather-clad bikers from all over the country flocked to the place for a secluded weekend of bikes, booze, burgers and rock ‘n’ roll, and I couldn’t fucking wait to get up there! This was the kind of level I wanted to play at!

Unfortunately, when the time came to get up there, we quickly realised that we were tragically inexperienced for a stage that size. We were a band honed on the club circuit and I was used to hearing Carl’s drums blasting from right behind me, not half a mile to the left. It was weird. And off-putting. I needed our interplay to feed off so, with full rock ‘n’ roll swagger, I took a run and jump for the drum riser so I could 1) scream in Carl’s face a bit and 2) exit said drum riser by way of a classic rock scissor-jump! Awesome plan. What happened was I tripped and flew face first into the drum hardware, taking a chunk of my face off in the process.

‘Fucking hell, son, you’re bleeding!’ Carl shouted over his cymbals, as I embarrassedly pulled myself up and carried on playing. Shit, what a twat! But adrenaline is a wonderful thing. I didn’t feel anything – no pain at all. In fact, the only signifier that I’d even cut myself was the blood now dripping onto my guitar. I did the obligatory ‘who put that bloody drum riser there’ face for the audience and carried on with the set – giving it extra gusto to try and redeem myself – but after a few more songs I sensed the faces of the front row morphing from smiling to agonised wincing and pained averting of eyes. *Still* no pain. I gave that show my absolute all, running, jumping and throwing myself all over that vast playground of a stage, blissfully unaware of the bloodied horror show happening across my upper half, and as I strutted off stage, guitar thrust to the air like a trophy, I was met not with the roar of victory but a very concerned-looking medical crew.

‘Dude, it looks like you’ve been shot in the face!’ said one of the growing circle of spectators. As the medic dabbed and wiped and stitched and worried, onlookers covered their eyes, sucked their teeth and made noises like ‘urgh’, ‘aaaah’ and ‘wooah’. Oh great, it seems I’ve mashed

my face up for life! As it turned out, what I had was a pathetic little one centimetre cut, through which my adrenaline and stage cavorting had been pumping blood like a geyser. Basically, it looked way worse than it was, and as vain as I am, I was conflicted over whether that was good news or bad. It got me serious kudos with the biking crowd, though, who assumed that smashing my face on things and throwing blood everywhere was my regular on-stage shtick, and I got to enjoy being the dangerous, wild man of rock for twenty minutes.

Back then, my stage presence style could be broadly described as ‘fighting with bees’ – and it was the cause of many an injury. In fact, unbeknown to many people, being a musician carries with it a whole buffet of injuries, lifelong ailments, and health-and-safety shockers that you’d never think us poseurs would be tough enough to deal with. I’ve enjoyed and endured all the classics: I’ve been so fried from electricity coming through the mic that my lips have blistered; I’ve had a front tooth chipped off by some dude falling into the mic stand and smashing it into my mouth; I’ve fallen through a stage; I’ve fallen off a stage and broken my ribs. And we would regularly hit, bash and accidentally stab each other while jumping around many other tiny, dark stages. It’s all part of the apprenticeship: if you haven’t hurt yourself after years of gigging, then your stage show is probably shite.

What’s no joke are the tinnitus, hearing loss, vocal nodules, carpal tunnel, tendinitis, addiction and mental health issues (more on that later). These are not rock ‘n’ roll trophies; they ruin lives. Seriously.

Tip number 3 for upcoming bands: warm up your hands and voice before playing and *wear fucking ear plugs, you stupid bastards!* I didn’t have a choice with my tinnitus; you do. Don’t be a hero.

More shocking than any stage injury was getting a text from Cat asking when we could hook up again! Whaaaaaat!? Just a text from her would send my blood racing and my mind fogging over as I clumsily speed-punched a misspelt reply. My knees weak, my heart pounding – over a text?! What *was* this? There was just something about her; she electrified me. Hell, yeah, I wanna hook up again! To my complete and utter astonishment, we soon began seeing each other quite regularly, and yet every time I’d come

away with the same intoxicating endorphin rush. Floating on air. We'd both just come out of long-term relationships and it was probably best to take it slow (Cat's words, not mine) so we kept it casual. But keeping it casual came easier to Cat than to me and I started thinking about her all the time.

By now I was living in Cardiff – right in the busy centre of it – and my day job had evolved into a better-paid, part-time, choose-your-own hours type of deal. I was still knocking on doors, but whenever I wanted. Pretty cool, huh! I would get boxes sent in the post each week filled with empty questionnaires about what radio stations people listened to and it was my job to get as many people as possible to fill them in within specified postcodes. It wasn't a bad little number. They paid for all my travel (and hotels if need be), it was fairly well paid, and I'd got my doorstep sales patter down to a fine art so my hit rate was way in the nineties, meaning it never took me long to complete a box. It also meant that I was free to party every night. Now in the city after seventeen years in the sleepy, green, pastoral safety of Little Mill, I had lost time to make up for. Luckily, I was living with Stefan Hinc.

Soon our house had become a carousel of burlesque dancers, rock bands, girls, gibbering wrecks, friends of friends, drug dealers and random dudes no one knew. Every night of the week, our place was the after-party. Sometimes, I'd just bring the whole club back. Drugs made a spectacular reappearance in my life and were welcomed back with loving arms. I'd also taken up the new hobby of chain-smoking. The house became a landfill of sprawled limbs, ashtrays, empty cans, high heels, guitars, and broken furniture. It was a perfectly normal start to the day to climb over sleeping strangers on the stairs, clean chalky-white evidence from the smashed-to-bits dining table without disturbing whoever the girls were on the floor, while figuring out how to wake up whoever the dude was who's fallen asleep in the bathroom again.

Stef was always getting invited to exclusive events as a photographer and I was always a loyal and dedicated plus-one. After the show, the club, and the even *later* club – it was all back to ours. We'd have booze and other substances delivered by the crate-load at all hours and, for most of the time

I lived there, I was obscenely and royally fucking hammered. Man, we had some fun.

Adding to the emotional kaleidoscope of my new life was my ever-intensifying preoccupation with Cat. In another curious twist of fate, she'd also just moved to the city and we were walking-distance from each other. Naturally, I wanted to see her all the time, but my over-keenness started pushing her away – which made me even more persistent. Until then, we'd only seen each other one-to-one, but seeing her now in this new, social city setting took my awe for her to destructive lengths. I'd never seen anything like it.

She was the most popular person I'd ever seen, and anyone who knows her will testify to the truth of this. We couldn't walk the streets without her bringing it to a gridlock – it was like hanging out with a guru. It seemed she was loved by *everyone* and not just me. You see, Cat has a 'thing' – it can't be explained. It's a magnetism, a pull, an energy that everyone wants to be near. She genuinely listens to every word you say and right now, in this moment, she has all the time in the world for you, and only you. The more I saw her around people, the more I got to know her, the harder I fell for her.

As well as her general, all-round loveliness, she was all the things I wasn't. Popular, brilliant with people, outgoing, confident, funny; I thought she was just so fucking cool. The problem was, so did everyone else, and I started becoming insanely jealous. Before long, I was doing every form of stupid shit imaginable – suspecting my friends, randomly arriving at her house, drunkenly ambushing her nights out, checking her phone – just generally being a stupid, immature, fucking asshole. So, it was no surprise when she told me it was over. And being a stupid, immature, fucking asshole, I would react by going out, getting hammered and pulling girls.

I'd hit a brick wall with the band, too. The scene seemed to have died. Gigs were harder to get, and no one seemed to turn up any more anyway. All but a few of the record labels had closed down, the video, single and promo venture had been an expensive waste of time and I didn't know what to do next. After all the buzz, the hype, the press, the promise, and hitting the live scene like a band of wild bulls, it seemed to have just fizzled out. We were coasting. Yes, I could book us another gig in London, but what

was the point? Sure, I could release some new material and try to get some buzz behind it, but what was the point? There were no prospects any more, no one was getting signed, venues were shutting shop and the tools to do it all by yourself hadn't yet arrived. It was an eerie, strange time to be in a band.

And I'd run out of money. I'd got caught hook, line, and sinker in the credit boom of the past few years and was now drowning in the credit bust of 2007. All the money I'd spent on the band had been racking up interest big time and I thought it'd all be worth it when we got a deal – but no deal was forthcoming and red letters were coming aplenty. I knew it would catch up with me and I was now thousands and thousands in the red. At times, I was paying my rent on credit cards because I'd blown all my income trying to impress Cat. I started taking out more cards and moving the balances around, but soon they stopped giving them to me. It was bad. And yet I was the co-host of the party house! I couldn't start getting all sensible and frugal now, we had debauchery to provide, dammit!

It just goes to show, as the old saying goes: behind every fortune lies a wanker in debt. I was losing sleep over it, but I was too ashamed to tell anyone. I was tense all the time and every drink, every meal, every night out would fill me with anxiety, yet I did it anyway. I've always felt like a broke-ass douche and for a short time I'd been enjoying myself. But no more. Coming from a low-income background where absolutely everything was dictated by budget made me yearn for a life where I was free of the degrading constraints of that root of all evil. And here I was – in a rock 'n' roll band, living it up in the city, with a smoking hot 'girlfriend' (she just didn't know it) and STILL that spiteful, queen-faced paper bully couldn't just leave me be. I'd peered over the top of my income bracket for a mere second and now I was being dragged back down to the gutter where I rightly belonged.

Being poor and lower class is a major trigger for me and my default reaction to it is anger. It's a hard-wired insecurity and inferiority complex that was sealed in childhood. I used to fucking *hate* posh people. As soon as I'd hear the accent, no matter what they were saying, I'd already decided they were a cunt. It's probably why I was drawn to rock stars as a kid – rich,

shiny, successful, non-fuck-giving dudes who'd escaped society's rigid pre-ordained box and were living the good life, thanks to the power of their well styled rock 'n' roll awesomeness. I felt trapped in a Catch 22. If I'd had more money I could have recorded the album with a proper producer, not someone who was just blagging it (me); I could have had decent, working equipment, not a pile of wrecked second-handers; I could have hired a *proper* PR, not some bottom-feeding con artist; I could have bought a decent van, not the two-hundred-quid one that had an asthma attack every three miles; I could take my girlfriend (she just didn't know it) out for a meal without it keeping me awake all night. Those rich daddy's boys would never have these problems, the pricks, no: they'd just click their soft, spoilt little fingers and daddy would make everything OK for them. I had a lot to learn.

That's when I realised, I had to summon my inner Aitch. My parents had been broke our entire lives, yet they'd raised a family and given us a good life, so what the fuck was wrong with me? Hell, being broke was a terrain I *knew* how to navigate, and I had the best teachers for every blag, wriggle, excuse, delaying tactic and outright lie, right there at the dinner table. It was time to learn from the best and start writing some very stern letters to Mr Barclay.

I clued up on the credit swindle and, proudly following in my dad's footsteps, became an expert on the global financial system – meaning, I skimmed a few online forums from other blaggers about how to scam the bastards back and listened to some blokes in pubs. Soon, I had my interest frozen, my balances chopped down, they'd given *me* money and they were off my back. But I was assuredly not getting credit for a very long time.

And then there was this: 'Britain is facing its worst financial crisis for more than a century, surpassing even the Great Depression of the 1930s', panicked the *Independent*. Remember *those* good ole days? The days when some of the richest people in the world played poker with our money, destroying lives and entire economies in the process? Remember how it was us, the very victims of the crime, who had to foot the bill for the damage? Wasn't the word 'trillion' bandied around for the first time, leaving us all

wondering how come they could find that much dough to give to these rich criminal cocksuckers but not to give the local hospital a children's ward?

The global financial crash that dug its claws in around 2007 and 2008 gave a terminal kick to an already battered music industry, and if venues, labels and independent radio were managing to stay afloat before, they were all dead in the water now. In 2005 we did forty gigs; in 2008 we managed eight. It was heart-breaking to see iconic music venues that had been at the heart of so much rock 'n' roll history close down after decades of influence, and so many talented, hardworking promoters and club owners left jobless because 1) nobody could afford to watch live bands any more and 2) nobody could afford to be in a band any more. As always, the top one per cent of major label artists continued touring and doing just fine, but practically everyone else involved in the bulk of the business had to move back in with their parents, hang up the dream and join the jobseekers' line.

The game was up. The credit-funded feeding frenzy was over, and I would have to downsize. This not only meant having to leave the party house, but also that the band was going to have to finance itself somehow. I moved to a house share on the cheaper outskirts of town with five other guys. It was the house from *The Young Ones*, but worse. I had the downstairs front room onto the street, and it was fucking freezing. There was mould and grime all over the peeling walls, I refused to sleep on the shit-stained mattress, and – with six blokes all sharing the same small space – the place stank. Still, needs must. As for financing the band, after much deliberation and desperately trying to find any other solution, I finally accepted that our only practical option at that point was to form a covers band and pool the earnings.

People have no idea how fucking expensive it is being in a band. They'll say, 'well, why don't you have any money?' and here's why: guitars, microphones, drum kits, amps, strings, leads, electronics and computers all cost money, not to mention the years of lessons and learning materials you need just to get you started. Vans (and the relentless garage costs), MOT, tax, insurance, and the fuel that takes you up and down the country, all cost money. Rehearsal rooms, websites, posters, demo CDs, photos, videos; all cost money. Lots of money.

In ‘normal life’, once your bills are paid, your money is yours, right? Maybe you’ll save for that holiday? Maybe that new car? Or just stack it all up for a rainy day. When you’re in a band there’s no holiday, there’s no new car, there is only the band – and lots of rainy days. Like any addiction, it takes everything from you: your money, your time, your focus, your common sense, your relationships. Most people have no idea just how much is sacrificed for this wholly irrational pursuit, and while everyone fancies the glory of the stage, no one wants to sleep in the front of a cold, leaky, broken-down van on the side of the M5 on a Monday night with work in the morning.

So, I swallowed my foolish pride and started learning cover songs. Soon after that, Joe quit the band. He’d joined at an unfortunate time. Kyshera had a good name on the circuit when he joined but the scene had changed radically since then. The gigs had dried up, the money had run out and for the first time since exploding onto the scene two years ago, everything had started to feel bleak and difficult. We’d started getting ripped off and I’d started shooting in the dark – I didn’t know what the answer was or why everything had got so tough – and so things just drifted along. I think Joe could see where things were headed and jumped the ship before it sank. 2007 had started awesome and ended shit. I was broke, living in a squat, girlfriend-less (I just didn’t know it), the band had ground to a halt and was without a bass player *again*. I was knocking on doors in the rain for money and to add insult to injury, I was learning how to play fucking ‘Maggie May’ and ‘Wonderwall’. Dark times.

My on-again/off-again relationship with Cat was also causing a lot of aggro. She couldn’t trust a relationship with me to not bring a ton of joyless jealousy into her life and I...well, I just didn’t trust her, or anyone, full stop. I loved her, but I wanted her and the world around us to conform to my paranoid boundaries. I was loving our relationship to death. My relationship with Claire ending as it did undoubtedly played a role in my psycho levels of distrust, but being around Cat brought parts of me to the surface that I didn’t know were there: chronically low self-esteem, a fierce distrust of people, and a bitter ‘little man complex’ that under no circumstances would anyone ever make a mug out of me.

I blamed these feelings on her, for *making* me jealous by talking to any tall, rich, confident, funny guys but deep down I knew – the tall, rich, confident, funny guy just symbolised everything I thought I wasn't, and my dormant broke-ass loser triggers were all being stamped on at once. I felt inadequate and threatened. Blinded with jealous rage, it would never cross my mind that the dude might be a cousin, a friend's husband, gay, boring, or a complete wanker; to me, *all* dudes were a threat. And with a highly popular and social girl like Cat, the situation was a cancer that was eating away at both of us and ruining everything good about our relationship. I was seriously starting to embarrass myself by making scenes in clubs, spying on her, involving myself in her life in ways that I had no place doing, and just generally being a controlling, contaminating twat. The fact that she continued to have faith in me despite all the shit I was causing her is further testament to her empathic, patient, and optimistic loveliness – except for the time she swung a solid right hook straight into my face, hard.

If I was going to not destroy this relationship, I was going to have to change, and that meant confronting some difficult inner demons. I wanted to change, I didn't want to be this guy, but facing your deepest anxieties and insecurities, and the traumas that spawned them, is fucking petrifying. The solution, I realised, is having something that means more to you than facing the fear. In my case, it was Cat.

CHAPTER 9

BLUE-RINSE BINGO BRIGADE

On 12 January, 2009, at the age of twenty-eight, I started cognitive behavioural therapy. But we'll come back to that. Sticking to my tradition of avoiding the noise of naysayers, piss-takers, and contrarians, I kept it a secret. 2008 had been a tough one. The futile search for yet another bass player dragged on depressingly, the gigs had effectively ground to a halt and we were no longer able to rehearse in Carl's parents' garage, so now I had to find us somewhere else to rehearse. Rehearse for what, I'm not sure.

After a while, my brother charitably offered his services on bass to help us out, but after a short stint of a few months, it was obvious that it wasn't working out. He'd joined at an unfortunate time, too. We'd just started doing cover gigs and I hated it – going from smashing, swearing and shouting my way through a set of my own songs in a dingy rock club to politely playing 'Hard Day's Night' for a hall of blue-rinse bingo bashers was a serious clusterfuck for my unjustified sense of musical 'integrity'. The problem was that the money was good. We'd get over three hundred quid a night, for easy work, and the idea was that we'd pool it all to pay for a practice/studio place of our own. That was the idea, anyway.

Lesson number 4 for upcoming bands: everything will be fucked when you start earning money.

You usually hear this from millionaire rock stars whose lifelong brotherhoods have been corrupted by bitchy court cases over unfairly chopped millions. But trust me, the same happens with peanuts, too. If you're piss-poor broke and there's a nice stack of hundreds lining up in the kitty, it won't be long before someone will convince themselves that they're doing more than the others and deserve a bigger slice. Everyone will be suspicious of the designated money handler and be certain that they're skimming some cream. And if you want to use the money for anything useful, some poor bastard will have to bank it into their account, breeding

toxic suspicion in the process. Whether it's millions, hundreds or magic fucking beans, the whole dynamic will change once money arrives on the scene.

After years of slogging it on the dying music scene, Carl took to playing covers a lot better than I did. Easy work, no pressure, no disappointment, playing packed houses every night to people who *love* every song you play, and enough pubs to keep you in paid gigs for evermore. Unlike me, Carl had a family to support and that extra cash would come in very handy indeed. It also meant that we had to start choosing: do we play covers at the local King's Head and shove another few hundred bucks in the kitty or do we travel to some half-empty gaff in Birmingham, at our own expense, and play our own songs for free (I mean, for 'exposure')? It wasn't long before one took over the other and that made me itchy. I persevered for a year and I hated it.

Plus, the original plan of pooling the funds into Kyshera seemed to have gone squiffy somewhere. Now we were 'splitting it'. My brother and Carl, both being big personalities, clashed like absolute fuck and they'd have these wild pre-gig arguments backstage while I just sat there cringing in the middle. And in that mood, we'd then have to hit the sequined stage and play two hours of ancient classics to OAPs in antique Valleys social clubs. It was fucking dire.

It began to look like the end. Kyshera had tried everything and failed. The money had run out. The gigs had run dry. The morale, passion and belief had fizzled out and the industry was on its arse. My bro seemed to hate every second of being involved (and made it well-known), Carl's heart had begun drifting towards the breezier, easier, bill-paying gigs – and I was broke, frustrated, and mindlessly wrecking my relationship with Cat in my spare time.

I started renting an industrial unit in Newport and moved all our equipment in there, with the aim of us weathering the storm by making another album while the industry got back off its knees. After six months of our hardly ever all being able to be in there at the same time, I had to lug it all back out again and hand back the keys – the whole pointless venture costing me a further chunk of money I didn't have. As much as I didn't

want to accept it, it was looking like it would be better to wrap it all up and move on.

There was one flicker of hope, though. Responding to an earlier ad for a bass player was the aforementioned Matt Warr, whose band, Alison's Op, had just split up. I already knew Matt to be an incredible player and a tyranniser of stages, so this was a little lifebelt in a year of drowning in shit. My brother had only joined to help us out of a bind but the truth was, it was taking up loads of his time and he'd joined at the lowest point in the band's life so far, and it was leading to a lot of personal tensions. In the time he'd been in the band, most of the gigs we'd done had been in social clubs playing godawful covers to pay for a studio that no one used. He got to play hardly any Kyshera shows as planned and it was time to let him off the hook. Matt was ready and willing to take the baton. The race, however, was just about to end.

We managed to do exactly two gigs with Matt. And for one of them I had swine flu. It was at The Water Rats in London. I started feeling seriously unwell before the gig, shivering, stomach cramps, throat like razors, weak, sweating, dizzy. Lying in the van under a mountain of sleeping bags, the idea of doing an intense, energetic, roasting-hot gig in half an hour's time was not appealing. Somehow we got through it, and all the way back to Wales I was clasped in a foetal position in the back of the van, writhing around with cold shivers and unable to talk, having blown the last of my voice on the gig. It was awful, and my voice didn't come back for three weeks. Welcome to the band, Matt, the singer's a fucking psycho.

But despite the injection of fresh energy into the band, it seemed the inertia of separation was set in motion. When I spoke to Carl about it, he said he'd also been feeling the burn for quite some time and had been looking out for other projects. And in one short, amicable phone call, after five years of musical massacring together, the consensus was made to part ways.

It wasn't planned that way. There was no prior discussion. No build-up. No drama. It's just the way the conversation went. And within minutes, it was over. It was strange. It felt...wrong. Like the break-up of a relationship but negotiated in grunts and shrugs. In those five years we'd done hundreds

of gigs, made hundreds of memories, had a million laughs, and kicked a thousand arses. I was a starry-eyed country boy when we met, and Carl had been a positive influence on me. He'd brought me out of my shell and injected some lightness into my perfectionist intensity. He was a huge character, hilarious, a great guy and a true friend.

Before Carl, there was no Kyshera and now it was a band people knew, respected and feared. The notion of there ever being a Kyshera without Carl on drums had never existed and there was no contingency plan for this sudden turn of events. Even if I was comfortable looking for a replacement – which I wasn't – his would be enormous shoes to fill. Carl was more than an incredible drummer to me; he was a presence, a force, a big brother figure, and an important part of my journey, both musically and personally. So, what unfolded was a real fucking shame.

Tip number 4 for upcoming bands: bands ruin friendships. Not you and your mates, you say? Get back to me on that.

Musicians are a funny lot. Especially when your band consists exclusively of men. Generally speaking, men don't talk in the same way women do, or share their feelings, fears and sadness, even though they feel it just the same. It's usually hidden under a blanket of banter, macho talk, and piss-taking. Neither Carl nor myself expressed any deep sense of bother about calling it quits; it was very much a blokey slap on the back 'oh well, we had some good times, see you around mate' sort of deal, and never mentioned again.

The problem is that when presented with that void, other people fill in their own blanks, and it wasn't long before a few gossiping bastards had planted seeds of conspiracy in both of our minds, which quickly turned our amicable parting into a nasty, shameful affair. Accusations and blame flew from both sides, involving money and commitment, which resulted in us never speaking again. It was my first painful lesson in diplomacy and the importance of communication. I never let on, of course, but I was gutted. My comrade with whom I'd shared so many formative moments was gone and the giant, Carl-shaped space in my life was felt greatly.

But I kept keeping on. I kept wading forward through all the other shit that awaited me. And there was a lot of it to wade through. My diabolical

finances, hijacking my relationship with Cat, career considerations as I approached thirty, and my relationship with myself, which was starting to sour as well. After all the faith, praise and success that had started me on this journey five years earlier, my energy, morale and hope had gone right down the drain. I felt defeated and deflated. I'd gone charging full-tilt into a barren, industrial no-man's land, full of vision and gusto, only to be steadily eroded by the depressing bleakness of opportunity and spirit that was the music world of the Noughties.

I started out only wanting to make a record. But after the unexpected hysteria it generated, I began thinking that maybe, just maybe, this might be the way that I'll drag my family out of the cycle of poverty we've always known. As my winning streak became a distant memory, the pressure kept building until I was ready to blow. I felt like a complete failure. I'd let everyone down. In hindsight it seems laughably naïve that I would beat myself up so hard after a mere five years in the game, and it was feeding a broader vicious cycle – the more insecure I was feeling, the more easily I would flip around Cat and other men. Then I'd act like a dick, make a scene, regret it, and have another reason to feel shit about myself.

And then I got fired. I totally deserved it. I may be the only person ever to be fired from a low-grade door-to-door survey job, for fraud. Desperately trying to maintain the highest pay quotas possible, so I could hammer the balance off my credit cards, I had become a master at scamming the system, or so I thought. The surveys were all back-checked so I needed a real name and address on the things, but instead of leaving them to be filled in by the 'respondent', who would either lose them or never answer the door again (meaning no pay for moi), I'd gather the details and just scribble results in for them. This meant that over the past few years, my hit rate had been fucking legendary and the company would send me all over the country as their 'go to kid'. Alas, one day I rinsed the gravy train a little too hard and some upstanding, killjoy, do-good wanker ratted me out. And now I was truly fucked.

No band, no money, no girl, no job, no house, no life. I thought being in a band was supposed to be cool? My band was a big fucking black hole that just sucked everything else out of my life. My head was a mess: without the

band, without music, without that identity and purpose, who was I? There's nothing else I can do. I'm not skilled in *anything* else. There's nothing else I *want* to do! Thirty was around the corner and I knew I needed a cognitive cleanse to clear the path ahead. My thoughts were not my friend and they couldn't be trusted. For the first time in my life, I sought help.

That's when I started going to see Linda for the cognitive behavioural therapy. Working from an extension to her house, which she'd converted into a top-of-the-range reflexology, massage and therapy suite, Linda was clearly in demand and I had to wait a few minutes. Man, I was nervous. This was unfamiliar territory for me. Hell, just *talking* about my feelings was unfamiliar territory for me – especially if it included admitting that I was not in control and I was scared. God knows how this would pan out. One session and never come back, probably. The door opened and as the previous dude squeezed past me to leave, I didn't even look up to acknowledge him, my head hung low in shame, embarrassment and apprehension.

'Hi James, I'm so sorry to keep you waiting! Come on in!'

Linda stood at the door manifesting the opposite of everything I was feeling. Warm, calm, and unassuming was the vibe I got, and young, blonde, and bubbly didn't fit the image of the serious-looking therapist dude I'd expected from TV at all. How the hell was she ever going to understand my situation? Well, as it turned out, Linda is excellent at her job. I found that just being able to talk openly about my feelings and fears with someone who was free of any assumptions or judgements about me was exhilaratingly freeing. Nothing fazed her and the more she questioned and the more I talked, the more the fog started to clear. I started to feel better. Maybe I wasn't a loser after all. Maybe I'd just been thinking about things like a loser?

The hour flew by and there was still so much to unload, so I booked another sesh for the following week and I couldn't wait until it rolled around. I was a balloon that was about to burst, and someone had just let all the anger, frustration and sadness out, leaving me floating through the air without a care. I knew that as soon as I got home, and saw those red letters in the post pile, I'd start having palpitations again, but that first session also

gave Linda all the info she needed to pinpoint the exact species of demon that lurked within me.

The following visit, we began what turned out to be a whole year's worth of weekly sessions, which I fully threw myself in to, doing all the recommended exercises, diaries, and practice as well. So many aspects of my life were getting radically better as a result of me not being a pent-up, pissed-off, self-hating little shit – including my relationship with Cat, which never again suffered the little man silliness of previous years. I felt I was ready. I got it.

Everyone needs a Linda, and if you're interested, dear reader, I would love to share with you some of the pearls of wisdom I gained from the experience. Some of it might help *you* to stop being such a difficult pain in the arse, too. We can but try.

CHAPTER 10

SECRETS OF MY THERAPY

I'm not going to lie. It wasn't easy. In fact, it was really, really tough, but doing CBT changed my life. That's not to say that I'm demon-free and levitating above you all in a blissed-out state of serenity and zen – far from it – but at least I've got the tools now to minimise the damage. Tools that I've been able to use again and again for wildly diverse needs. It seems we're our own worst enemy. There's a voice in our heads that we're trapped with for our entire life – and it's a right 'orrible piece of work. If we spoke to other people the way we do to ourselves, we'd get our nose broken, and for good reason. And that is what CBT tries to do – figure out the nature of our particular thinking patterns and the root issues creating them and then hijack the internal dialogue with some home truths.

It's caveman's fault. We're not designed to be happy; we're designed to survive, and most of our time as a species on this planet has been spent as hunter-gatherers (drummers are still catching up), with modern humans a very, *very* recent arrival on the world stage. That voice in your head telling you to be scared, telling you that you *can't* do something or that you *shouldn't*, or 'what if it goes wrong, how will I survive then?' – that's the ole selfish gene trying to keep you alive in the long grass. 'Stay safe and don't go chasing rainbows, there's probably a lion there waiting to rip your ribcage out.'

Unfortunately, there's absolutely nothing we can do about this; it's just the way we're wired. And the problem gets worse when you spend your entire life getting the positive vibes smashed out of you by others – parents, teachers, bullies, bosses, society, or the media. It's inevitable that we're tangled-up messes of insecurity, fear, frustration and anger. All we can do is understand the forces at play, rediscover our true selves and know how to keep that damn internal arsehole in check.

Mindset is often the invisible cause behind many other problems in our lives – in relationships, work life, finances, health – not always, but it's definitely a factor. We back out of speaking up in work. We continue to drink more than we should. We comfort-shop. We lash out and regret it. We avoid risks. But this annoying, life-diminishing baggage can be weeded out. You'd be amazed how much opens up for you once you get out of your own damn way. At the root of it all is...well, a root. Each of us has our own root issues, buried deep within our past, and just like the root of a tree, that shit is clinging on tight and ain't going nowhere. Confronting it is terrifying, but you have to dig.

Linda would ask me streams of questions which walked backwards towards my root issues, such as: 'what happened?' > 'and how did that make you feel?' > 'why was that?' > 'and if that was true, what would that mean?' and so on. After a few sessions, I saw that I was always ending up at the same point: I had chronically low self-esteem. All the other stuff ('this bloke made me look weak' or 'this situation was loaded against me') was a mere cover-up for the throbbing, raw nerve underlying it all: I was painfully insecure and real life kept touching that nerve. After a while, I could see it clearly affecting everyday situations and I was able to start rolling my eyes at it, instead of reacting, but that took some time and effort. I did CBT every week for a year and there's absolutely no way I can substitute that for a quick digression in this book, but some of the points that resonated the most with me are as follows:

Break the loop. If you try too hard, people will avoid you. If you're all shy and dainty, no one will notice you. If you're constantly criticising, no one will listen to you. People treat us based on how we behave, regardless of our reasons. It's not everyone else's job to know the inner workings of your issues or the backstory to your poor life. They've got their own shit going on – it's your job to handle your own baggage. Sad but true. I know that the loud, coked-up bloke in the pub is only coked-up and over-compensating with mental levels of bravado because he's socially anxious. I *know* that and I can feel sorry for him all I want, but chances are I'm probably just going to avoid and ignore him because it's bloody irritating. His behaviour will have the opposite effect to what he wants.

Our thoughts inform our behaviour and our behaviour determines how other people react to us – and that reaction then confirms our thoughts about ourselves. It's a loop. If you feel socially anxious (as *everyone* does), you might end up getting a little too drunk or trying a little too hard to make people like you, and when they back away, it will just confirm for you that you are not likeable and people suck.

You need to break the loop. It's so hard, but usually it's the things we think are helping us that are making it worse. Substances, trying to impress, being a know-it-all, being a hard man, shyness. STOP. Be vulnerable. Be stupid, be humble, be interested in others, chill out and let your damn guard down – you'll find it makes *everyone* feel more relaxed and people will gravitate towards you like moths to a bulb. Why? Because everyone is dealing with their own versions of the above and when someone comes along who's just cool, it's a breather for everyone. Keep doing this and a new loop of thought/behaviour/reaction will form real quick, a much more positive one – for you and everyone else.

Dig deep. Whatever that horrible little issue is that's fucking everything up for you, find it! You probably already know what it is, but I think that this is something that needs assistance. It's terrifying confronting our deepest fears, most of which are deeply rooted in childhood trauma, but trust me, when you revisit that trauma as an adult, it's not as scary as you might think. More than likely, you'll feel a warm sense of relief to have finally looked it bravely in the face, and you'll have an overwhelming amount of sympathy and love for your poor younger self who's been carrying that scar ever since. It takes courage to do this and I know the thought of it is beyond the pale for most, but it's the best thing you will ever do for yourself. Let that shit go, man.

It's all in your head. Sorry to burst your bubble but no one is thinking about you. Don't worry about what other people might think of you because they won't. People will comment, ohhh people *love* to comment, I'm a musician, I know all about that one – but ultimately, they don't really care. They're distracted with their kids, their deadlines, their own problems. They're not thinking about you.

Don't be sad, this is great news! You are free to do whatever the fuck you want, safe in the knowledge that getting anyone to give the remotest of shits will be the hard part. For years I was paralysed in social settings, believing that everyone was judging me and that they could all see through my thinly veiled disguise. Nope. Absolutely everyone else in the room was too busy feeling the same way about themselves – which is why when you drop your bullshit and just start being open and normal, everyone wants to be your mate. Realising that everyone else in the room is fighting battles you can't see, makes it easier for you to turn your fears into empathy, and that'll make for a much better look.

It's all relative, man. If all you focus on is what you *don't* have, you'll be depressed forever. It's important to aim high but it's also vital to count your blessings now and again, and keep yourself in check, too. I wanted the big record deal, to buy my parents a house, to tour the world, to make a classic album, to make a difference – lofty goals, and I worked hard for them – but along the way I lost sight of what I already had: good health, loving parents, amazing friends, a band, a talent, and I wasn't starving. Many people yearn for the items on that list and yet here I was, flippantly ignoring them all.

Most of us in the West today – even the poorest – enjoy living standards higher than even royalty knew not so long ago. That's not to say we don't have a lot of work to do, but it's important to recognise progress made and triumphs won, too. Otherwise you get depressed. And then you get slow and then we're back to that loop again. See where you are in the broader picture. If you're reading this book, you're probably somewhere near the middle of the comfiness curve. It's important to remind yourself of that before you get consumed by a sense of inadequacy and meaninglessness (more on that to come).

The important thing with all this is practice. As a musician, I know about practice. Don't start big; start small, but be consistent. A little every day. For me, once I'd acknowledged my core issues and seen the daft, cyclical nature of my behaviour, it was time to apply it out there in the big bad world. This is terrifying. Dropping my guard, potentially exposing myself as weak and stupid and vulnerable in front of everyone was my deepest fear. I decided that the next time some dude talked to Cat and I felt

threatened, I was going to join the conversation. Not in a cockish way, I was going to be unassuming, cool with the guy, and not let myself regress into that weird version of myself that I hated. I failed the first few times; my fears and low self-esteem got the better of me.

But practice does make perfect and before long, it was my new normal behaviour, and d'ya know what? Nothing bad happened. Only good. I made more friends. The guys I thought were threats started to feel threatened by *me* and my desirably calm, self-deprecating openness, and for Cat, nights out with James became a thing she wanted more, not less. It's obvious and simple when you think about it, but we're all so enchained by these deeply rooted issues that it seems impossible to ever overcome them. It's not. Trust me. Your issues may be way worse than mine and the scale of the trauma may be unspeakable, but help *is* out there, and old habits *can* be changed. Can you *imagine* if every child had CBT in school? Our whole society would be so different. Maybe it's about time we replaced religious studies with CBT? Don't be held hostage by these demons any more, dear reader. They may have taken your past, but do not let them take your future.

As I said, I had a reason to go to CBT. I had something that meant more to me than the fear of facing my fears. What means more to you?

CHAPTER 11

YEAR ZERO

2010 was my Year Zero. Not in a Pol-Pot-killing-rampage kind of way, but I'd emerged from a year of CBT with a fresh mentality and I was ready to build a new republic on the ashes of my old order. Now that I'd stopped being an immature, jealous little Napoleon, things between me and Cat were drama-free for the first time. My best mate Aled had been chucking me some work, covering for him at the schools he taught in while he was on tour, so I'd been earning a few quid, too. I felt like I could have ownership of my circumstances rather than just being pissed off with them. Mentally refreshed, emotionally cleansed, and musically rested, I was starting to get the itch again. I missed the road trips, the adventures, meeting new people in new places, the camaraderie and most of all, I missed the buzz – the indescribable euphoria of sweating it out on a sticky stage with your mates by your side and the power of a thousand decibels in your hand. Without it, I just wasn't living my true calling. An essential piece of me was missing and I knew that I would never be completely happy without it. And what else was I going to do? Get a job in an office somewhere? Watch TV and long for the weekend? Forever?! Music was my retreat, my comrade, my guru, my coach, my vent, my drug, my destiny and the defining core of my identity. *I had* to do it.

Matt felt the same – in fact, he was positively frothing at the mouth about getting the band back up and running. Ah, Matt Warr. I haven't properly introduced him yet, have I? Well, by night he's a wild, rabid beast, stomping and screaming his way around the stage with four strings, and by day he's one of the gentlest, most supportive people you could ever wish to have in your life. And fucking hilarious, too. His relentless wind-ups and ability to keep a professional poker-face when convincing someone that he's Bon Jovi's brother-in-law/a CIA operative/a porn star/all of the above are talents to behold. Matt brought some rock 'n' roll into the band and I

blame him entirely for the subsequent all too frequent time I spent drinking late-night whisky at seedy strip clubs. He was as blindly passionate about music as me, a few years younger, living with his parents, working a job he hated, and saw music as his escape, spiritually and literally. We quickly became good friends and our daily chats about global Kyshera dominance reignited an undeniable fire within me.

I just needed to make sure that I didn't get sucked into the same traps that ruined it all the first time around. Jumping through hoops for an industry that no longer existed after all the hype of *Made in China* had cost me several years, put me in paralysing debt and sucked the joy out of everything. This time, it would be about the music again, and enjoying it; getting back to that early sense of innocent excitement, wonder and fun. *Made in China* was old news; it was time to let it go and get creative again. It was time to make another record. But this time, I wouldn't send a single copy to the evil empire. Fuck 'em. No, this time I'd stick to what's always worked out best for me. I'd do it myself.

I started by setting up a record label. Konic Records (another made-up word, which I unofficially defined as meaning 'anything that is otherwise indefinable or defies categorisation' – yup, pretentious and proud) was to be our release platform for the next record, and Matt and I immediately set to, recording what was to become the *Paradigm* album. Many of the songs were already written and I wrote the rest as we went. In fact, we'd already started tracking bits of it by Christmas 2009.

As part of my self-imposed Get Out of Debt programme, I moved back in with my parents (oh, piss off). Do you remember that rickety old upstairs conservatory/greenhouse thing they had? The one that rattled in the wind, leaked in the rain, was an oven in the sun and Siberian in the cold? Well, nobody was using it, unsurprisingly, so I claimed it as ours and it became our DIY recording space. It was far from Abbey Road, but it would get the job done. With random offcuts of carpet on the floor, sheets over the windows and a noisy electric heater, it was a sound tech's murder scene. 'Impossible', they'd exclaim, 'a recording cannot be made here'. Well, we had no choice.

And given that I would be doing everything myself – editing, programming, mixing – I needed somewhere that was near my bed. It had no light source, no power, no insulation, no comfort of any kind, *and* we had no drummer, so I had to use my old *Made in China* method of programming all of the drum parts by hand using live samples.

For the record, there is NO substitute to having a real drummer on your track, and even after using all the tricks in the book, as I do, it's still not the same. But I didn't have a drummer, I didn't have the time to find one, couldn't afford to pay one and just wanted to make a record, pronto. So, I programmed them. Sue me, nerds.

But I guess God must be a drummer, because no sooner had I finished programming the entire album's worth of drum parts than the computer died. Like, kaput. Game over. It was only a little home PC, but I couldn't afford a new one. Thankfully, Claire came to the rescue, like the angel she is, and generously gave me hers just in time for Matt's bass sessions. Problem was, now he didn't have any drums to play along to, so he had to record the whole album to nothing more than a click track! No vocal cues or guide guitars, nothing. Apologies if I'm talking double Dutch here, but listen to *Paradigm*, with all its rapidly shifting time signatures and tempo changes, and tell me that's not fucking impressive.

What's more, he was doing it all with gloves on, because in December 2009 it snowed like hell and our flimsy corrugated-iron ceiling was letting it in all over the place. We'd scoop it off the amps each morning. It was piercingly cold, with no heating other than the shitty little electric thing that Matt had to point at his hands while playing. Anyone looking in from outside would have seen two blokes in hats, gloves, and parkas huddled over a fire inside a derelict shack, and most definitely *not* have concluded they were making an album.

Matt completed his bass tracks to the entire album in one day – I wonder why! With similar eagerness, I rattled out the rest of the album (guitars, vocals, drums, electronics) throughout January, and by 1 February, 2010, *Paradigm* was finished! I made a bloody racket up there, frantically recording a prog rock album until the early hours every day in my parents' home, yet every time I asked them if it was too loud, they'd say, 'we can't

hear you at all, love'. God bless 'em. It's far from a perfect album in terms of production, but for an album recorded in a month inside a dilapidated freezer on a home PC, it certainly ain't bad.

As an album, *Paradigm* isn't as ambitious as *Made in China*, but it's undoubtedly got its fair share of what Oasis fans might call 'shite'. Such as the frantic 'Fiction' – just over two minutes long and over 200bpm with a blur of non-repeating sections and an intro riff composed using a high-brow twentieth-century classical technique called serialism, but played in a punk rock style, of course. Or 'Frequency 1' – an orchestral piece with no melody, rhythm, or key; just dense blocks of sound contrasting with each other to create changes of tonal colour. The politics are still there, with songs about the media, Remembrance Day, celebrity culture, globalisation and revolution. But on the whole, it was a much rougher, rockier-sounding album that had something resembling actual songs on it. And playing them live was going to rock.

Unlike *Made in China* before it, *Paradigm* was going to be an officially released album, available in the shops – and produced by moi. But my ears, remember, are shagged, so I thought it wise to have it mastered by someone with working lobes, as an error correction measure except, surprise surprise, I couldn't afford it. I was penniless. By that point, I was struggling to afford petrol as all my money was going out on debt payments. Aled once lent me a tenner so I could get to a radio interview. So, without hesitation or question, and proving once again how insanely fortunate I am to have such incredible people in my life, Cat loaned me the five hundred quid I needed to get it done. Basically, without my ex and current girlfriends, the album would never have been made, so please do thank/blame them.

On 1 March, I drove to Twickenham to get the album mastered by Jon Astley, who had worked with other small bands like The Who, but with poverty being the relentless comedic twat that it is, my car broke down halfway there and I was piss-takingly late. Thankfully, Jon honoured the full session, and in a setting laughably juxtaposed with my personal circumstances, I sat there sipping posh coffee in a state-of-the-art studio overlooking the River Thames, watching rich people drifting by on their boats in the spring sunshine. The bastards. That would be me one day.

Arriving home with my car jerking, choking and billowing smoke, I felt victorious, returning from battle with the prize in my hands: the *Paradigm* master disc. That long-dormant feeling of pride and excitement was swelling up in me again. The bloody album was done! Well, kind of. There was still a shit-ton to do before that disc in my bedroom turned into something that others could hear and buy, the first thing being the artwork, and I knew exactly who to ask.

Not only was Lorna Stevenson an old neighbour and family friend from back in the good ole days of Jock Strap the Awesome, but she was also a professional artist with a strong portfolio of TV and print work. The last time she'd seen me I was half a metre tall with a towel pegged around my neck, so not much had changed. Meeting at her flat in Barry, I showed her my basic sketch, which was shit – essentially matchstick men. A week later which she produced the incredible finished article you see on the album cover today. Then there was the registering of rights, digital codes, CD duplication, promo, gig booking and all that other fun stuff, but the album itself was done, and it was done via the communal charity of girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, former neighbours, sturdy bassists and bloody amazing parents. Not a suit in sight.

Things had changed a lot since *Made in China*. The dust from our industry's gargantuan crash was settling and a new model was finally taking shape. By 2010, artists were able to get music into the stores by themselves, using a variety of new web-based services that didn't force you to depend on the old way of doing things, like getting a record deal. Of course, whether anyone would know your release was out, or whether they'd buy it, like it or give a shit, was another story.

Having tied up all the aforementioned excruciatingly boring stuff that's needed for a commercial release, it was time to start promoting the thing. I learned all this along the way and probably screwed most of it up, but I intended to fully utilise these new tools to get *Paradigm* into as many hands, ears, and hearts as I could. Matt and I spent days scouring the internet and directories, compiling lists of journalists, magazines and papers to send promo copies to and, as before, we treated it as a day job – up early and on the phones.

An actual day job had yet to materialise, so it was perfect timing. Matt was working part-time at a shop and I was still working as a part-time cover teacher but that would soon end once Aled's tour was over. Surprisingly, I was thoroughly enjoying it. After years of knocking on doors in the rain, sitting in a warm, rainbow-coloured classroom, on a miniature blue plastic chair, drinking coffee and talking about guitars with a bunch of eight-year-olds was my kind of gig.

I had no teaching qualifications or formal classroom experience; I was, essentially just a beneficiary of nepotism, a lucky bastard with friends who had their shit together way more than I did. And this was real teaching: shiny shoes, jumper and tie, kids calling me Mr Kennedy, teachers calling me 'Sir'-style teaching. If you look up the word 'blagger' in the dictionary, there is a picture of my jammy, beaming mug. It was fun! What better way to start your day than hanging out with a bunch of excitable kids for whom life has yet to steal away their dreams, wonder and self-belief? That energy can lift even the most stubborn of spirits and I taught them all the things I would have loved to have learned at that age. I've no idea whether Metallica's 'Enter Sandman' was on the syllabus, but that's what they got. I consider it my good deed for future society.

We were actively seeking a new drummer and we had a very brief flirtation with a nice guy called Rich. But after two jams with him, his gentle and precise rendering of the songs drove Matt batshit crazy, so he took matters into his own hands and contacted an old college mate of his. Rhys Jones's style was far from nice and gentle. Another stocky Valleys boy, a rugged ex-rugby player with shoulder-length hair, tattoos – and one eye. He told us he lost the other one when he was 'shot in the face' but I suggest you take that with a huge pinch of salt.

Rhys arrived with a ton of gear and proceeded to smash, crash, double-kick, cross-stick, blast-beat, uppercut and power-punch his way perfectly through the songs. In fact, he played them better than we did. We knew by the first verse that we'd found someone special. Rhys is a machine. The Terminator of Rhythm with the memory of Rain Man. The guy can play anything, and he has a 'musicality' to his playing that is a rare and difficult thing to quantify. He seems to just know what you're going to do before

you do it, and then his phrasing and dynamics trace yours in a complementary and beautifully musical way. And he's loud as fuck. And crazy. YES! Another gleaming jewel had been discovered in these undermined and undervalued valleys.

We scheduled *Paradigm* for release on 12 July, and in the spirit of 'fuck the music industry', I made sure that CDs were only available from the online store of the anti-sweatshop campaigners No Sweat, who would get a split of all sales. For the month of the release, we booked two special launch shows, one at The Water Rats in London (home of the swine flu incident) and the other at the regal and swanky Globe in Cardiff, on 10 July and 1 July, respectively. We were going at it hard and we wanted to crash back onto the scene with maximum impact: new album, new line-up, new mindset and no fucking prisoners. It was a promising sign of how different things had become in this new digital democracy that we were able to record, promote and release an album completely by ourselves, in just six months. Our cottage industry PR efforts were paying off and *Paradigm* was getting some great reviews, with not a penny wasted on a promo company.

'A whirlwind of Avant Rock that will leave you wanting more...like drinking twenty Red Bulls in ten minutes, a big musical head rush, for the mind, body and spirit.' *Flavour Magazine*:

'An overdose of ideas when, even at its quietest, guitarist/singer/mastermind James Kennedy is more exciting than ninety per cent of bands today.' *Shout4Music*:

'If Kyshera's quest is for individuality, then they've hit the mark here, with complex compositions running the gamut from schizophrenic riffing to lounge jazz.' *Rock Sound*'

One of my favourite magazines, *Sound on Sound*, spent almost all the review slagging off Wales, but eventually compared us to Mars Volta, Muse and Soundgarden, albeit as a criticism, not a compliment.

For two dumb-ass musicians, working out of a leaky shed with zero budget, Matt and I were doing all right. Matt was as driven by the dream as I was, and throughout the whole process of making, releasing and promoting the album, I was well aware that I had not only the best bassist in the world, but the best band-mate in the world. When we weren't doing

band stuff, planning band stuff, working on band stuff, rehearsing, or discussing it all on the phone, text, or email, we'd be at the pub – talking about band stuff.

Tickets were selling nicely for the launch shows but with the ever-mounting costs of CD-pressing, rehearsal rooms, fliers, petrol, distribution and merch, it wasn't long before we had to accept that a lack of funds would quickly become a terminal problem for us, and things were going too well for us to slow down now. I didn't want to do it. Nobody wanted to do it, but it was the obvious solution: we'd have to hit the pub covers circuit again. The money was just too easy, and for a struggling band like us it was a no-brainer. We told ourselves it would only be temporary, but before we knew it playing covers had become 'what we did' on the weekend and we stacked up a healthy kitty for Kyshera doing it. As always, though, there was a trade-off, and as well as being vacant during the week days 'because I was working on band stuff, man', I was now literally vacant every weekend, too, which is less than ideal for a relationship.

Tip number 5 for upcoming bands: being in a band is expensive, and whether you like it or not, money will *have* to come from somewhere.

Unless daddy can give it to you, or you take a blood loan from someone (label, bank, gangster), then playing covers is a damn easy way to pay for things while maintaining your independence. Sure, your ego may take a hit, but if that means more to you than funding your band then you don't deserve to be in a band in the first place. Playing cover songs also benefited me in many other ways that I never expected, such as stamina. Cover sets are usually about two hours long. And that's with no sound tech or monitors, just a crappy little pub PA system which struggles to overpower the screaming, drunken hordes in front of it. Doing Kyshera gigs became a breeze after a few months of playing pubs and we would all crack up laughing when other singers complained about their voice being blown on tour.

Singers often ask me what tricks I use to maintain a consistent voice while touring, all of them carrying an arsenal of breathing devices, lozenges, special drinks and rituals that they obsess over, but the simple truth is that my voice has been toughened up by singing for hours upon

hours at rough-arse chicken-wire joints around the Valleys. As much as I still hated doing it, there were much harder ways to make a few grand for your band than playing guitar with your mates. And Christ, we saw some sights.

The launch parties were an enormous success and remain two of my favourite gigs. It was mostly an audience of friends, family, and hardcore supporters, which made for a nice vibe and it felt bloody great to be back. Cat's band SAL opened for us in Cardiff and tore the fucking roof off the place, showing us up at our own launch, and opening for us in London was a spellbindingly talented Maltese singer-songwriter I'd discovered by the name of Carrie Haber. Blasting those new songs with a ferocious new band and looking out into the smiling faces of good friends and family was a touching moment that still stays with me. I just had to make sure that I didn't let it get as bloody serious as it did last time.

Afterwards, we fully indulged in the standard partying, boozing, smoking, shouting, spewing and regretting, but I haven't forgotten that this was only possible due to Matt's girlfriend at the time giving me the money to buy a few celebratory beers. Don't feel bad for her, she was a stripper and you have no idea just how much money they make. But thank you again, girl who shall not be named.

With the album out, Matt and I set about packing the rest of the year with gigs and keeping the bulldozer rolling. Kyshera was back, baby! As was my sense of purpose, which made the fact that I was piss-poor broke and living out of a little bedroom at my parents' house at the age of thirty feel more like a noble and necessary sacrifice, rather than pitifully sad. In six months, we'd made and released a commercially available album which was already fully paid-for, with money we'd earned ourselves, and not a penny or percentage owed to anyone. That's how you fucking do it!

The album had been well received, our line-up was world-class, I was gradually chewing through my debts and Cat, for reasons unknown, was still with me! Sure, I'd had a rough ride the past few years but as the dude says: 'it's a long way to the top if you wanna rock 'n' roll', right? And I was in for the long haul. The other guys were, too, so before you could say

'be careful what you wish for', I was back on that hamster wheel and running for my goddamn life.

CHAPTER 12

BARE-ASS NIGHT TERRORS

‘I’m gonna smash that cunt when we finish, bro,’ Rhys shouted across his cymbals as we played ‘Brown-Eyed Girl’.

‘What cunt, man?’ I mouthed back, in between strums.

‘*That* fucking cunt over there,’ he nods.

‘Uh, *why*, dude!?’

‘He’s been staring at me all night, bro. I’m gonna wrap a fucking equaliser round his head when we finish.’

Not considering the possibility that said ‘cunt’ may have been staring at him because he was currently lit up on a stage performing, Rhys was convinced during *every* show that there was someone there who: 1) was a cunt and 2) needed ‘smashing’. Sometimes the whole room would be threatened with a smashing. Oh, and in case you’re wondering, an equaliser is what he named the steel bar that he always kept by his side on stage. The problem with auditioning or interviewing someone for something is that you don’t get to know the whole person until you’ve been working with them for a while.

Until a few gigs in, it was unbeknown to us that Rhys, for all his uber-human musical genius and generally gentle manner, was a bit fucking mental. I know, I know. I hear what you’re saying and yes, *all* drummers are mental (I guess you’d have to be, wouldn’t you!). But it’s one thing to be mental when you’re successful and you’ve got some helping hands around. It’s another when you’re struggling to do everything yourselves and you’re stuck all night, every night, with someone who wants to smash everything that moves with a steel bar. That shit starts to wear thin quick.

It was a slow creeper, and all was bliss for the first few months, but as the gig count increased and the cunt count with it, it started to become a big problem. Every gig now came with some new, extracurricular drama that needed sorting on top of everything else. When you’re an unsigned band

doing all your own driving, lugging gear, getting lost, organising, selling merch, packing away, lugging gear, driving, getting lost, breaking down, there isn't much head space left over for babysitting a roaming, scaffold-wielding murderer. One night I snapped.

'I'm gonna fucking kill that cunt, bro.'

'Why NOW, man?!'

'He's using my drum stool and didn't ask me.'

I found him backstage, glaring at the drummer of the support band and absolutely shaking with rage. Peering around the stage curtain I saw the poor, grinning drummer finishing his set, sitting unknowingly on a psychopath's drum stool.

'The guy's about fifteen fucking years old, for god's sake!'

'I don't care, bro, I'm gonna fucking *kill* him.'

Whoever that hapless drummer was – you owe me. Somehow managing to get Rhys out of the venue and into our van, we had an emotional shouting match, with me unable to contain my disbelief at the level of pettiness on display and Rhys maintaining that he was fully in the right. Nobody won, but in the meantime the stupid bastard who caused the whole kerfuffle in the first place was able to leave unscathed and unaware.

I hate arguing, it leaves me unsettled and distracted, and Kyshera was on next and had to be fully set up in ten minutes. For me, the gig was already ruined. This was going to be the last time I ever stepped on stage feeling that wound-up, unfocused and drained by this bullshit – or so I thought. After the gig, we all agreed we needed a band meeting.

All this was a mere side show, though, for on stage, the gigs were always killer – no pun intended. Kyshera had the best fucking rhythm section in the land – no contest. Matt and Rhys were a tight-knit, rhythmic hurricane. It's always been the case that I'm the least accomplished musician in the band – I'm more the 'jack of all, master of none' type of guy – but those two together had to be seen live to be believed. That volatile fusion of passionate musical telepathy plus all the peripheral drama and friction that sandwiched the gig, led to a highly charged, angry energy on stage – and the injuries increased with it.

There's a pub in Birmingham called The Crown. It is one of the UK's treasured (but, inevitably, now endangered) jewels of live-music history. Black Sabbath played their first gig there, the UK's first live folk-music recording was made there back in the Sixties, and other rock 'n' roll royalty, including Robert Plant, Jethro Tull and Marc Bolan have all graced its stage – and the stage survived. Until we played there.

I hadn't even sung the first note; the tension on stage was already about to blow as we booted the set off with much jumping, stamping and swinging of things, and after just a few bars, I fell through the stage. Not only did I shred half the skin off my leg and leave my jeans looking like the Hulk's in the process, but I also left a gaping hole right in front of my mic stand, obliging me to perform the entire gig in full spread-eagled rock hero pose, with my legs fully outstretched either side of the hole and bleeding throughout. There's no way I could have paid for the damage and the venue seemed more worried that I was going to charge *them*, so we all just silently acknowledged the problem and we slid off without mentioning it. It was on this same run of dates that I fell off the edge of the catwalk at Sin City in Swansea, breaking my ribs, and in London, I 'accidentally' smashed Matt in the face with the head of my guitar. Ironically, it was Rhys, almost always the cause of the pre-gig stress, who would come away unscathed, seated and protected as he was by a barrier of drums.

After finishing *Paradigm*, I was keen to make up for lost creative time after the *Made in China* record-label carrot chase, and I started work on what would become my first, very strange, solo album: the uber-experimental and electronic *9.i.P.* As far back as I can remember, I have never differentiated between musical genres; there was just music I liked and music I didn't. While my mates in school were slagging off hip hop as 'not real music', I was a big fan of Ice-T and Public Enemy. The genre didn't matter to me, I just liked the music. It was the same in my college years when I discovered electronic music and all my muso peers dismissed it as 'not real music', whatever that means. The first time I heard the likes of Squarepusher, Aphex Twin and Autechre, it was like the first time I heard Steve Vai as a starry-eyed nine-year-old – although the mushrooms may have helped this time around. Electronic music became a dominant

presence on my playlists and I grew to firmly respect the genre, getting further immersed in the likes of White Noise, Merzbow, Tod Dockstader, Stockhausen and musique concrète (music created from manipulated recordings of natural sounds).

So, no, I have never been a musical snob. The fact that those weren't 'real' instruments didn't bother me in the slightest. Musicians often confuse themselves with gymnasts; whoever can play the fastest must be the best, whoever can sing the highest must be the best singer – what a load of nerdy, self-aggrandising wank. For me it was always just about the music. Does it *do* something for me? I don't care how they got there. Whether the artist is doing it live on a piano, a laptop, an orchestra or standing on their head slapping a pan with their dick is of no relevance to me. It's not a test, I'm not scoring you on it. I'm just *listening*, man. So, realising the possibilities for the limitless sonic potential provided by technology, I threw myself into the deep end of the most experimental waters I could, and started composing fully electronic pieces on the computer. Obviously, this would never work as a Kyshera album so I would put it out as a solo release instead. Because I could.

I wanted to go as far out to the musical fringes as possible and see what was there. Using my trusty computer, I started experimenting with extreme 'nested poly rhythms' (unplayable by mere humans), chopping up the humble semi-tone into microtones (unheard of in Western music), speech rhythms, and music devoid of any pitch, rhythm, or structure at all. I wanted to see if emotional responses could be provoked in the listener by timbre alone. Simon Cowell would love it.

My personal life was beginning to settle, too. I'd got the bug for the schoolteaching thing, and thanks to the timing of another teacher's long-term ill health, I had lucked out with a full-time position of my own. For the first time ever, I felt like I had a proper job. I always had the feeling that people saw me as a bit of a bum, a scruff, a waster musician-type, but as soon as I said I was a schoolteacher, I'd see their whole face transform into an expression of shock and respect. I still hated them, but it was a sneaky little 'fuck you' I could subtly throw into the conversation whenever I saw some middle-class douche giving me the judgemental once-over. Things

were happy and steady with Cat, thank god, although me being away gigging every weekend wasn't ideal; we made sure to have a 'date night' once a week.

I was still drowning in debt but slowly and gradually, it was getting easier. I started doing private home guitar lessons for extra cash and set up my own venture called the Kennedy Music Service, for which I approached all the local councils with pitches for community music projects. Before long I had a busy and eclectic schedule of daytime schoolteaching, after-school workshops provided by KMS, private home lessons in the evenings, band production and corporate team-building projects. Whatever I could get that paid, I'd be there. I carried the weight of a heavy imposter syndrome during every single one of these engagements, and as I'm not trained or qualified in any of them, I always felt like I was blagging it and that soon I would finally be caught out. But poverty is a ruthless motivator, and so long as the enquiries came, my answer would always be yes.

Gigging with the covers band all weekend and working on Kyshera every available second didn't leave any space for personal pleasures or recreation but that was a problem I was willing to have. I hadn't had a holiday in over ten years, anyway, and while everyone else had spent their twenties travelling, drinking, and shagging, I'd spent mine 'building'. It was all about 'building'. I didn't want to be skint; I didn't want to live within the limits dictated by my social class, I wanted to do great things, I wanted to *be* something. And I was aware that it was on me to make it happen. The crowded little bedroom at my parents' house was basically an office with a bed in it, and there was work-related mess everywhere, jumbled in with dirty clothes, used plates and a growing collection of empty beer bottles. I did *everything* from that room and when I wasn't gigging or teaching, I was in there, hunched over a computer, working on Kyshera and Operation Future. At that stage, I had hardly any personal possessions and could have fitted everything I owned in the world into the back of one small van.

Exercise and vegetables had never featured in my life, and for a guy my age I was needlessly unhealthy with a commendable beer gut, thanks to too many last-minute, late-night microwave meals and bedtime beers. If I ever had a free night when I wasn't gigging, working or seeing Cat, my treat to

myself would be to sit in that exact same computer chair all night by myself with an extra-large pizza, a crate of lagers and an entire box of chocolates, which I'd speed-guzzle until I was sick, while watching marathons of David Icke videos on YouTube. Yup, I'd become one of *those* guys.

Disillusioned with the entire political system, I'd fallen headlong into the world of conspiracy theories and I couldn't get enough of it. Endless documentaries about underground tunnels, aliens, vaccinations, the monetary system, false flags and shape-shifting princes would feed my cynical mind into the early hours. I'd stopped voting years ago and my former feelings of debilitating confusion, powerlessness and injustice had been replaced by a fully formed answer to any and all questions. That they were *all* bad and it was *all* fucked. There is a surprising comfort in believing that.

It was this very sentiment that led me to write and record, in one afternoon, the song 'Know Your Enemy', which was released in the spirit of the current austerity culture, as a free download in early 2011. All the typical lefty jargon is in there, including: 'We are many and they are few', which is still being used by the Labour Party in 2019.

The song's simple, chanty, march-like energy made it a new favourite in our set and we started wearing complementary orange Guantanamo-style boiler suits on stage, which just made it even funnier when Rhys would talk about 'killing some cunt, bro', because I'd be able to joke that at least he was already dressed for jail. All that killing talk did stop for a bit after our 'chat' but then a new issue arose – Matt had managed to get us on the bill for 2011's North by North East (NXNE) Festival in Toronto, and Rhys didn't have a passport.

Getting a slot on those big city festivals isn't easy and if we accepted it, we'd also get passes to tons of industry seminars, showcases and parties and potentially get to meet some of the industry fat cats who fly in from all over the world for that week. It would be fucking awesome; we *had* to do it. With only a few months to go, the passport was a worry. The band would pay for it, but the band couldn't legally order the thing. As time grew near and the nagging hadn't paid off, the time was up. We had to go without him.

And I'm glad we did because it still stands as one of the best weeks of my life! Matt and I trekked off with our guitar cases like charity shop Beatles; staying first at our friend Sarah's house in London, whereupon we promptly got insanely shit-faced in Brixton until 5am. We had an hour's sleep, Matt burnt his mouth, and I can't remember even being on the eight-hour flight. Toronto was in the middle of an historic heatwave when we landed; it was glorious.

Our first port of call was to meet up with Matt's contact there, Maryse Benge. There's always a lingering doubt at the back of your mind when you organise something over the internet with someone you've never met, involving money and big promises – that 'what if it's all bullshit?' feeling. Fortunately, Maryse, like all Canadians I've met, was exceptionally lovely and genuine. Sharply intelligent, an advisor to the Canadian government, stylish, kind, and given to replacing all of her swear words with a letter, such as 'what the F, man!?!' She couldn't do enough for us.

How did Matt meet her? He hadn't. He'd met her brother on a flight back from Sweden (side note, Matt only dates girls from abroad) and the rest had been arranged online, hence my hovering dubiety. But we couldn't have been in better hands. Maryse was the It girl of Toronto, she knew everyone, she knew all the cool places and she gave us the keys to her high-rise apartment right next to the CN Tower. Yet another faith-restoring example of the heart-melting support and charity that has been freely offered to us as musicians by good people all over the world. We weren't sleeping there though – oh no, *we* were sleeping at Canada's number 1 award-winning luxury hostel.

After climbing twenty-five flights of stairs with my cases in the defiant heat (Matt was on a different floor, in a different room), I opened the door to my dorm and was immediately punched in the face by the most pungent waft of terror, which hit the back of my throat and startled me off my step. It was pitch black in there – at two in the afternoon?! Timidly tiptoeing into the dark, I could feel a floor full of litter around my feet and a claustrophobic lack of air or useable space in the room. I could hear groaning, snoring, farting and the smell was just...it was fucking

unbearable. I could sense that there were a *lot* of people squeezed in there, even though I couldn't see any of them.

The hippie at the desk had told me which bed was mine (top bunk) so I threw my cases up there and left them to fate. Award-winning, my arse! Unless the award was for the worst-smelling shithole this side of hell. Racing downstairs and gasping at the fresh air, I texted Matt to say I'd see him at the bar. He said he was already there. I needed a drink. Entering the little makeshift bar they'd squeezed into the lobby, I saw Matt chugging down a large Canadian (the drink, you filth-minded perv) and he looked like a changed man. There was a vacancy to his gaze, like a startled deer with post-traumatic stress.

'How's your room, man?' I ask.

'Dude, you have no idea...I... I... What's *yours* like?'

A silent, knowing nod was exchanged and the subject was never mentioned again. God only knows of the horrors that lurk in those darkened lairs. As for me, my way of dealing with it for the next week would be alcohol, lots and lots of alcohol. That's always the answer.

Fuck it, let's get out of here. Time to explore. We sunk a few crisis beers and were a little fuzzy with jet lag and lack of sleep, but outside the sun was glaring and the whole city was filling up with musicians and music-industry types from all over the world – you could feel the buzz of the place growing every minute. We spent the first day getting our bearings and the first thing that struck the two of us was just how *big* everything was. It was my first time seeing real skyscrapers, and even the pavements were enormous compared to the cobbled, metre-wide ones that we're used to. They had *everything* there and I loved it. The stereotype about Canadians being friendly was proven within minutes; anyone seeing you with a map or talking about going somewhere or just pausing to *think* about going somewhere would immediately volunteer to be your personal tour-guide for the day. One guy offered to lose a day at work just to show us round (we only met him in the line for coffee) and when I took a picture of a building across the road, the traffic stopped to let me do so. I shit you not. And once they hear a British accent...

We weren't there to sightsee though. We were there to kick ass and take names. After spending the first day and night getting royally trolleyed, day two was when we would get serious. Everything would be happening at the fittingly colossal Hyatt Regency Hotel in the centre of town: music managers, label guys, bookers, and bigwigs would all be using this place as their hub for the week, to meet and discover new talent. For the past few weeks, Matt and I had been feverishly printing and preparing fliers, business cards, CD demos and press packs, and we didn't travel all this way to dick around with them.

The plan was: alarm for 7am, be ready and meet in the canteen for eight. There was no need. I couldn't fucking wait until seven. My entire night's 'sleep' was spent clutching the sheets of my spindly little top bunk in fervent fear. I lay there, frozen and wide-eyed, staring out into the darkness, speculating frantically on whatever beast or presence was torturing the dude on the bunk opposite me as he screamed and thrashed around his bed all night like something out of paranormal fucking activity. It went on all night, yet everyone else was sleeping just fine. Maybe he always did this and they were used to it, but for a first-timer with no warning, it freaked me the fuck out.

As a sliver of morning sun brought a cloud of visibility into the room, the first thing I saw as I assessed the situation opposite was his big, brown, naked ass staring back at me. There was a fully naked guy right opposite me, our bunks so close that his head was practically on the end of my mattress. Completely naked...except for his boots. And now he was sleeping soundly, the son of a bitch. Glancing around the rest of the room, I could see the others for the first time. There were indeed about twelve guys packed in here and I could now see why they all slept at random hours. Hard hats and boots on the floor, high-viz vests, foreign paperwork – they were foreign construction workers, sleeping on the cheap. The room was like the aftermath of a slasher movie; empty food cans, ripped-up magazines, dirty clothes, grime, sticky liquid trails. You couldn't see the carpet, which was probably a good thing. This was clearly a hostel in which no one gave a fuck, but at least I now had a visual idea of what was in it; previously, it had been pitch black every time I'd been here. And why was

the night-time howler opposite me bollock-naked but still wearing his stompers?

Matt had had a similar adventure, except he was a bottom bunker and the German guy above him had been hammering some girl all night, shaking the entire, rickety unit around in the process and talking filth in German throughout that long, long night. And *he* hadn't seen the showers yet, either. What a feat of design genius they were: you could have a cold, dribbly, brown-water shower in one grimy, sticky-floored corner of the bathroom while watching a Mexican take a dump right in front of you, *at the same time*. Who wouldn't want that?! These were the mornings for which alcoholism was invented.

Despite our fragile, sleepless composure, we managed to squeeze as much out of those industry events as humanly possible: meetings, promo, flesh pressing, TV and radio interviews. We dragged ourselves to *everything* and played shows in the night. My exhaustion made an appearance while doing a live TV interview with Alan Cross, one of Canada's most loved and respected music journalists, as I said, 'it's great to be here at South by South West'. Which is in Texas.

And how, with no serial-killing drummer, could we achieve such a feat as a gig, I hear you ask. My Blackberry. I put all the drum tracks on my phone, and we played along to them like a backing track. Crazy, I know. A bit of a con, too, but Matt and I just refused to stop momentum – no drummer, no problem – much like Carl and I made do without a bassist. The machine must keep marching forward. The funny thing was, no one even mentioned it or seemed to notice or care.

On our final night we finished our set, all hot, sticky and soaked with sweat, and the crowd chanted for us to do it all again, so we did! No one seemed at all bothered that the drummer had been replaced by a mobile phone – so long as it was loud, the mosh pit continued throwing tables, cracking their heads, slipping and sliding on spilt booze and creating general fucking carnage, regardless. It was great fun. Adrenaline and alcohol seemed to be doing a decent job of keeping us propped up during our week of zero sleep and diet of free hostel pancakes.

At the booze-up afterwards, I saw him. The naked screamer. There he was, laughing and enjoying himself, the fucking ass-proud destroyer of dreams. With post-gig adrenaline and alcohol rushing through my veins, I made a beeline for him.

‘Dude! What the *fuck* is up with all the screaming! And what the *fuuuuck* is up with the ass and boots thing?!’

Silence and a look of confusion, his mates exchanging shrugged shoulders and unintelligible mutterings. Ah, of course; he didn’t speak English. But I *had* to know, I *had* to! Egged on by that testosterone-driven after-show belief that courtesy and boundaries no longer apply to you, I pressed on with a cockish charades version of the enquiry.

Point.

‘Yooooou.’

Pillow hands.

‘*Sleeping.*’

Point at ass.

‘Ass!’

Point at boots.

‘Boots!’

Point.

‘Yooooooooooooou.’

Make screaming and wild, writhing gesture.

Point at self.

‘Me? NO sleeping!’

Looks of confusion turned quickly to that of concern, and he and his mates started to back away cautiously. The bar manager came over.

‘Is there a problem here, guys?’

‘No, no, I’m just trying to...’

‘OK, OK, let’s drink up, guys. Last orders at the bar.’

My gentlemanly and very much fully dressed nemesis gets gently ushered away and the whole bar is now eyeballing me, shaking their heads disapprovingly and tutting like *I’m* the madman! And in a few hours’ time, right on cue, there I was again, staring into the darkness, suffering the shrill, harrowing screams and metallic trashing of bed frames from this cheek-

baring, boot-wearing pain in the arse. The bastard *knew* what I was trying to say to him. The onstage glory of a few hours ago quickly diluted back to the grim reality of my economic standing. I'd given up on sleep anyway.

Before we left Toronto, we made sure we did all the touristy stuff like going to the top of the CN Tower and walking on the glass floor. On our final night, after hauling our gear up ten flights of stairs for our final night of sleepless doom, I found that my key card was no longer active and I couldn't get in. It was 5am and after a week of no sleep, too much booze, gigs, heat and hostel horror, this minor inconvenience took on a symbolic significance. As I skulked back down to reception, I passed Matt's floor and I saw him standing down the corridor, staring at his door. He was having the same problem with *his* key. I watched as he hung his head in passive defeat, paused for a moment's careful reflection, gave a single, visible sigh and then, with the full force of his size-ten Doc Martens, kicked the fucking door clean off its hinges. I just stood there with my mouth open as he casually entered the room and went to bed, leaving a hallway of debris, dust, and wreckage behind him. I on the other hand, politely requested that my card be reprogrammed, apologised for inconveniencing them and climbed my way back to the house of pain like a true chump. No hotel rooms, homeless people or groupies were harmed during the making of *my* story, Mötley Crüe!

It had been our first jaunt abroad as a band and while it may sound like an absolute horror show, we both agreed it was one of the best times of our lives. A further testament to just how much that half an hour on stage really means. Musicians are used to discomfort and, that aside, we were free out there. No day job, no boss, no commitments or obligations and nowhere to be other than the next gig – or maybe the tacky sports bar called Shoeless Joe's, which we frequented every single day because they served super-size jugs of cold Canadian beer and all the barmaids seemed to have been flown in direct from an elite modelling agency in Gorgeousland. Playing songs you've written in faraway lands with your best mate, partying every night with new people, making new friends and seeing new places – all of this was only possible because I was in a band and bands got invited to do things like that. And all I had to do in return was turn up and do the very

thing I love to do anyway! Going back to being Mr Kennedy on Monday would be tough.

CHAPTER 13

ARE WE THERE YET!?

After getting a taste of what it felt like to perform in exciting new places, Matt and I knew we needed more of it. Settling back into normal life was weird and we'd only been away for a week! Until now, we'd worked so hard building up our domestic audience that we'd never focused on elsewhere, even though most of our sales were in Europe and the US. The costs of doing so had always made it impossible for us as an option, anyway. But now we were thirsty for it and getting on an international tour was fucking impossible. As usual, all doors were closed. We'd proven our mettle as a live band, shown we were willing and able to slum it, overcome obstacles, turn up on time and kick ass every night – and our live shows *always* had glowing reviews – we had an album out, tons of live experience, a growing fan-base and great press. We'd come up during the worst possible time for a band and yet we were still standing tall and trucking hard. What we *didn't* have was money, and despite what those TV shows tell you, money talks and talent is cute. Over the years I'd contacted every bloody agent, booker, promoter, label guy and tea boy in the land but nobody would take a risk any more: you were either U2, or you could fuck off.

For now, though, it was back to work. We needed the money. Money, money, money; what an absolute bore. I know I've said it before, but there is no glory in being poor. Only the middle classes think it's cool, the rest of us think it sucks. And being poor is *expensive*. It's easy to save money on vehicle costs when you can afford to buy a decent motor in the first place. It's easy to get better credit terms, set up nest eggs, maybe invest a little and shop around for a career change when you've already *got* money. But when you're starting from fuck all, you basically spend your entire life staying afloat from minute to minute – and saving *anything* is impossible. You'd be amazed, and appalled, at just how many people in my industry have got

absolutely fuck all, and I'm talking about people you've heard of. This is the cruel misrepresentation of life as a musician; there is the one per cent at the top who make shit-tons of money, and there is everyone else who makes music at a loss.

I worked on the band for eighty hours a week, unpaid. I'd get up at 5am and sit at that desk, emailing, promoting, designing, booking, creating, arranging, and battling until I crashed around 2am in the bed next to the desk. My parents worried about me because I'd never leave my room. I'd eat my breakfast, lunch and tea at the desk, working as I ate. Come the weekend we'd be out doing cover gigs to pay for the websites, CD printing, band van, equipment, rehearsals, merch, videos and, if we were lucky, food. While I was doing all of this, I wasn't earning any money – in fact, it *cost* me money to do it. Crappy, low-paid part-time jobs would come and go, but in reality, I was working *all* the time, and for nothing more than hope. Hope that it would one day have all been worth it. And you can't pay your bills in hope.

We had a few more gigs that year but, essentially, we were just treading water now; doing the same old circuit of venues that were the only ones still standing for bands of our size. The issues with our weapon-wielding, non-passport-owning sticks man still plagued us and with our sights now set on pastures new, it was time for a chat. Again. The problem was, while we were in Canada, he'd joined another band and was now turning up to our gigs an hour late and threatening to 'smash' any promoter who had a 'problem with it'. There was no way we'd ever be able to slum it around Europe like this and by the end of the year, all our mental gaskets had blown. It was time to part ways.

Can you fucking believe it?! Every time the band would get some momentum, we'd have to sit in the pit stop for six months to find a new bloody member. It was becoming a farce. My problem was that I've always taken the band so seriously. I don't take *myself* seriously but when it comes to the music, my patience for babysitting-entitled musicians wanes fast – I'd been doing it far too long. I started to take it personally; it was disadvantaging the band that I've put my heart and fucking soul into, the band that I've put *everything* into. My money, my home life, my

relationships, my health – everything had taken a back seat for the band and I was expected to wipe people's arse for them because they play an instrument? Get the fuck outta here!

And it wasn't just me, either. Society's opinion of musicians had shifted, too. Technology and the internet had made it possible for *everyone* to be a musician of some sort and these days it just wasn't that big a deal. The glory days of musicians being able to act like needy prima donnas was over. I was bloody gutted to let such an incredible talent go, but it was in the best interest of the band. And so, just as we'd done way too many times before, we began our hunt for yet another 'new guy'.

2012 was looming and that meant that ten whole years had now passed since my original demo of *Made in China* back in 2002: that kiss of death that started me on this godforsaken ride of turmoil and ecstasy. Yep, ten years of 'trying'. Ten years of being piss-poor broke, of sacrificing everything for that carrot, forever dangled but never tasted. Maybe ten years would be a good time to say I'd given it my best shot and hang up the gloves? Get out while I'm still able to start something new? I was thirty-two, living with my parents, in debt and my so-called 'career' was no further down the road than it was exactly ten years ago – in fact, I was doing way better back then. And this is where any sensible, rational, intelligent person would bail out gracefully and get on with the rest of their life while they still could. Me? Nah, I wasn't thinking that. I was thinking 'tenth anniversary reissue', baby!

Following in my dad's footsteps, I now had a variety of 'schemes – I mean, jobs' of my own. By day, I was Mr Kennedy, teacher of guitar. By night, I was a private tutor of anything and everything as well as band mentor, recording engineer and music workshop host. I said yes to anything that paid and would speed from one place to the next, starting my day at 8am and getting home around 9pm most days. And on weekends we were still playing in the covers band and saving all the takings for the Kyshera fund. The money was great on paper, but I was so deep in debt that it all went out on the repayments. If I hadn't been fortunate enough to have such amazing parents, I would have been homeless. I had absolutely nothing left

touching the sides after my outgoings, I *had* to live at home, despite earning decent money.

I would also do song-writing and recording workshops for community groups, usually made up of disadvantaged young people from regeneration areas. These projects were almost exclusively funded by EU regeneration initiatives and I can personally vouch for their vital social value, having seen the results first-hand. Some people think that money shouldn't be spent on such projects that involve the arts; that it won't help people get a job or that it's a waste of important funds. Well, I can tell you that the confidence, pride and feeling of worth that is engendered in these young people when they explore the arts can transform lives, and society, for the better. It's not about the music or the painting, it's about self-esteem, it's about self-belief and dignity, it's about having to work with others and it's about having something that's more important to you than the demons.

There was a kid at one of these workshops who had been expelled from every school he'd ever attended. He had no hopes for the future, no support structure at home, in school or in his community. He wasn't a victim; he was a product of circumstance. It turned out he absolutely loved guitar, and as soon as I showed him how to play a simple Green Day song, he went from being a disruptive, chopsy, aggressive pain in the arse, to being one of the best-behaved and loveliest kids I've ever taught. He'd turn up early, having done all his homework and was already helping the other kids out with theirs.

Where is he now? He's earning good money and paying a ton of tax as a professional computer programmer. He'd escaped the chains of the grinding poverty around him, devoid of any hope or opportunity, and against all the odds, in a desolate former mining town, he'd broken the cycle. He was one of many. I'm not taking credit for any of it, but I witnessed how the simple realisation for these kids that they *could* do something, when everything around them suggested it was pointless, was all it took.

These programmes are so important for society. Would you rather the kid across the street be practising their guitar or setting fire to your bin? Or nicking your car? We all share the same land, people.

This is one of my biggest worries about Brexit. As you drive through the valleys of South Wales, you will regularly pass signs saying, ‘This area is being regenerated with funds from the EU’, not funds from Westminster. The government doesn’t know that anywhere outside London even exists, so without these essential social investments from the EU, my heart sinks for what will happen to those cut-off communities, denied the only lifeline they’ve been given. It’s fucking infuriating, then, to see that it is those *exact* same communities who voted to *leave* the EU!

Another of my growing menu of day jobs was working at a recording studio at the sprawling ITV studio complex outside Cardiff. My mate Sanj rented some rooms there, I set up all my studio equipment and we made an arrangement on earning splits. Like me, he was a ‘yes to everything’ guy, so one hour we’d be finishing up mixes for a band and the next we’d be hosting a hen party karaoke recording package for groups of drunken women to spend an afternoon at a studio. It was brutal but it paid. As the studios were designed for TV production, the rooms were incredible! Comfy and spacious, with perfectly dead acoustics and twenty-four-hour security on their own restricted compound. I had my own key and I could use the place for my own purposes during the night if I wanted. It was like the good ole days at WhiteOak Studios – without the mushrooms or Cliff Richard. I figured it would be the perfect place to re-record my most ambitious work, my proudest moment and the album that started everything off. It was time to finally make *Made in China* into the proper commercial release I’d always wanted, and film the process.

Of course, this was no mean feat. *Made in China* is an incredibly dense album, with hundreds of layers and complex arrangements, which would all have to be recorded again, one at a time, from scratch, and I was working twelve-hour days already. But now I had that 24/7 access at ITV (wink emoji), so, for the first few weeks, I’d just go there after work and work through the night on the drums. Like all Kyshera’s albums, the drums on *Made in China* aren’t real; if you thought they were, thank you, they took a long time! The playing is complex, and I had to make every single hit a different ‘velocity’ – or force/volume – to try and mimic the way a real drummer would play. It’s boring, long-winded, fiddly, and lonely work but

at least the project was moving! After a few weeks, Matt came round, and we started tracking all that amazing bass work you hear throughout the album. That was more fun, and luckily there was a retail estate next door with pizza delivery, twenty-four-hour booze and twenty-four-hour supermarkets, so recording all through the night suddenly became almost fun! Before we knew it, we had the skeleton of that monstrous album already down. The rest was on me: guitars, vocals, keyboards, editing, mixing. I decided to do all my parts at home, or rather my parents' home, so that I could get more done quicker. I moved all my equipment back up to the bomb-site/'conservatory' and got cracking.

All was fine until I started fainting. After working chaotic twelve-hour days, recording this colossal album all night, and doing cover gigs all weekend, my body was under-slept, underfed and unhappy. My weight had dropped to below nine stone and I'd started needing a chair behind me on stage for when my blood sugar would plummet, and I'd fall over. The doctor said it was exhaustion and ordered me to get my weight up, and while I did take this pizza prescription very seriously, guiltlessly gorging myself on all kinds of carby goodness to get me through the nights, I didn't stop. I couldn't; there were too many parts left to record and I couldn't let anything slow me down.

With no engineer, assistant, or producer, it was all down to me, so I had to just keep on trucking. I was still working on the mental electronic solo album, too, which was taking months of intense programming and probably didn't *need* to be done right now, but I'm a crazy, stubborn, impatient arsehole and once I decide I'm doing something, I'm fucking doing it, goddammit! After six months of this carnage, the colossus was complete and we now had a vastly new and improved version of my favourite work, ready for a proper commercial release at last!

Remember Cat? She was still humouring me by being my girlfriend despite never seeing me (unless that was the key to our success?) and she had just moved in to a new flat in Cardiff, where I would try and stay as often as I could – which was never – and Matt and I would crash there after late-night gigs in Cardiff. Now, ladies: do you want to be a musician's girlfriend? Are you *sure*?! Despite the romantic rock 'n' roll image of life

with a musician – the partying, the money, the freedom, the glamorous, bohemian lifestyle – the reality is that you’ll mostly not see them at all and when you do, you’ll probably be helping them carry something. Or waiting around, watching their merch desk, waiting some more, sitting in a cold van with farty blokes, getting jealous of drunk girls and wondering why they’re closer to their band-mates than they are to you. Oh, and they’ll always be broke and need more money – usually yours. It takes a certain type of person to be able to stay with us douche-bags long term, and god bless them.

One night we stayed at Cat’s after a gig, and it wasn’t my proudest moment. Or Matt’s. We’d both driven to the show, done the gig, and got absolutely shit-faced at an all-night strip club. Waking up the next afternoon, we had no recollection of leaving the club, getting home – nothing. We’d been fucking legless.

‘Dude, I don’t even remember walking home last night!’

‘Nor me, man, I’m *still* pissed!’

Lighting up a cigarette out of the window, I saw our cars below, parked haphazardly across the street. One half on the curb, the other half sticking arse-end out in the road.

‘Dude, I know why we can’t remember *walking* home last night. We didn’t.’

I’m not proud and I haven’t told anyone about it other than you, so please keep it to yourself and don’t judge me. You’ll be pleased to know that a similar future incident ended with me in a police station and subsequently dropped in the middle of rural nowhere at 5am by some coppers who wanted to teach me a lesson. Fucking cockish, isn’t it – please don’t drink and drive. Anyway, it was that guilt-laden, queasy afternoon when I got the message from Phil Smith.

Matt and I were conflicted over Phil initially. He was a gentle soul, a nice guy, an intelligent guy who had his own business running a complex of studios and rehearsal rooms, and a good drummer. His playing at first reflected his character: gentle, considered, and precise, which Matt didn’t want – he wanted Rhys but without the jail time. I, on the other hand, was totally happy to have someone in the band who wouldn’t be fighting us out

of every gig, who was intelligent and understood that there was more to this game than just being ‘good’; someone we could rely on, someone steady and someone with a bloody passport. I felt that Phil’s pros outweighed his lack of aggression behind the kit – something he could develop anyway, which he’d assured us he would. Matt had discovered Rhys and this time it was my call. The problem was, we’d just made an album, a particularly complex album, which we’d be touring soon and Phil would have just few weeks to learn it, get it good, play it with aggression and play it all along to a click track, because in less than three months we were off to Canada again!

We’d signed on to Canadian Music Week fully intending to do what we did last year at NXNE, which was to play the drums on a backing track from my phone; mental, I know. Even better though, this time we had an actual drummer with an actual passport coming with us! While Phil tucked in to learning the songs, Matt and I went on an obsessive booking frenzy, booking as many shows as we could, as far and as wide as possible. And with the new, spangly *Made in China* in the bag, we were able to start gearing up promo, pressing copies for radio stations, mags, and reviewers, booking launch show parties and the rest. But then, completely out of the blue, we received in our inbox, not only an offer from a reputable national booking agency but also a record company.

They say that good luck comes in threes and I can’t think of any band who deserved some good luck more than us, after everything we’d been through. It was perfect timing, too. Of everything I’ve done, *Made in China* is still my proudest work and it was always my dream to see it one day properly released and given the push it deserved. Is that what might be happening here? The label was gushing with praise for what they’d heard of the new record and they were keen to talk – soon. It was just like *Made in China* the first time around. The problem I had now was not to fuck things up for myself by being too controlling and too protective, and not to drag my heels for a year like I had the last time labels were interested in this record. We did our research and the results were good. This label was *doing* stuff. So we quickly arranged to meet the label head to find out more, and

with another sick day called in at work, Matt and I trekked out to meet the head of the label, Mark Daghorn, at his swanky home in Essex.

CHAPTER 14

MYSTERIOUS WAYS INDEED

After all the years of trying to get a record deal and getting nothing but silence and rejection in return, it seemed ironic that it was only when we stopped trying that we were offered one. Matt and I set off in his beaten-up little car and made the five-hour drive to Clacton-on-Sea to meet with the head of Rising Records. Although a small label, they were a reputable independent rock and metal label who were getting their bands good tours and good press. If nothing else, we saw them as being a stepping stone which might help us climb a few rungs up the long ladder. We'd spoken with many of their other bands, the unanimous response being, 'yeah, they're cool, they get us good tours and good promo, go for it'. I liked the sound of that. A lot. After ten years of doing absolutely everything myself, the idea of just having some help appealed to me. I didn't have lofty goals about giving up the day job or anything, we both went in with realistic expectations, but I won't lie – the idea of finally having some professional help gave me a surge of the happies.

As we edged our way onto the grounds, the first thing I took note of was the house. Needlessly large and posing proudly in its own exclusive slice of countryside with complimentary brook. It was the type of house I dreamed of having 'one day' – the house of a successful person. There was a lot of activity going on; musicians hanging around the grounds, staff and assistants running about, and we could hear a band recording somewhere. Mark was already in another meeting when we arrived and there was an atmosphere to the place of a bustling, proactive cottage industry. They were clearly doing stuff and getting stuff done here.

After a short wait, Mark Daghorn appeared in the doorway, apologising profusely for keeping us waiting, and welcomed us into his cluttered office. Gold discs adorned the walls. Now, it's easy to let your lust for rock stardom overshadow your good sense and Matt and I had agreed to keep it

cool and box smart in there, but after an initially icy start on our behalf, we softened – he actually seemed like a pretty cool guy! He had a detailed knowledge of our album, was impressed by how much we'd done for ourselves and was certain he could help us get to the next level.

As we had already recorded our album ourselves, we proposed the idea of a licensing deal with him, which meant that although his company wouldn't own the rights to the recording, they would take a percentage on it in exchange for promotion, distribution and tour booking. We'd read his mind, he said. So we hashed it out – we'd go 50/50 on promo costs, 80/20 on profit (in our favour) and he'd take care of radio plugging, tour booking and getting the album in the stores, with first refusal on our next record.

By the end of what was a very productive meeting, we had a draft agreement on paper but, doing as our dads said and 'NOT SIGNING ANYTHING!', we left on the understanding that we'd have the agreement looked over and get back to him. He wouldn't have it any other way, he said. We went in prepared for a wrestle and a disappointing compromise, but crowd-surfed out on a cloud of yesses. For a band as battered by bad luck as us, it all seemed too good to be true.

We had a long drive back to chat it out. We were both on the same page. He'd agreed to everything we asked for and was clearly a legit operation. This could potentially be very good for us, and along with the excitement of potential tours, festivals and groupies, was the excitement of a life no longer spent on the computer all day. We couldn't see any negatives. I knew a few lawyers I could send the contract to, so we figured we'd start there and see what they said, but the general picture was looking extremely positive. And about time, too! We'd had a long, unforgiving slog and no one deserved a little leg up more than us. Maybe all the pain and embarrassment would be worth it after all. And we were off to Canada again soon! Not since the good ole days of the original *Made in China* had I felt that proud swell of excitement that good things were on the horizon.

We left for Toronto on 19 March, 2012 and the wacky electronic side-project album I started a while back, *9.i.P.*, was released on the same day. No promo, no CDs pressed up, no biggie – just a simple download link sent in a tweet from the airport. That was the entirety of my promo campaign.

You may think this seems a tad cavalier for an album that took months of eye-blearying, wrist-paralysing, brain-bruising computer programming to bring to life, and you'd be right. I'm an idiot – *surely*, you've sussed that by now! If you needed any further evidence of this, then allow me to introduce you to the choice of accommodation that I had awaiting us in Toronto this time. Are you seated? Then, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure that I welcome you back once again, to 'Canada's number 1 award-winning luxury hostel!'

That's right, we did it again. In our defence, it wasn't just our penchant for sleep deprivation, sewage, German sex tourists and squealing nudists that led us back to the ghost train, but budget. And even though we splashed out on our own room this time, astonishingly the place had somehow managed to get worse. It was as though some invisible, airborne disease was eating the building from the outside. But so long as neither Matt nor Phil screamed all night with their balls out, it would be a vast improvement on our last visit for me.

Another improvement on our last visit was our better knowledge of the city's venues, and Matt had managed to wangle our way into more of them this time, with us having shows almost every night. Poor Phil had only two short warm-up gigs with us prior to setting off, so he was really stepping up here. After picking up our rental equipment, it was time to do what we came to do. We went to Shoeless Joe's.

The shows were immense and climaxed with us playing the famous Cherry Cola's Rock 'n' Rolla Cabaret Lounge on Bathurst Street. A favourite with the alternative set and visiting celebrities, it was like a secret club; no sign out front, just a terraced house with a little black door. Yet somehow, inside was an expansive, cavernous nightclub – a low-lit, funky venue, all decked out with purple, pink and gold retro furniture with burlesque girls dancing on mini stages built into the walls. And it was packed.

We were on at around 1am, and foolishly we'd all fallen asleep an hour before the show, accidentally drifting off in our salubrious quarters after a week of boozing, gigging, and partying. So we felt like absolute shit when we rushed into that mass of sweaty, hot, loud, drunken sexiness ten minutes

before our stage time. The ole adrenaline is a wonderful thing, though, and as soon as we got on stage, the angry terrier came alive again. The show that followed remains one of my favourites to this day – loud, aggressive, impassioned, tight, destructive. We left it all on the stage that night. Literally. Phil left their drumkit splattered in blood and smudged a big ‘K’ into their snare drum with it as a memento. A reviewer from *Cashbox Magazine* described our set:

‘You know it’s tight in a club when you can feel the phone but can’t reach into your pocket without molesting the persons around you. Such was the case Saturday at Cherry Cola’s Rock ‘n’ Rolla as Welsh power trio Kyshera tore through their set heavy and loud as a runaway 747. A flawless set of intense music.’

Phil had done it. He’d fucking nailed it, in fact. And now it was time to celebrate. One of the few perks of being in a band is that when you play a festival, you get free passes to the whole thing, and CMW being a city festival meant we got free passes to every gaff in Toronto – and boy, we used them. We spent that night navigating an impossibly large radius of the city, and I don’t know how the hell we did it but I remember fights, an ambulance, clubs clearing out, police, and somehow ending up at a rooftop jacuzzi party overlooking the CN Tower lit up in all its night-time glory. Man, we were spannered.

Tonight had been victorious and tomorrow would be our first day off since arriving, so we were off the hook. We’d keep drinking till we dropped, have a colossal lie-in, a traditional Canadian heart attack for breakfast and a few more pints to send us on our way. That was my plan, anyway. And then I wandered off looking for the toilet and stumbled out onto the roof instead, with the door locking behind me.

Now, Toronto at 5am in March is...let’s say...cold. And bumbling around in it on top of a twenty-five-storey high-rise, drenched in water, barefoot and wearing nothing but sopping-wet boxer shorts is...let’s say, a tad nippy. Man, that warm pool water turned into an ice suit the second the door slammed.

Immediately realising my blunder, I first tried yanking the door, then banging, then yelling, then kicking, banging and yelling but it was no use –

it was one of those modern, high-rent buildings of thick glass and thicker metal and nobody could hear me. Those drunk bastards probably hadn't even noticed I'd been gone so long. It didn't take long for the bitter cold to seize my power of movement. Amid the violent, involuntary jerks and shivers, I could feel my joints freezing shut and my skin tightening. This was *not* good. I forced a check of the vicinity and it seemed I was fucked. There was nothing but the invincible door or a sheer drop to the sleeping city below. I was fucking freezing. In the true sense. The thought did flash through my mind that this would be where I die. Nothing glamorous, no blaze of glory. Just freezing to death in a foetal position in my pants. I guess it would be a fitting metaphor for my career. Until suddenly...the sound of angels.

'What the F, man!'

It was Maryse. I've never been more relieved to see a person in my life! I could barely walk by the time I got back in the pool and the other wankers were still partying obliviously. Fast forward to 8am and Matt and I are still drinking on the balcony, shouting at early morning workers, and watching the sun rise behind the CN Tower. Life was good. Until Maryse hit us with the big one.

'Church?!'

'It would mean a lot to me.'

'But we're not religious!' said I.

'And we're fucking hammered!' said Matt.

'It would mean a lot to me if you came!'

Maybe after hanging out with us a few times, she felt we needed saving but seriously, we hadn't slept, we were falling-over drunk and she was demanding that we attend Sunday service – in an hour! Then again, she *had* just saved my life, so I guess I kind of owed her one. But it was an incredibly bad idea. God knows what had happened the night before but my hair was a giant, scraggly, wild man's afro, we were all still wearing our gig clothes (a sleeveless Megadeth T-shirt in Matt's case) and all of our supplies were at the palace of misery several blocks away.

Rifling through Maryse's wardrobe for hats, jumpers, and anything we could wear in an attempt to look even vaguely churchy had the opposite

effect because now we looked like the fucking Village People. Me with a ridiculous, floppy, women's sun hat and Matt with a flowery, ill-fitting woman's blouse. We were reeking of booze, shaky on our feet, loud, giggly, and still very much pissed.

Phil, we learned on this trip, is consistently sensible. If he was drunk, it didn't show, and how he put up with us pair of dickheads, I'll never know.

The church was the real deal. An enormous, old-school Catholic situation, complete with robed bloke speaking in riddles. And it was a packed house. Maryse made a push for the front, dragging me with her, and I was trapped in the lion's den. This was a bad idea. Having been raised by atheists, I had never been to church and have no idea about its customs or etiquette so it felt *wrong* being there – not because of my atheism, but because I felt disrespectful to those around me whose holy house I was in, dressed like a rodeo drag queen, buzzing of booze and fucking up the service for everyone else.

Matt had done the intelligent thing (which was rare for him), in that he waited until Maryse's back was turned and promptly ducked out of the door, finding his saviour in the nearest coffee shop. As the congregation squeezed in around me, I started to sweat; a bad hangover was kicking in and, with it, the paranoia. I could *feel* people's disapproval. It was intense. More sweat, more fidgeting, more standing up and sitting down at the wrong times. I swear the priest glared at me. They knew. I knew. Everyone knew. The big guy upstairs definitely knew and was teaching me a lesson I probably needed to learn. Gentle divine punishment as my drunk arse wriggled around inside the tightly crammed house of the Lord in full view of everyone, dressed like a floppy fucking sunflower.

How long was this service, anyway?! It dragged on for an eternity. I was in church, yet I was in hell. When the service was finally and miraculously over, I gave a hefty donation to the magic box and got the fuck out of dodge. Maybe I'd at least earn some good omens for the ole rock 'n' roll cause, but God knows I needed a drink after that. Amen.

* * *

Back home it was time to start ramping up the promo for *Made in China* mark 2 – and we were so ready for it. The hard work of making the album was far behind us and we could finally enjoy getting it out there. After several re-writes of our contract with Rising Records, we'd settled on a pearler of a deal and everything was signed and sealed before spring was out. It was all systems go, and just in time.

Yet, the album was initially penned for an October release and as the summer came and went, we'd had no reviews or gigs other than the few we'd sorted for ourselves. The booking agency we'd signed with had taken all our tour payments and disappeared while we were in Canada. No website, phone number, business address, nothing – their entire existence wiped out to a level even Stalin would have admired. Communication from Daghorn had also gone strangely quiet, considering we were in the middle of a promotional campaign. He'd just endured months of back and forth over the contract and bent over backwards to get us on his books, yet here we were a month from release and his emails were bouncing back. Something just didn't add up.

By the end of summer, it was in the news. It seems that signing us was all part of a much larger plan. And it also seemed that the post-crash music industry in general was entering a new phase in its grapple for survival – straight-up fraud. Unbeknown to anyone at the time, Daghorn had been secretly signing tons of bands around the same time that he signed us, and was saying yes to their every demand. But the reason he couldn't get us any press was that the big magazines had all recently stopped working for him due to large unpaid sums of payola (remember that?). Basically, the guy was deep in the red, had been floating on a sea of matey rock 'n' roll bullshit forever, and now his dinghy was sinking in the shit – and fast. I'm assuming the money had gone up his nose.

Despite having a previously good track record, by the time we came along, he was already planning his escape. He took all the money from our pre-sales, and that of all the other bands he'd been collecting, all of the various 'joint investments' we thought we'd been clever going along with to protect our long-term percentages, all of the money he'd saved by not

paying PR companies and production houses for god knows how long, and fucked off to Barbados. That awesome house? It was rented.

What followed was an industry-wide scandal in the rock and metal world which ruined many lives. It's just fucking typical that we'd get caught up in it! That said, we didn't fare too badly. Other bands had invested tens of thousands in Daghorn's big ideas; houses had been remortgaged, hefty loans taken out, and parents' savings donated. Way too many talented, hardworking, decent, emerging bands – who've got it hard enough as it is – were well and truly crushed by the guy. None of them remain.

Promoters, bookers, PR people and magazines had all worked for free for him for a long, long time, believing that servicing a client with so many promising bands on his books would pay off soon. Many of them had their businesses destroyed by debts they'll never pay off. Houses were sold, marriages broken up, lives and careers were ruined, and many turned to the bottle. He was a good crook; I'll give him that. We all fell for it.

Yet did you read about any of this in the mainstream rock and metal mags? Of course not. They were all in bed with the guy when he was giving them free drugs, free festival passes and free stays at his second residence in Barbados. They all take the moral high-ground now, of course, but they won't say anything about it because they know, as do we, that they were part of the same desperate, corrupt, dying breed of old industry blaggers that are going down on the same stinking, sinking ship. Barbados boy, as much of a cunt as he is, was just a better crook and made it out alive by trampling on the carcasses of his equally cuntty peers.

Tip number 6 for upcoming bands: your contract doesn't mean shit.

I was absolutely fucking shaking with rage. It was just bullshit on top of more bullshit in this business. Where were the 'good guys' people talk about?! We hadn't signed any old rag; our contract had been amended umpteen times to give us the best protection, but I guess we dropped the ball when we forgot to add the 'in the event that either party shall fuck off to Barbados with all of your money' clause. We could never have foreseen that, and our contract wasn't worth shit if it wasn't enforceable.

Man, I was so sick of this shit. Getting stiffed by that booking agent and now THIS?! I'd worked my arse off to make that album; I'd given body and

soul for it, I'd played fucking 'All Right Now' every week for a year to pay for it. There was no way I was going down without dragging someone down with me – by the throat.

First, I contacted the music press with a name-and-shame story. Absolutely none of them would run it. They all shared their personal hatred for the guy with me, moaned about *their* losses and cheered me on to go get the bastard – but not a single one of the pussies would stand and be counted. Probably because Daghorn had some equally incriminating tales about them. Who are these guys of whom I speak? You know them.

Next up, the bands. If we all pooled our contacts, time, and energy maybe we could sue the guy, contact the Bajan authorities, start a campaign or...I didn't know, but surely, we couldn't just roll over and take the fisting, could we? Apparently, we could. Understandably drained of all morale and fighting spirit by having their dreams and livelihoods ripped away from them, the musicians just wanted to focus on repairing their devastated finances and putting their lives back together. They had no energy for a battle and didn't think it would achieve anything anyway. And that's how the bad guys win, I thought.

It was more the principle of the thing for me. I still owned all the copyrights and masters and could just release the album on Konic. The sum of money we lost was tiny compared to the other bands, some of whom lost an eye-watering amount. We were a few grand down but nothing a few more 'Wonderwalls' couldn't handle. Above all, I was just fucking fed up with having my time wasted and my emotions ruffled. We were a *good* band. And year after year, we'd proven our resilience, our grafting spirit, professionalism and passion for keeping on, despite every setback imaginable. We did it *all* on a shoestring, with none of the creature comforts that other bands enjoyed – and we were *good* guys. We didn't deserve this shit.

I started suing Daghorn that very autumn. The same autumn that *Made in China* was finally released for public consumption – through Konic Records. After ten years as my best kept secret, the beast had been upgraded, tweaked, polished, and properly released at last. I was worried that my emotional connection to the album may have blurred the fact that it

was still a ten-year-old record passion project, so we made no mention of that in the press release and announced it as a new album.

With launch parties booked in Cardiff and London and a ton of live shows around the UK, we managed to salvage a workable release campaign from the debris of the Daghorn debacle. By this point, whatever might happen next, I was proud. Of myself, of the record and of the band.

CHAPTER 15

'IT'S OK, MAN'

'The frenzied originality that Kyshera create regularly defies description, yet their giddy mix of Muse, Soundgarden, Red Hot Chilli Peppers and Frank Zappa is as captivating as it is bewildering. Some may find this magnificent cacophony overwhelming, but after repeated listens it becomes clear what Kyshera have achieved here. It is quite simply a glorious record.'

Classic Rock Magazine

'Fantastic guitar hooks, masked by a million different distractions demanding each millisecond of attention from the listener. Screw it – it's impossible to put words to this inspired madness. I love it! 5/5' *Big Cheese Magazine*

'An hour of "music" that leaves one gasping for breath and a desire to immediately repeat the experience all over again. Ambitious in scope, innovative and compositionally complex, this is an exciting album that does not for one moment allow the listener to rest on their laurels and it is one that, I promise you, will continue to reveal new facets and surprises long after most have revealed all their charms and/or inadequacies.' *Rocktopia Magazine*

And my personal favourite: 'One of the best bands in the UK today', Tony Iommi. From Black Sabbath, dammit!

Thank god! The reviews were good. For most people, it was their first experience with *Made in China*, and it seemed that its manic schizophrenia still held its charm. For me, the album was very familiar ground by now but I was glad to finally have it 'out there' in its new and improved form and I was proud to see it enjoyed by people after all these years. If only they knew it was ten years old! We gigged like crazy throughout 2012 and I'm amazed that Phil's old converted-ambulance-type van managed it! That van was the dog's bollocks. It had a lift on the back, tables and chairs in the middle, and surround sound. Not too shabby for a band used to sleeping on

drum cases. That year we played so many amazing venues, many of which, again, are sadly no longer with us. Non Zeros in Dundee was one of my favourites, despite nearly getting my head kicked in there. ‘Me time’ on tour is non-existent; those short five-minute breathers to yourself only occur when you’re on the john. Which is where I was when the guy started banging on the door, yelling,

‘Security! There’s a fire and ya need to get *oot*, pal.’

Jesus, man, can’t a guy even drop a deuce in peace?

‘All right, man, gimme a minute,’ I barked back.

‘No pal, ya need to get oot NOW!’

I’m a gullible dumb-ass in my endless endeavour to be a polite British gent and would normally have done as I was told, doffing an invisible cap as I skipped out. Instead, I texted Matt.

‘Dude, is there a fire downstairs?’

(BANG BANG BANG)

‘What the fuck are u on about, man?’ Matt replied.

‘Ah, then I think I’m about to get my head kicked in, dude.’

(Open thi doo-or NOOO pal!)

I started to sweat. There was nowhere to escape and the animal on the other side of my porcelain mouse trap was practically bashing my door off its hinges. After what seemed like an hour, but was probably only seconds, Matt, a tall, muscly motherfucker, charged into the room like the American cavalry in a movie, shouting, ‘Dude?! Dude?!’ I saw the beast’s shadow recede from under the door and timidly unlocking, I asked, ‘Was there a security guy in here just now, man?’

‘Nah, man, just a big, chavvy-looking bastard who ran out.’

Surprise, surprise. Isn’t it funny how ‘hard men’ target the defenceless? Maybe it was divine intervention for the Sunday service I did in Toronto but getting my head kicked in, in a toilet in Scotland would, quite frankly, have sucked. Take note, the next time ‘security’ knocks on your door.

In Stoke-on-Trent, I had another post-gig booze blackout. They were becoming more and more frequent, it seemed. I only know because I’ve seen the video. Me, lying right in the middle of whoever’s house party it was, in a perfect Tutankhamun crossed-hands pose, smiling up at the gods

and dead to the world, as a gang of bastards (Matt and Phil) armed with BB guns shot the shit out of me. I didn't even flinch. The clues to this particular blackout made their big reveal later the next day when I tried to buy a sandwich at a service station. Scrabbling around my pocket for cash, I grabbed a fistful of change and dumped it on the counter. Standing proudly upon the shrapnel, and in plain sight of the fidgety cashier, the mother-of-two behind me and everyone else, was a mystery brick of weed and a little bag of ketamine. Nervous looks were exchanged, I paid up (not in drugs) and promptly hot-footed it back to the bus.

'Guys, what the fuck is *this*?' I accuse, holding up exhibit A.

'I just gave it to the cashier!'

'You *really* don't remember, do you, dude?' replied Matt, he and Phil swapping eye-rolls.

'No! What the fuck was I doing with *this*?'

'It's OK, man, don't worry about it.'

'It's OK, man, don't worry about it' was becoming a phrase I hated almost as much as the blackouts that prompted it. It only seemed to be me that had these damn things. Granted, I'm small – five foot four and averaging ten stone – but there's nothing worse than that feeling of having done something mental the night before but having no memory of it. The disappointed looks, the lack of eye contact, evasive phrases like, 'it's OK man, don't worry about it'.

As much as I have always loved a drink, I have never drunk before or during a gig, ever. But the second the show finishes, it's game time and I go for gold. Maybe it's the surge of adrenaline still rushing through my body? Maybe it's the meagre tour diet of crisps and cardboard? Or maybe I'm just a lightweight. Either way, it's fucking irritating, and so is having nice guys around you who are too kind to tell you what a twat you've been. Not knowing is worse. Not that it ever stopped me.

But maybe I needed to start calming it down a bit. I worked so obsessively on the band – all day and night, every day and night, including weekends – that I needed regular and extreme blow-outs. Spending all day on the computer emailing, writing press releases, social media posts, booking gigs, designing artwork and doing it all with no money, in that tiny

square bedroom at my parents' house – the same bedroom in which I also slept, ate, drank and hung out – compounded by the daily stream of rejections, disappointments, the hundreds of sent emails that just got ignored and the constant weight of guilt and feeling like a failure, left me with only two choices of an eve. Get obscenely hammered or join Fight Club.

Any time that wasn't spent on the above was spent suing that bastard Daghorn. I'd managed to find his new address in Barbados, and he was, for now at least, replying to the paperwork. I gathered testimonials from former employees and bands and pieced together a thorough paper trail of his deceit. His response was essentially the 'I can't believe you're doing this to me after all I did for you' defence. Then bribery – why don't we just call it quits and I'll send you a hamper. Then the threats – I'm fucking with the wrong guy and he *knows* people, bro. His written statements were devoid of any real substance and looked like he'd written them with a crayon in his fist. He didn't give a fuck and neither did he need to. He'd been planning his escape for way longer than I thought and had become a citizen of Barbados just before he pulled the chain on us all.

It didn't look like we stood to gain much from all the drama even if we won, but for me, again, it was the principle of the thing. This industry is rotten to the core with crooks, bottom feeders and fraudsters, and they continue to get away with it because good guys can't be arsed. Fuck that, if I couldn't have his head on my wall, I at least wanted a court order up there. And so, it dragged on. And on.

Then Cat and I broke up. Again. Despite overcoming the baggage that was causing problems at the start of our relationship, there was still this *other* thing. Cat was totally supportive of my music – she's a musician herself – but my excessive preoccupation with it was sucking the air out of everything else in my life. The best of me went on the band. Every penny went on the band, every spare second went on the band, my mental focus and energy went on the band. When we were together, which was rare, I'd be talking about the band. I missed meals, birthdays, weddings, funerals, and get-togethers for the band. And every weekend, Cat would be the girl who was out by herself because her boyfriend was away playing yet another

late-night pub covers gig in order to earn money for...the band. She was a single girl, in a relationship.

We had always been on-again/off-again, and even after all the other issues we'd worked through, there was this elephant between us. I didn't even have the trappings of success on my side. Far from it; I was penniless. We didn't go on trips, we didn't go on breaks, we didn't *do* much at all, other than hang out in my bedroom/office now and again. It had been like this for so long. We were both getting older and Cat wanted more from a relationship. Who can blame her? We stayed friends, without the constant disappointment of trying to maintain an 'us' that mostly never was. I was devastated, but I got it, I understood. I would have left me, too.

It was a bad time to give up smoking, but somehow I did it. Man, it was hard. No patches, no gum, no programme, no two-a-day malarkey, I just bare-knuckled it. I'd failed so many times before and I failed because, until now, the desire to stop didn't outweigh the joy of doing it. This time it was different, the joy was gone and one day I just snapped. I wasn't going to do this any more.

What I learned was that 1) when you genuinely want to stop doing something, you will, and 2) your body, mind and soul only goes ape shit for about three weeks before it embraces the new way as normal. Your job is to batten down the hatches, be strong and avoid temptation while that process happens. I'm not gonna lie – it wasn't easy – but before long, I didn't even think about smoking any more and the idea of doing so seemed a bit mental. These days my lungs explode if I take a drag of *anything*.

Our bodies and minds are wonderfully fickle habit machines. Once you appreciate how malleable they are, you can use their inbuilt need for routine to your advantage by hacking the system and imposing new habits. Whether that's kicking self-destructive tendencies, getting in shape or self-development, all you have to do is decide, start and be strict for a few weeks. You'll be amazed at what you can do.

Luckily, I was still a smoker when I went to the fiftieth birthday party of Welsh music producer, Greg Haver, for it was in the outside smoking area that Greg drunkenly and accidentally invited me to become a songwriter at Modern World Studios in the Cotswolds; something he'd forgotten by the

next morning, but I had not. Modern World is a Tardis – a single, utilitarian door in the middle of a regular, busy industrial estate, giving no clue as to the wonderland beyond. Once inside, it expands into a spacious, two-floor, state-of-the-art studio, with all the gadgets, mod-cons and toys a boy could dream of. Every variety of unattainable guitar, amp and pedal was there for the taking, and if the creative juices ever dried up, there was pool, movies, the gym or a hundred computer games to be played on the mega-sized screen and array of La-Z-Boy chairs. I was on holiday in heaven.

My ‘job’ there was to help hone songs for other artists – maybe their lyrics needed tweaking, or a chorus wasn’t quite hitting the G-spot. It was all new for me and I was nervous being on the spot in front of all these pro dudes, but as new challenges go, it could have been worse than lounging around a swanky studio, drinking posh coffee and playing expensive pianos. And just by being there, I picked up a ton of tips which I could use to make *my* recordings better; I realised just how much I’d been doing so wrong all these years!

One of the first projects I worked on was with Katie Waissel, who had recently been a controversial contestant on *The X-Factor* and a tabloid favourite. It was through her that I met her then-manager, Mark Fuller. Mark is the owner of a highly successful international chain of luxury hotels and we would go on to maintain contact long after the Katie project had finished, leading to some seriously awesome parties and surprising social insights of a whole new kind. More on this later.

As the gigs continued to blitz on, as Kyshera *and* the financially necessary covers band, I started getting the itch to make some new music of my own. I was changing, though. The last ten years of struggle, defeat, travel, human insight, heartache and growth had broadened my experiential palette significantly from that of a naïve country boy from a remote village. And having submerged myself in music that was exclusively of the ‘extreme’ variety, I suddenly found myself yearning for something simpler; music I could just play on a guitar without all the layers, complex arrangements and garnish – ‘songs’ in other words. So over the next few weeks at the – I suppose we should officially call it The Shack – and squeezed in around my gazillion day jobs, I wrote and recorded *The*

National Health Service, a mostly acoustic album of simple songs that touched on more personal themes for the first time, rather than me ranting about bankers and sweatshops.

It was hardly ripe Kyshera fare, so just as I did with *9.i.P* before it, I released it as a solo album, with zero promotion, fuss, or ball-ache. No CDs were printed – it was download only – and I immediately forgot about it among the blizzard of more pressing priorities. But having the ability to make and release an album as quickly, cheaply, and easily as that was further proof of the empowering strength of the new DIY music-industry model. If it was still the not-so-distant former model of labels, gangsters and kings, the album – in fact, *none* of my albums – would ever have been made. This was a fact I was embracing with increasing creative intensity, having now rattled out four albums in two years.

My catalogue was becoming fairly eclectic. Political, progressive grunge rock, highbrow experimental electronic music, orchestral instrumentals, straight-up alt rock, and now an acoustic album bordering on folk music. But I've always believed in being true to wherever my musical curiosity takes me at any given time – yet another freedom of living in the era of independent art. Plus, it's the only way I can write; it has to come from a place of authenticity, or it doesn't come at all; I just dry up. In fact, it would be harder for me to make an album that sounded like whatever the last one was.

Yet, despite the radically different styles I bounce between from album to album, my creative process is always much the same. It usually starts with a flash of inspiration that comes from...well, who knows – and it could be a lyric, a riff, a melody or even a sound. I listen to a lot of different styles of music and I make a conscious point of upgrading my inspiration tank regularly. I don't chase the inspiration, I feed it until it comes to me. But once a strong idea has landed, I quickly get a complete mental picture of the entire record that will form around it, including the production, instrumentation, and overall vibe.

These flickers of excitement tend to arrive at an awkward time, such as when I'm driving, or halfway through a serious heart-to-heart conversation with someone, but mobile-phone voice notes are an absolute godsend for

grabbing them when they come. I'll leave all sorts of garbled instructions to myself while the windscreen wipers screech in the background, singing guitar parts and mouthing drums. And I'll collect these seeds of inspiration for a few weeks while the vision of the record as a whole simmers and ferments in my mind.

Then, one day, I just know that I'm ready, and from that point, it all happens quite fast. That's when it's time to work on the songs. Those seeds of pure inspiration get jammed around on the guitar, piano or computer until they become a full song, although sometimes full songs come in one big hit – my song 'Home' being one of them. I always do a dummy run of recording the entire album, which gives me an opportunity to trim the fat, change keys and hear if a song works or not.

So I've got two versions of all my albums – the test run and the final version, where I record it all again from scratch. This method of encouraging and collecting moments of pure inspiration, and then waiting until they've brewed into a cohesive broth in my mind, may not be how others do it, but it works for me. It also keeps the records sincere and unforced. After that, it's just a matter of getting up and cracking on.

CHAPTER 16

ADVENTURES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

The year of 2013 was mental. First, after several frustrating adjournments to my court case, due to Daghorn simply not showing up, I won. It was a long year of paperwork, deadlines, testimonials, research, advice and all manner of headaches and boredom, but in the end, I got the bastard. Kind of. His living in Barbados rendered my judgement mostly a vanity project as it couldn't be enforced, so I guess you could say he won in practice and I won on paper, for what that's worth.

Given the loud chorus of support I had from other bands, the music press and the rock/metal industry, I immediately sent out a press release about the verdict, and again, not a single magazine or blog would dare write about the guy publicly, even though I'd just won *in court*. Why was everyone so fucking scared of this guy? He'd stiffed everyone in the business and in private they all cheered me on to go get him but when I did, and won, they were nowhere to be seen. Solidarity, Reg!

I found out *exactly* why they were all so scared of him not long after. Many of the testimonials people gave me for my case involved descriptions of physical threats and abuse, which I just laughed off as ridiculous – if that fat, wheezing wanker ever even *tried* to get physical with me, I'd kick his lardy arse, I thought. And then it was reported in the news that he was currently doing time in a Bajan jail, for shooting somebody out there. What the fuck?! Jesus, maybe all those macho threats he made towards me weren't just big-boy talk after all. All of this is 'allegedly' of course – definitely allegedly. But I seriously doubt the bully with the gun gives a shit about my flimsy court order, and holidays to Barbados are unlikely, to say the least.

I wrote an article about the whole debacle, and suggested that this was not an isolated incident but a symptom of a much deeper-rooted problem in this industry, and that unless we all work together as a community, another

Daghorn will be waiting around every corner. Guess what? Not a single music media company, small or large, published or shared it. Funny, that.

So, my 'win' wasn't soundtracked by a triumphant Hans Zimmer score and lots of back-slapping, but was instead the source of more dull and predictable disappointment in the character of the industry I thought I wanted to be part of. Still, there was alcohol! There was *always* alcohol, and by now I was guzzling the stuff every night, not for pleasure but for medicine. Sleep had become a problem and every night I would dread the fateful moment when it was 'time'. Time to lie there for hours, far more awake than in the daytime, my mind racing, throwing up ideas, lyrics, riffs, thoughts, worries, solutions, plans, a million and one fucking barriers to a moment's snooze. I started planning for it and ensuring that I bought enough wine every day in preparation for the nightly battle. My daily reality was now a slide show of groggy, unslept hungover-ness and coma-inducing drunkenness, which made being a daytime schoolteacher interesting. Yep, I was still doing that, and I was fully aware that I was starting to become a bit shit. Gigging throughout the week with Kyshera, song writing in London, and playing pub covers all weekend didn't leave much left of a man to be the best teacher and I was starting to feel it.

The London trips were weekly now, and my regular place of residence was the swanky, glitzy, five-star, celebrity-filled Sanctum Hotel, right in the throbbing heart of Soho and owned by the aforementioned Mark Fuller. I could *never* afford to stay there but Mark let me stay for free because... well, he's a fucking legend.

Friendship with Mark is a concise affair. He's a busy guy with an array of mobile phones pinging discordantly, and conversation is confined to only its most essential components. His various operations permeate myriad roles in the capital's entertainment world, from luxury hotels and nightclubs to VIP services and more. Yet, despite his insane workload, he will *always* get back to you and he will *always* be true to his word. I haven't met many of the 'good guys' but Mark is assuredly one of them. And he is good at what he does. All the big names stay at the Sanctum Hotel, and its zero paparazzi policy, twenty-four-hour rooftop jacuzzi bar and no-questions-asked culture make it the go-to place for touring rock stars. It was a world that was very

alien to me, but I fucking loved being a fly on the wall there – oh, and did I mention my free bed, bitches? I did?

Initially, I was there writing with Katie, but then Mark enlisted me for other projects and soon I felt like the hotel was my second home. It was standard to see rock stars hanging around, and one morning Bruce Dickinson from Iron Maiden walked in on my session and started nattering to his mate, completely oblivious of the fact that I was there and in the middle of recording. I battled nervously for too long with whether to jokingly tell him to ‘shut the fuck up and get out’ and before I mustered the courage, he’d gone.

These were normal events here. It’s where I became friends with the son of one of the world’s most famous drummers, who put me up at his place when I was in London for meetings, and our late-night smoking chats gave me many an insight into the true reality of what life is like for these gigantic stars. In fact, just being around that whole world, albeit as a visitor, taught me a lot. I felt like an anthropologist, cast into a jungle very different to my own, and for someone who had spent their entire life obsessed with escaping the cruel grip of poverty, I was shocked to see that these insanely rich and successful people were in many ways *more* fucked up and *more* unhappy than the people on my side of the fence. It was a priceless social insight that would inspire the band’s next album.

By the summer, the Sanctum had become my London base. I felt at home there, sauntering in and going straight to the ‘secret’ floor with its rooftop jacuzzi overlooking the bustling Soho streets below. I’m not sure if they *were* models, but there was always a curiously high ratio of smoking hot women there and the conversations with them generally went like this:

‘Heeeey, so what do *you* do?’ Girlishly giggled through fingering of hair.

‘I’m in a band.’

‘Oh wow! That *is* interesting! Which one?’ Moving closer, girliness ramping up a gear.

‘We’re called Kyshera.’

There would be a momentary look of disappointment and resentment at having wasted their time followed by an immediate exit, devoid of even a ‘later, loser’. And over the din I’d hear the distant echo of another, ‘Hey,

what do *you* do!?' Oh wow, that *is* interesting!' I thought it was hilarious. I started to get the impression that most of the people in these types of places were on the make. No one really seemed to *know* each other, and I detected a very different social transaction to the one I was used to, which involved pubs and real mates. Everyone seemed to be there for a reason. Just standing around, looking each other up and down and trying to figure out whether that's 'that guy from TV' or not. Joyless, bored, overly presented and only there to meet people of use.

For the first time ever I started to feel like I might be on the winning team in life. Many of the blokes there, blatantly loaded and clueless, were kind of desperate and lonely-looking and blowing tons of cash trying to impress these smoking-hot airheads, who were mercilessly rinsing them for every £100 cocktail they could get. I loved just sitting there by myself for hours, downing lagers and soaking it all in.

The bus rides were brutal, though. Remember, I may have been hanging around rich people, but I was piss-poor broke myself. I couldn't afford the train, so to make it for the 10am writing session, I'd have to wake up at 5am and catch the 6am bus from Cardiff to London, dragging a guitar and recording equipment with me. If I was teaching in school the next day, I'd have to come home the same day, so after a full day writing, I'd usually get back to Wales around 2am. My record was a twenty-three-hour day. With a 7am wake up call for school.

One night I took my mate Acy to the Sanctum. Acy was a mate from back in the old Stefan Hinc rave-house days, who used to play bass in the Donde Stars and went on to become a sound engineer for big names. Twice my height and with double my drinking powers, he had a legendary mastery over booze and it would be no surprise to fall down at 8am after trying to keep up with him all night, only to receive a text at 9am simply asking, 'Pint?'

He'd just teched a launch show with the band Drenge at Rough Trade East on Brick Lane; I was in town, so he put me on the guest list. More than enough beers for a Monday night (or any night) were consumed afterwards, the band wisely choosing not to join us, and as the last gaff kicked us out, I foolishly suggested a place I knew with a twenty-four-hour bar and rooftop

jacuzzi. Of course he was in! I was already too pissed to remember getting there but I *do* remember us lording it up in the jacuzzi, fully clothed, until sunrise, while being served special champagne by a mystery dwarf with a suspicious silver tray. After that, all I know is that I woke up in a random, grotty hotel on the other side of London, shivering wet, with half my clothes missing and an important publishing meeting in two hours. Miraculously, my phone still worked, despite leaking water from every hole, and had a single text on the home page: 'Pint?'

We didn't have many gigs that year and the few we did have were marred by bad luck, such as the tiny little club in Newport where, half a song into our set, we blew all of the electrics in the building, leaving an entire club full of drunk people trapped in complete darkness for an hour. My attempts to salvage the situation by doing an acoustic set only made it worse when the ceiling caved in and flooded the increasingly frightened and sightless drunks below.

Still, that wasn't as bad as the club in Cardiff that went up in flames after we played there. We had a good one in Sheffield, though, as always. An outdoor show for the Tramlines Festival Fringe was followed by us ending up at a sprawling illegal rave until the early hours. The thing was enormous! I've been back to Sheffield many times and I can't for the life of me imagine where it was, but we managed to wake up on our bus.

That was the night Matt pretended to be a policeman. Right after the gig we were hammering some beers and playing music in our tour bus/ambulance thingy and a group had assembled outside. Being a drunken dumb-ass, I opened the door to chat to them and a rush was made to get on the bus. When they couldn't, they started rocking the bus back and forth and Phil was *not* amused. During the ensuing argy bargy, Matt had somehow acquired a high-viz vest and glasses and managed to slip out the back of the bus undetected. Reappearing out front, he launched flawlessly into the whole 'allo 'allo, what's all *this*, then?' routine and I've never seen a pack of people run so fucking fast in my life. They dispersed in all directions as if he'd opened the water cannons on them. For a start, he looked *nothing* like a policeman, and secondly, they had literally just

watched him play in the band! Just goes to show the power of a high-viz vest. And glasses.

After our show in Derby, I caught up with a mate of mine called Gareth Icke. As well as being one of the loveliest people you will ever meet, Gareth is a talented singer-songwriter and the son of the so-called conspiracy theorist David Icke – yes, the shape-shifting lizard alien guy – of whom I was still very much a fan at that point. He asked if I was playing at the Bilderberg protest gig in June. Bilderberg protest in June? ‘Playing’ at it? I wasn’t, but I fucking wanted to!

If you don’t know, the Bilderberg Group is an annual gathering of the world’s most powerful scumbags, held at a different location each year. The meetings are top-secret, no press allowed, and the very existence of the group was casually laughed off for many years by the authorities and the press as a crackpot conspiracy theory. Attendees include the heads of governments, banks, royalty, media owners, CEOs of multi-national behemoths and, basically, anyone who plays a role in the global elite. Now tell me you don’t think that’s fucking weird?!

Many of these guys are elected officials and thus accountable, yet they fly around the world to discuss something in complete secrecy. Seriously not cool, and I, for one, am fairly sure what they’re discussing in there is not in the best interests of the peasants. These days, they’ve finally had to come clean. I remember the days when the group’s existence was officially denied, but if you go online today, you’ll find plenty about them in the mainstream press – they’ve even got their own website. This is all thanks to the work of democracy campaigners who have been ridiculed for years for trying to expose this apparently non-existent group. However, in the interests of not wanting to inadvertently convert any of you to the daft world of conspiracy theories, I once asked Noam Chomsky what his thoughts were on the Bilderberg Group and his response was, ‘I don’t think they’re up to much’. Chomsky generally knows the score.

Anyway, that year’s global scumfuck shindig was to be in Watford, just outside London, and a mass demonstration was being mobilised to meet them there. There would be a stage and speakers, including the eternally irritating Alex Jones, David Icke, and MP Michael Meacher, as well as live

music from politically oriented artists. Gareth was surprised I wasn't already on the bill, so he hooked me up.

It was a stunning, scorching day and Watford was on lockdown. Roads were closed, access was restricted, even on foot, helicopters circled above, press jostled about, and police and private security heavies were *everywhere*. I thought this meeting wasn't supposed to exist? Stuck in the gridlock, my taxi driver leaned back and said, 'I think they're scared of you guys!' to which I over-confidently replied, 'and so they fucking should be', before stepping out into the chaos with purpose in my heart and a guitar in my hand.

There were protesters everywhere and, in my mind, I was striding through them in slow motion, about to stir the sentiments of the proletariat with my songs about rising up and seizing power. Hell, I even had a speech. What actually happened was that I was immediately cooped up with scores of others in a police holding-pen outside the main compound, and it was obvious that none of us were getting out. I heard one of the coppers say: 'There's over two thousand people in there already. There will be no further entry.'

Fuck that, I'm in the band! I called Gareth.

'Mate, are you inside?'

'No. They're refusing us entry. We're cooped up outside!'

'WHAT!? I'll come out now.'

His dad being one of the speakers meant that Gareth had a press pass and was able to get me in. I don't know if any of my fellow chicken-coopers ever made it in, but when 'official figures' are bandied around about the turnout, bear in mind a shit-load more people were purposely denied entry. Upon entering the grounds of the regal Grove Hotel, I could see that the copper's claim of there being 'two thousand people in there' was no exaggeration. It was like a festival.

We were still contained within a certain distance of the hotel itself – where the Masters of The Universe were probably sacrificing a tea boy – but you could just *feel* the energy there. This was new. Until now, protests at Bilderberg Group meetings meant a handful of the hardcore; today, there were thousands, standing right on the lawn of the meeting itself.

Occasionally some of the Bilderbergers would come out for a spin in a golf buggy and watch us. I wondered who they were. Helicopters hovered above, Alex Jones was stamping around, barking at his selfie stick, and the press were doing their very best to interview only the daftest minority of exhibitionist hippies they could find.

I'm no longer a conspiracy theorist but I'm not gonna lie; the BBC's reporting of the day was a fucking disgrace. I was there and it was nothing like they portrayed it – i.e. a gathering of seven ridiculous hippies talking bollocks. I already knew the BBC was an establishment mouthpiece but now I'd seen with my own eyes a literal fabrication of events.

Squeezing my way to the makeshift stage, where some sort of Woodstock-era PA system had been cobbled together, I could see the entire field in front of the stage filled with eager bodies sitting waiting. Man, my adrenaline was racing. I was so fucking ready. The buzz, the heat, the atmosphere, the anticipation, the purpose. David Icke was standing right there! And Alex Jones was by my feet, still yelling into his selfie stick – my younger, conspiracy-fried self was in tin-foil heaven. I couldn't fucking *wait* to get up there. And then they landed it on us:

'The police have just ordered that if there is any music, the event will be shut down immediately.'

What the fuck?! A stressed-out organiser informed us that there must be *no* deviation from the order or else it was over. The speakers were fine, but music? No way! My immediate reaction was 'fuck that, we'll do it anyway – fight the power, comrades!' But then my conspiracy-trained mind quickly chipped in with 'that's what *they* wanted us to do'. They *wanted* some dumb-ass like me to disobey this just-made-up rule so they can wrap up the whole event. In the space of ten minutes, I turned from Che Guevara into Rik from *The Young Ones*, sulkily accepting that for the greater good, I'd have to take this one for the team. So, just like that, my moment of revolutionary glory was stolen from me at the last minute.

But the biggest anti-Bilderberg protest ever, by that point, got to go ahead, and it made the Bilderberg Group a mainstream news story all over the world. And even though I now consider conspiracy theories to be dangerous, divisive and toxic, standing a metre behind David Icke while

wearing daft white sunglasses as he gave an impassioned speech to the large crowd, was a surreal thing to do on a sunny day. Something I wouldn't have got to do if it wasn't for the ole music thing. Afterwards, in true champagne-socialist style, I headed back to my five-star luxury abode at the Sanctum Hotel and bragged to models at the rooftop jacuzzi bar about my day fighting for the common man.

Back home, we decided to use the quiet period as a chance to slam in extra cover gigs, build up our kitty and finally make some music videos. The ever clever Phil had become proficient at editing and made videos for 'Germ', 'Vote With A Bullet' and, of course, 'Shelf Life', where I *allegedly* set fire to £5,000 in a car park in Newport as a statement about inequality (it was Phil's idea; blame him).

By the summer, we were hitting the covers scene *hard* and stacking up some good coin in the process. We'd been booked to play at a football presentation one night and as the night reached the point where the 'lads' were doing their usual pissing on each other/running around bollock naked/drinking each other's puke/fighting and just generally being incredibly blokey, one of them came running up mid-song, asking me if 'Chris' could play my guitar. 'No fucking chance' was, I believe, my response. We were on our encore by now and I had my eye on the clock. He kept nagging and I stayed firm; 'Chris', whoever he was, would most definitely not be playing a song. Staring at me dumbfounded, the guy just blankly repeated, 'But it's *Chris!*'

'I don't give a fuck *who* it is, mate, he ain't playing.'

'But it's Chris Coleman!'

As I am clueless about sport, I had no idea that 'Chris' or 'Chris Coleman, OBE' was the manager of our national football team. In the end, I relented, still clueless as to who this 'Chris' fella was, but only on the assurance that he was honestly going to *play* the guitar and not just shove it up the arse of one of the other lads as some kind of (totally non homoerotic) 'banter'.

As it turned out, he *could* play one song on the guitar and – you guessed it – it was Wonderwall. I only began to think that this 'Chris' fella might *be someone* when a hundred football fans immediately gathered round with

their phones. I sang, the band backed, and Chris played the guitar in a motionless state of zen-like concentration, complete with sticking-out tongue, and the room went fucking berserk! We thought these animals were already off the chain, but Chris' impromptu Wonderwall sent them through the fucking roof.

When you have a room exclusively full of drunken men, you will often see the most distasteful, competitive ridiculousness imaginable, but this night took the trophy. As I drove away afterwards, shaking my head in disbelief, car doors locked, my departure was lined with a montage of fist fights, people pissing on a guy who'd passed out, someone being sick on himself, an array of cocks and balls, tears, screaming, self-harm and unspeakable stupidity. This wasn't a riot; it was football boys on a Friday.

Those cover gigs were regularly way more rock 'n' roll than any I'd done with Kyshera. Man, we'd get caught up in full-scale bar brawls, we'd get started on *while playing*, the dance floor would be slippery with blood, the police would turn up and get bottled, people would leave in ambulances and stretchers, we'd have food and coins thrown at us and we'd often barricade ourselves in behind our equipment cases and chairs. I even got pissed on once. A guy calmly took his dick out and just pissed on me in the club. I've had my junk groped and fondled many times while playing – what is it with these super-testosterone-charged blokes all getting naked together and playing with each other's ball bags as 'a laugh'? Weird. Of course, when you're the singer of the band in these bloke-heavy places, you will get 'started on' fairly often. I have been started on many, many times but never punched. Yet. One night at another football bash in the arse end of beyond, a group of three 'lads' cornered me, with the ringleader mumbling drunkenly a few inches from my face:

'So, you think you're the big man, eh?'

His two toothless yokels wobble unsteadily behind him.

'What, mate?' I enquire.

'You. You think you're the big man, eh? You think you're the fucking man, eh?'

Where the fuck was Rhys and his equaliser when you needed him?! The problem is, I have a dangerous inability to be bullied. I am by no means

‘hard’ or a fighter but there is just something in me, a stubborn, belligerent little-man syndrome that *refuses* to be bullied. You will have to *kill* me before I bow to your bullying. I inform my impending assailant of this.

‘See! You think you’re The Fucking Man, don’t you?’ he repeats, this time stepping so close that we’re now nose to nose, eye to eye. I can feel his breath and it ain’t pretty.

‘You know what you are?’ he offers.

‘No, mate, please tell me.’

‘You...are a fucking wanker.’

His gormless goons are impressed by this – they like their leader. He’s now making a slow-motion wanking gesture right in front of my face and it’s obvious that there’s nowhere left for this to go other than someone (me) getting a kicking.

‘Waaaaankeeeeeerrrrrrrrrr,’ he emphasises slowly, in case I wasn’t following, staring me deep in the eye, his wanking hand still animated.

And then it came. SLAM! Blood! Headbutt! Scram! Kick! Out of nowhere, this dude’s missus flew in and kicked the living shit out of him in front of his mates! I didn’t see her coming, no one saw her coming, and she was fucking brutal. She had the look of a bulldog chewing a wasp and you could tell she was enjoying the excuse to give this pathetic asshat another pounding.

‘Was he trying to bully you, babe?’ she shouts over in a strong Valleys accent while throwing him around like a dopey rag doll; kicking, punching and slapping the poor, hapless bastard from wall to wall – his pussy mates scarpering immediately.

She didn’t need a reply. She didn’t need anything from me at all, she was handling it just fine. I carried on packing away while this four-foot-five Valleys terrier gave this asshat the hammering of a lifetime in front of everyone. It was beautiful.

In a very different land with very different people, I got to peer behind the wizard’s curtain again when I was invited as a VIP to the Iron Maiden gig at Wembley Arena. Exactly as I’d suspected, it was a highly professional affair where the only people trying to live the wild rock ‘n’ roll cliché were hanger-on douche-bags like me, the band having gone home as

soon as they finished the show. This and many similar recent experiences were beginning to make me think that all the rock 'n' roll folklore I'd read about may be just that – marketing mythology woven to make normal people seem like superheroes so that people like me would buy more of their stuff.

All in all, the wide spectrum of social territory I was navigating made for a fertile period of lyrical inspiration. And by accident of being on the scene, I was becoming a full-time writer for several different music publishers, sync agencies (companies providing music for adverts, TV and games) and producers in London across a crazy range of styles, and that was expanding my musical vocabulary a lot, too.

Some of my mates were making a decent second income from doing similar work through publishing deals so I began pursuing that as a possible escape from teaching, but even though I was effectively already working as a full-time writer, I couldn't get a damn deal for love nor money. Same old story, eh! The song requests kept coming though regardless so, enlisting the talents of Cat, I set out producing a ton of bespoke music in different styles and focused on building a strong catalogue of songs, which I then pitched to ad agencies myself. It was another thing to pile on top of everything I was already doing, but it was a breath of fresh air from dealing with jaded, frazzled rock 'n' roll burnouts and I quite enjoyed the change of musical scenery.

At the same time, Cat was super-busy with the release of her first solo album (the eclectic comic-book concept album, *Call of Distress*) and working for a cancer charity in Wales called Tenovus, which was trialling a new approach to patient care involving the use of music; specifically that of choirs and what physiological and emotional benefits might be gained from singing in one. The outcome was compelling and fascinating, with positive results across the board, including shifts in happiness levels, measurable health improvements, and increased moral strength through a sense of community and purpose.

When Channel 4 filmed a documentary about this innovative new project, Cat was chosen to be the face of the charity for the show, which followed the personal journey of the first choir from its humble beginnings

in Cardiff to a standing ovation at the Royal Albert Hall. The TV show was emotional enough but we'd also been living it as it happened, so that final moment as I sat in the stalls watching a glammed-up Cat energetically conduct a full stage choir of brave and amazing South Walesiens – many of whom were quite unwell and *none* of whom had ever sung live before, certainly not at the Albert Hall – engulfed me in a warm, pulsating pride.

What she was doing up there *meant* something and would have a life-changing impact on all involved. For some of the singers, that moment would be one of their last, and when I saw the post-gig euphoria in the guys afterwards, I remembered my early experiences of playing live and realised just how far I'd drifted away from that feeling. It was a much-needed reminder of the primal, healing, universal power of music for its own sake – something I'd lost sight of. So, when Cat was asked to write a custom song for the charity, I jumped at the opportunity to be involved.

We wrote 'Sing For Life' in three short sessions and it remains one of my proudest moments as a writer, as I know it does for Cat, too. The song would go on to be performed by choirs all over the world, including a gargantuan eight-hundred-strong choir belting out the piece at a theatre in Cardiff. As the sheer force of the sound and the meaning of the words that I had helped write resonated through my body and soul, I thought: '*this* is why we do this'. It's not the money, I've never made any – it's that feeling. The unparalleled, primitive, soothing majesty of music; being a catalyst to that is something special. It was also the beginning of a new period of Cat and I wandering across the blurred lines of friendship and 'more'. Again.

As autumn came around, the band started thinking about next year. With *Made in China* finally out there, it was time to make a new record, and I'd had a new sound fermenting in the back of my mind for quite a while. I was bored of all the clever stuff. After years of priding myself on being the 'anti-song' guy – the guy who wrote about 'issues' and avoided standard musical structures like a loan from Enron, I was yearning to sing a chorus that people could sing along to. I'd grown a lot since writing those other albums, and the rich social insights I'd gained from years of gigging, teaching, observing rich guys, falling in love and doing therapy were all

informing an interest in writing about more philosophical, personal and existential themes.

So, from August, I knuckled down and wrote what would become Kyshera's third and most popular album, *Circle* – a character-based story exploring meaning, death, vice and human nature. And musically it was extremely different. Not a bar of 7/16 in sight; it was loaded with big choruses, fat riffs and simple melodies. It had *songs*. Songs you could move to! Yet another musical curve ball to add to my confusing back catalogue. I recorded the whole thing in demo form first and sent it complete to the guys on 1 November. It was a vast departure from everything Kyshera stood for and I was nervous about their reaction. Luckily, they loved it.

We had a couple of quid to play with now, so we decided we'd skip The Shack this time. And thank god. I didn't want to be hunched over a PC in the snow any more, nor fainting from weight loss, and I certainly didn't want to be programming any drums ever again. After much window-shopping, we settled on recording it with Jeff Rose in Newport. Jeff used to play guitar in Dubwar and Skindred; he was a super-cool guy who'd been around the block and knew how to make a record fucking ROCK.

We spent the rest of the year rehearsing the new songs and Phil was going to record his drums over Christmas, with me and Matt scheduled to record our parts from February. And just like that, it was on! As the songs started taking shape, turned up loud in the practice room, the excitement set in; this new, more accessible sound was much more fun to play than the maths tests we usually performed. The live show was going to kick ass!

And this time we wanted to get everything perfect. No skanky labels or dodgy agents holding everything up. Fuck that. We felt like we had something special with this one, which was going to take us in an unknown new direction. We launched our first ever crowd-funding campaign to raise extra funds for promotion, videos, and touring and as the year came to an end, 2014 was looking peachy.

However, this amazing, action-packed year came to a sad close, with the unfortunate news of Matt's father falling ill. This sudden change in Matt's personal circumstances would mean a change in his priorities for the immediate future. Man, I felt for him. But bands *become* family. You go

through so much together when you're travelling, gigging, and struggling; you see each other's limits and losses, and you have to console each other through the hard times. Life-long bonds are made.

I told him that no matter what happens, family is always more important – although I was hypocritically ignoring that sentiment in my own life to a shameful degree – and that Phil and I would crack on and keep the Kyshera train running while he did what he had to do. Matt was more to me than a mere band-mate, he was my best mate, and if anyone deserved to make it in this bloody awful business, it was us two. I knew how much the band meant to him and I made a promise to him there and then that while he was taking some time out, I'd be going into fucking overdrive and marching us *both* to the victory line.

CHAPTER 17

LEGO RECORDS

And then Phil quit the band. I only knew because I saw it on Facebook. He'd put up a statement announcing his departure yet hadn't even mentioned it to us. What the fuck? I called him. No answer. I called Matt and he'd just seen it too; it was news to both of us. Eventually, Phil called back and said that he hadn't been happy in the band, had decided to leave and here was an invoice of his accumulated expenses since joining.

Remember the tip about money? Well, things got ugly, fast. Phil had all the band's money in his studio safety box and was haggling over how much he felt he should give us back. It felt like a power move rather than anything financially motivated. He was obviously pissed off and using whatever weapon he could to stick it to me. But why? And why no warning? A band meeting, perhaps? Grievances raised, apologies made? I wasn't given the chance.

Now, I know what you're thinking, and I needed to ask myself the obvious question – was it me? Why couldn't I keep a damn line-up together? And did I make Phil feel like he couldn't speak to me? Granted, not every former member of the band had quit, some had been asked to leave, but either way, I sure as hell wasn't able to keep a happy unit for very long.

The standard shelf life of a member of Kyshera seemed to be two years max. My take was that people joined the band thinking we were 'going places' but when they realised it was a gruelling slog, a madman's marathon with no reward in sight, their staying power vanished. But it was always in the back of my mind, and undoubtedly yours too, that maybe it was me. I just could not keep a constant line-up together and by this stage I couldn't discount the possibility that the root cause of this incessant dilemma, the common denominator which had plagued the band since its inception, was me. Yet nobody would say it. I racked my brains for what it could be. My

concern had always been whatever was best for the band; it was never about me personally and if I was doing something to fuck the band up, I would gladly change. Was I too controlling? Too precious? Or just a fucking wanker?

In the end, I think it came down to the fact I gave too much of a fuck. The music meant everything to me. Plus, I had a lot of very heavy personal stuff invested in the band's success. For me, it wasn't about having a laugh, getting wrecked and 'jamming, bro'. It was about creating intense, meaningful art and trying to escape the scourge of poverty that had bullied me and my family all my life. In my family I was the one with the talent, I was 'the hope', the one they invested their expectations and belief in. The pressures that came with that burden, year after year, could keep me awake at night.

As those years whizzed by and my every effort failed mercilessly, I grew more and more intense, angry, driven and overly serious. And that was not what most people thought they were signing up for when they joined a rock 'n' roll band. Fuelled as I was by a deeper personal motivation, my resilience and tolerance for taking the relentless blows eclipsed everyone else's, and it became a common feature of the band that people would just surrender after a while and bail out. It also meant that it wasn't always a fun band to be in and I wasn't always a fun guy to be around. I might be wrong, though, and I do wish I knew.

In Phil's case, we'd started clashing a while back. Phil was a different character to me – a qualified computer programmer, an organised, order-following, attention-to-detail guy. Me, I'm a big-picture guy, a creative guy, a messy, self-taught jump-in-and-learn-while-you-fuck-it-up guy. As Phil became more involved in the band business, we had radically opposing views on what decisions to make, with Matt the lukewarm water between us. Phil needed order, he needed guarantees and he expected everyone we did business with to behave in a respectful and upstanding way.

God knows I wanted that, too, and in a sane world he would have been right. But we weren't in the normal world, we were in the music world, and I'd been struggling in the business long enough to know that the music industry was more like the wild west. There was no order, there were no

guarantees, no one *truly* knew what they were doing – most were just blagging it and occasionally getting obscenely lucky. That's the terrain I was riding in and our general clash of world view had started to get in the way. The gigs had slowed down and as the inevitable disillusionment began creeping into our newest member, we had the familiar feeling that we'd hit a brick wall.

Despite a busy few years releasing records, getting great reviews and doing hundreds of gigs, the industry was still wholly disinterested in us. I'd contacted hundreds of hand-picked managers, agents and labels, and the tiny few who bothered to reply would always say 'you're not doing enough'. I'd spend so long emailing some days that I'd get shooting pains down my wrists and my fingers would go numb.

It's a shame because, outside the band, I was having one of the best years of my life. That's the rub; when you're really trying to 'make it' as something, it overshadows everything. No matter how incomprehensibly fortunate you may be in all other aspects of your life, it all gets measured in comparison to the almost unattainable fantasy of being a rock star. Or to the crushing realisation that you are still not a rock star and that you're broke as fuck. So broke, in fact, that just to keep up with my meagre outgoings (cheap food and keeping a car on the road) I resorted to selling the only material possessions I had left: my recording equipment. Mixing desk, outboard gear, microphones – all of it. The only items I couldn't bring myself to part with were my computer and speakers.

Here we were again. Phil left the band the night before I was scheduled to start recording my guitars with Jeff Rose in Newport and I'd been so pumped that for the first time ever when making a record, I would get to enjoy just being a guitarist and not have to be the tea boy/engineer/editor/babysitter/admin clerk/Uber driver. Jeff was known for his big guitar sound and I was excited about the session. I called him, apologising for the inconvenience, and explaining that the album would be a no-go until further notice.

'Fuck that!' said Jeff.

'The show must always go on. He just quit a great band, fuck him. I'll see you at 11.'

I needed to hear it. I was pretty down in the dumps, beating myself up and blaming myself for the whole mess. Jeff suggested ploughing on with electronic drums, in the same way I'd done on our earlier albums, so I quickly edited some together, got off my sorry arse and turned up for the session. And I'm glad I did; it was just what I needed. Like a sulky dog losing its shit over a new bone, a day blasting fuzzy guitars turned my mood around just like that! I came away from that first session with a revived sense of confidence and purpose. This album needed to be made!

Operation New Drummer was launched immediately, but we also needed someone to stand in on our cover gigs too, since our album fund had been rinsed by Phil's exit. We had gigs that weekend and if we didn't keep the money coming in, we couldn't afford to finish making the album.

Who did we know who could slip straight into action with no rehearsal? Why, none other than our friendly, pipe-wielding, cunt-smashing, cider-blagging, genius ex-sticksman Mr Rhys Jones! For an even third of the fee, he said he was in. And he slotted in like he'd never been away. The first time he mentioned 'killing some cunt' I just laughed – I was past it now. We had successfully completed a crowd-funding campaign, which gave us much-needed extra help for the album release, and thank you so much to all of the gorgeous people who got behind that. You know who you are! It seemed that somehow, we'd make it happen.

Back in the real world, my teaching job was starting to get on my nerves. I couldn't complain; there are way harder jobs out there than teaching guitar to a bunch of kids who think you're awesome for it, but the surrounding stuff was beginning to grate. The council politics, the bureaucracy, the budget cuts, the increasing demands, the paperwork, the other teachers talking to me like I was a pupil, and the not paying me for months at a time. I started to feel that it had run its course.

Nor was it an ideal job for my nightly drinking habit. One Tuesday morning I woke up to see my work desk toppled over, computer monitor plunged face down on a floor littered with empty beer cans and dirty clothes, a scraggly curtain half hanging off and a sticky note in a bedside ashtray reminding me of the school performance that day – which I'd already missed by the time I'd woken up. I felt terrible and ashamed, but

neither were worse than the hangover. I called in with some bullshit excuse about my car breaking down but as I lay there assessing the sad state of debris around me, I wondered whether a part of me had started to break down as well.

The recording of *Circle* motored on around my teaching days but in order to speed things up and save money, I constructed a DIY vocal booth in my bedroom out of two bookcases and quilts, and began recording as much of the vocals as I could at home. We recorded all of Matt's bass parts in a single day at what was left of The Shack, and I programmed all of the drums and electronic parts at home, cutting down on studio recording time, which we needed to save for studio *mixing* time.

After a few weeks, the bitterness started creeping in. This wasn't how the making of this album was meant to pan out, and once again I started to feel like I was doing everything – putting out fires and cutting corners. When Matt excitedly suggested that we film the process like we had with *Made in China*, I replied with something to the effect of, 'I hate the fucking process and I can't wait until it's over', which Matt took as a no.

My morale started plunging to new lows making *Circle*, and it didn't take much to send me spiralling downwards like the guy on the album cover. All I wanted to do was make a record and I was starting to get tired of the pointless uphill battle that came with everything. I was certain Roger Waters didn't have to put up with this shit!

And then, true to the emotion-tugging, hope-teasing, endorphin-wrecking norm, in one month we got both a manager and a new drummer! We'd had quite a few drummers try out for us already by the time Matt saw Glyn playing in a covers band in Cardiff, and some of them were incredible, but when Glyn came and played with us, right away, we knew. He was perfect.

If Rhys was The Terminator of rhythm, Glyn was its Shakespeare. With a richly nuanced and layered musicality to his powerhouse delivery, not only could the guy play (and I mean, really play) but he was energetic, positive, funny, eccentric and one hundred per cent enthusiastic about...well, absolutely everything! That riff you just played? That's the best fucking riff Glyn has ever heard. Play it again, play it again! We needed that energy about now. There was also an emphatic kindness and warm sincerity to

Glyn that was apparent as soon as we met him – a heart on the sleeve kinda guy. And he believed that aliens control us from the moon, which is always a plus.

In a single session it was a done deal and Kyshera had found their guy. For us, it seemed too easy! Sean, the new manager, was a fast-talking, ‘all business, no small talk’ type dude from Detroit, who’d received our promotional mass email mail-out containing demo tracks for the new album and replied with interest. He thought our new direction was strong, was amazed by how much we’d done by ourselves and wanted in. Our recently burned fingers wouldn’t be signing anything with anyone anytime soon, though, so we cagily began working with him on a non-exclusive trial basis to start off with. And fair play to the guy, the first thing he did was promptly get us a national booking agent, which we desperately needed to get a good tour for the album’s release, and by the end of the same week he’d lined up a US label and a PR rep.

Compare the events so far in this chapter and you can begin to see why mental-health issues are so rife in this business. In the space of a day, you can sink to the depths of total despair, doubt, and defeat, and then, out of the blue, a new opportunity will tease your dreams and dopamine into overdrive, usually to brutal disappointment a little while later. Compounded by the permanent state of multi-tasking and tension – this sustained, highly charged electrical stimulus to your brain wreaks havoc on your grasp of normality. You are standing to attention and ready for action even in sleep. That rollercoaster, every day for a few years is enough to thoroughly frazzle your emotional, nervous, and cognitive systems, especially when blanketed with chemical coping methods.

After a frenetic few weeks it was as if the debacle with Phil had happened years ago, with Matt and I now regularly rushing back and forth to London, meeting with Sean, liaising with the team he was putting together for us and rehearsing with Glyn. I felt like all the stress of making this damn album might turn out to be worth it and I was grateful to Jeff for not letting me bail on it.

Brewing behind the scenes were several European tours I’d been working on, and they were all due to happen this year. We hadn’t confirmed all the

dates yet, but we were going to be playing main support on all the UK dates for the US rock band 'Boy Hits Car' that July, which was awesome. Also on the cards was a Scandinavian tour with the ginormous Swedish band, 'Amaranthe', in the autumn.

Things were starting to look up again. We pencilled the album release for after the summer, giving us a good few months to build up the promo. We couldn't afford to pay for the company that Sean wanted us to work with, but I was still in contact with the former PR guy at Daghorn's label, a fellow-victim in that whole mess, and I thought it would be cool to send the work his way instead. His business and personal life had been devastated by Daghorn, and he had suffered far worse than us. I thought it would be in the spirit of solidarity to bring him on board, and it wasn't just charity; he was good as well!

In the build-up to the tour, our lead single, 'Break This', was getting some good radio-time and the pre-release reviews were all positive. Everything seemed to be going as it should, except that Sean had started invoicing us for his expenses. We hadn't signed a contract with him, and we hadn't discussed any expenses payments – we also couldn't afford them, especially as they were all for swanky hotels and other unnecessary luxuries. We'd become sensitive to being exploited, and Matt and I had reservations about it all.

Our new booker was booking us a national headline tour for after the album came out and things were generally moving in a good direction, but we were, as always, fucking broke. Paying for Sean's 11am room-service whisky was starting to jangle my balls a bit. We also needed a promo video for 'Break This', but we needed someone who could make a decent video for hardly any money.

A friend of mine suggested a guy called Scott Carey, and boy, were they right. Scott shot the whole thing in a few hours, in one location with one camera, and comfortably within our budget. My kind of guy. Scott would go on to produce all our future videos as well as my solo videos. I felt a team was building.

When July came, we were aching to do some shows. The weather was gorgeous and, after all the headache that goes into planning an album

release, the time had come to get away from the computer and do what we were made for. Our collective work holidays and sick days pooled, we were ready for tour. US band 'Boy Hits Car' hold the world record for the highest stage-dive ever after their singer, Cregg (who Matt kept calling Greg), dived from an insane sixty-eight feet onto the crowd below. Our tour with them was a snug little stint around the UK, with shows from Edinburgh down to Basingstoke, so we hired a cheap little transit van and Dan Donnelly, my long-time mate from the WhiteOak Studio days, joined us as merch guy/photographer/drinking support.

Bewilderingly, what followed was one of the smoothest, most drama-free tours in the history of music. Sometimes, not often, the stars align in your favour and the bullshit parts for a minute. This was one of those moments. Great weather, great traffic, easy routing, the other bands were all super-cool and we played some of the best mid-level venues in the country, such as the Craufurd Arms in Milton Keynes, Bannerman's in Edinburgh, London Underworld and my favourite venue in the UK, Nottingham Rock City. New friends were made in every city, and the new line-up? The new line-up fucking rocked. We realised on that tour that Glyn was more than the new guy on drums; he was a friend. He got 'it', he got 'us'. We had a great laugh together and looked out for each other, and that seemed to add something to the energy on stage because we were fucking fierce every night.

'Are you in some kind of trouble, Glyn?'

As well as being lovely, Glyn is...let's say, a tad gullible, and he makes the fatal error of listening to Matt Warr. Matt, as we know, is a world-class prankster, and boy, did he have some fun with the poor little lamb.

'Trouble? What?! Why, mate!?'

'Well, I've had these Nigerians calling my house for days now, looking for you. Something about "the money"? Is everything OK, man?'

Every one of these daily wind-ups was so blatantly ridiculous that none of us could fathom why on earth Glyn would fall for them. Matt would say something increasingly outlandish and sit and watch as Glyn ran about for hours, checking messages, making calls, asking questions and trying to figure out 'who the Nigerians were', or why Mickey Mouse was in the

Illuminati or whatever today's nonsense was. I'd always crack first – I'm a useless liar and I can't keep a straight face.

'He's fucking winding you up, man!'

'But why would he do that?!'

'That's what he does, dude! Ignore him!'

'But why are Nigerians after me?!'

Oh, Jesus.

Things at Camp Kyshera were going well! The only problem we *almost* had was in London. I got an email, while on the road, from some bloke who said he was the promoter of the London show and that we had been moved from main support to first on the bill, at 6:30pm. Fuck that! I explained that we were confirmed to play main support on all dates and were listed as such on the tour poster. There must have been a misunderstanding. A back-and-forth ensued and it transpired that the band he wanted to push in on our slot was his son's band. Surprise sur-fucking-prise! There was no chance. Our slot stayed, end of. He then sent me a bizarre message telling me to 'be careful of who I fall out with' as 'people know people'. So, when the London show came around, I was expecting to have to deal with some East End gangster. Instead I met a sheepish little bloke in his late fifties who is not, nor has ever been, a promoter. Or a gangster. What he was, in fact, was a part-time window-cleaner whose son was in a band.

Tip number 7 for upcoming bands: everyone in this business will treat you like you're twelve, assume you've been on the circuit two minutes and try to exploit you to fuck. Don't fall for it. Case in point, our new manager Sean was still sending over invoices for expenses we knew nothing about and which had nothing to do with us. We soon found out that they were another band's expenses – another band to whom he had just given our Scandinavian tour – a tour that I had lined up.

I knew our winning streak wouldn't last long and in a matter of weeks, it was games as usual. We were gutted; that tour right off the back of this one would have been perfect. I told him no more expenses and no more Mr Manager. He played the innocent little flower routine. They always do.

Tip number 8 for upcoming bands: if you don't like arguing or confrontation, you'll have to delegate someone who does, because there's

gonna be a whole lot of fighting if you want to get out alive. I don't like confrontation, but I do like my band, so I rise to it if I must. It would be nice if you didn't have to, though, and if people could just do their fucking job without taking the piss, but honey, this ain't a rom-com.

The album was originally scheduled for an October 2014 release, but our PR guy suggested moving it to six months later to fully ramp up the promo. Our booker agreed, so we did it. *Circle* was scheduled for release on 16 March, 2015, the day after my thirty-fifth birthday. We decided to use the extra time to line up some more promo videos and rebuild our finances (thanks again, Wonderwall). 'Inertia' was filmed at the disused former mining colliery in Penallta and 'Gone' at the old Coal Exchange in Cardiff – both visually stunning local locations. Penallta was a jump-the-fence-and-go situation, whereas the Coal Exchange was closed until further notice, but the vast, empty, regal expanse of the place was perfect for what I had in mind and I managed to blag permission for us to film there, for one night only.

The house scenes were shot at a friend's house and feature the alternative adult model Lady Lauren, who got to do something many others would love to do: punch me in the face, repeatedly. It looks like a mere slap in the video but on the day, Lauren kept going wide and clocking me on the nose, ears, eyes – everywhere other than my bloody cheek. I was seeing stars by take fifteen and I started to suspect it was a conspiracy on behalf of the other guys to see me get my comeuppance.

During this bonus downtime, did I go on a holiday? Catch up with friends and family? Chill out? Nope. I stayed in that dark little bedroom and worked on expanding Konic Records into a music-publishing company, managing to blag a network of partner companies in each country around the world.

I know, it's exactly what you were thinking, too, right? I'd been trying to get a publishing deal for ages but, true to form, despite all the commercial song-writing I'd been doing, and despite already earning a regular little income from it all, I just could not get a deal! For the life of me, I still couldn't fathom the industry's choices. For so long I'd watched as seventeen-year-old ukulele players would get huge deals and gushing

column inches without a single song written, only to be dropped a few months later. Yet here was a band that had a proven track record, was touring, had a back catalogue, making its own releases, generating its own money, getting great reviews, getting radio play, had a songwriter who was already writing to spec for a variety of clients and earning money from it, and I couldn't even get a fucking call back!

And then I did get a call back. And a meeting.

I had to catch the 5am Megabus to London to get there on time to meet one of the UK's biggest music publishers, at the exclusive, members-only Groucho Club in Soho. I told work I was ill. It was mildly snowy when I left Wales but by the time I'd got to London, it was an all-out raging blizzard.

Surprisingly, the meeting was still on, so I waded my way through the battering snow in clothes that were chosen to look cool but were now sopping to the knee. Beating the doorway interrogation, I waited at the bar to be summoned to meet the wizard. I waited...and waited. Melting and dripping all over the posh flooring, I could feel my working-class peasant triggers being pulled as I sipped the only drink I could afford there: a water. I felt like everyone was judging me. They weren't.

Eventually, finally, it was my turn! But don't get excited, it took less than ten minutes for me to be humoured and politely churned back out into the snow. You see, there were lots of ukulele players to get through and could I get back to them once I'd scored a few Grammys?

That four-hour trip back on the Megabus would be my last. I'd given up all hope with these fucking visionless, complacent, out of touch, old-school dinosaurs and I made the decision right there and then to do what I always do – I'd do it myself.

As the warmth of self-righteous clarity coddled my frozen exterior, something else entirely was consuming the bloke in the seat next to me. It started with the coughing. The loosening of collars. The fidgeting around in his seat. Then came the sweating. Lots of it. Then the groaning and involuntary bursts of, 'oh god', 'what's happening?', and 'aaaaargh!' Just my luck, sitting next to the fucking bus psycho.

I moved across to the pleasant-looking elderly lady opposite. Out of drama's way, not my problem. Then *she* started. Same format. Coughing, choking, clutching at her throat. She glared at me through sweaty, tear-smearred eyes that hissed, 'What have *you* done to me?' Flummoxed by the two post-apocalyptic zombies writhing around on either side of me, I started to sweat myself, and I promptly opted for another seat switch. Except that nobody would have me. Heads shook, seats became full and it was right there in the aisle where it hit me. A moving bus became a bouncing washing machine. My balance faltered, my throat locked up, my palms were numb and sweaty. I clambered straight for the only seat left – the toilet – and immediately projectile vomited all over the place.

I don't know if you've ever tried to be sick in a moving Megabus toilet, but it's not easy. For a start, you have to do it standing up because there's no room to bend over. And of course, you're getting tossed from wall to wall as you do it, throwing vomit in all directions as you hold on for dear life. That little cubicle looked like a collaboration between Tracey Emin and Jackson Pollock. If it was in the Tate, I'd be lauded for my genius and artistic commentary on the hypocrisy of modern consumerism, or some such bollocks.

Funnily enough, I felt bloody great after it and skipped breezily back out into the coach like a free man, to gasps of horror from all others on board. My two victims were both spread out horizontally across seats and looking very, very unwell. I plonked myself down next to a nervous student and had a nap. That was the event that marked my decision to set up Konic Publishing. I was still building things out of Lego.

CHAPTER 18

KNOW YOUR ENEMY

To my long list of Reasons I Hate Myself, which included being a failure, being poor, letting my family down, being a shit boyfriend, being an absent friend and regretting pretty much all of my life's decisions, I'd now added 'being overweight'. To be fair, I wasn't *that* overweight, but I was enormously unhealthy. Living as I did, hunched over a computer all day and most of the night, surviving on microwave meals, biscuits and beer, I was becoming conscious that as a man now in my thirties, if I didn't get on top of things soon, I would have problems. I'd never exercised a day in my life and couldn't name a vegetable if a tour with Maiden depended on it, so I tried a different approach; I would do as little as I could be arsed to do, but I would do *something* every day.

I swapped intensity for consistency and by Jove, it bloody worked! What began as a five-minute jog before buckling over in agony became a regular pre-breakfast several-mile running routine within a few months. The more the weight fell off, the more I learned about nutrition. The better I felt, the more I did, and before long I was obsessed. By summer I had a personal trainer and by autumn I had the coveted six-pack; something which would have been unimaginable when I started.

Now, most people would have seen this transformation as a respectable, hard-won achievement, but my inner demon isn't most people and even something as positive as health and fitness turned into yet another ugly manifestation of my hardwired self-loathing – I was good, but I wasn't good *enough*. I started pushing myself harder. I dropped my calorie intake to dangerous levels and now I was an unhealthy health freak. At the point when I was in my best shape ever, rather shredded in fact, I was also at my unhappiest – deprived of any sensory pleasures and flagellating myself daily for not attaining a Greek god-like physique fast enough. Fitness soon became just another contributing factor to my creeping depression.

Being an intense bastard notwithstanding, 2015 was lined up to be *the* year. The year of the *Circle*. Everything was in place and we were ready to kick some asses. Glyn had settled in to the band as if he'd been there forever, and for the first time in a very long while, we had a band who were all on the same page, not just musically but also socially. This line-up felt like 'the one'. However, Glyn had recently damaged his wrist during a fall at an abandoned warehouse (I didn't ask), so while we were temporarily out of action I filled the time with some solo gigs, including what became a 'sit in' at the iconic 12 Bar Club in Soho and an impromptu performance outside Parliament with Occupy Democracy.

The famous 12 Bar Club on Tin Pan Alley (starting point for Adele, Jeff Buckley, the Libertines and so many more) was one in a long line of historic venues to be demolished for gentrification, and a group of demonstrators had decided to occupy the building in protest. I popped in to show my support but, having come fresh from the Sanctum Hotel, I stood out somewhat from the rest of the gathering who had been squatting there for quite some time and were openly suspicious of this mystery new guy waltzing in with his pearly white Converse trainers and nosing around. It was dark and dingy in there with no electricity, and beds had been improvised across the stage. There was a miasma of sullen, tense anticipation hanging in the air.

The police had been threatening to make their 'final' visit that day and everyone knew what that meant. No one was talking; they were just waiting. Waiting for the doors to get kicked in. My attempts at small talk were met with steely silence and I was starting to regret being in there... until I saw a guitar. Fuck it. There was a chance this would go badly wrong but I took a gamble and launched into an acoustic version of 'Know Your Enemy', with its cascade of anti-establishment incitements, and I prayed to god that it would ingratiate me with the room, rather than having me ejected – or worse, simply told to shut the fuck up.

Thankfully, it was the ice breaker we all needed and resting bitch faces quickly melted into animated outpourings about the struggles of the past few weeks, the shifty games the police had been playing and stories of similar campaigns. Soon we were eating together and swapping details.

And so there it was again. The magical, universal power that music has to transcend boundaries. True to their word, the police did come that night and forcibly removed everyone in a scene that was far from pleasant.

Experiences like these are just another example of how broad and varied the social palette of musicians and artists can be. One minute you're at a squat in Soho, the next you're chatting to models on the roof of a five-star hotel – and accepted at both because you're a musician. Musicians and artists get an open door to such a complete cross-section of society that I honestly believe we see more of a country, more of a society and more of human nature than any other line of work; certainly more than politicians. People *want* musicians in the room.

The gig outside Parliament was funny. I was there for the Occupy demonstration and after a while of the usual marching around and chanting stuff, we assembled at Parliament's gates and I was asked to sing some songs. I don't know any of those old lefty folk numbers that are usually the law at such assemblies, so I did 'Coalition' and another 'Know Your Enemy'. Thankfully, people joined in. We were blocking the entire road by now, with double-decker buses whizzing past us, and as I looked around while singing 'They're all criminals now' on that simple, sunny afternoon, I had a little internal chuckle to myself at just how surreal it all was. I was playing to an audience of banner-waving protesters, bewildered but snap-happy tourists, pissed-off Londoners trying to squeeze past, an array of news cameras, and a line of police. And right behind me were the gates to Parliament. I had a nice chat with one of the coppers afterwards about guitars and more details were swapped. It was all good fun.

After getting home to one arsey exchange too many with my teaching agency – about trousers, would you believe – I handed in my notice. It went like this:

'Hi James, yes, it's just that um...well, it's not acceptable to be wearing jeans at school. You're a teacher not a...'

'I wasn't wearing jeans.'

'Yes, yes, I hear what you're saying but it's just not good enough, you *can't* be wearing jeans at school, you're a teacher not a...'

‘I wasn’t wearing jeans. I was wearing trousers. I’ve been teaching for fifteen years and not once have I ever...’

‘James, look, it’s just not good enough to be wearing *jeans* at *school!* You’re a *teacher* not a...’

Click. Fuck it, I wasn’t listening to that babble any more. Jeans? What was that mental bellend blabbering on about!? It was one petty stupidity too many and I just couldn’t deal with humouring the guy any longer. I handed in my notice, he never replied, and then three months later gave me a bollocking about having missed a term of school and asking if I’d sorted my trousers yet! Absolutely batshit crazy. I was jobless again with no plan for money, but I just didn’t care.

* * *

At long last, *Circle* was due for release in a few weeks and I was keen to see the reviews, conscious of the fact that this album was a big stylistic departure for us. To my surprise, many critics still referred to the music as complex and progressive, when it was intended to be our mainstream album!

‘The three-piece take pride in being hard to define, combining complex compositions with a taste for the epic (not to mention freewheeling riff action). With an explosive live show that has laid waste to both sides of the Atlantic, the band’s intentions are clear: to fuck things up and break down the walls of genre. And long may they continue to do so.’ *Big Cheese Magazine*

‘I’m not totally sure as yet whether it’s a work of absolute genius or actually a bunch of weird, discombobulating nonsense, but oddly that’s exactly what makes Kyshera so intriguing.’ *Rocktopia Magazine*

‘Not every band can capture such energy and ideas in their music and wrap it all up into bite-size pieces, but Kyshera appear to have pulled off a masterstroke with *Circle*. 8/10’ *PowerPlay Magazine*

We were stoked that the album had been well-received, but also pissed off that once again, these were all reviews we’d got by ourselves. Our PR guy – our *paid* PR guy – hadn’t done much over the past few months, but

you're probably bored of hearing me say that. In his defence, his life was a mess and when I brought him on board, I didn't realise just how *much* of a mess his life had become since Daghorn had fucked him over. He seemed like a good guy deep down, and at our London show he approached me afterwards and apologised sincerely for letting us down. He refused payment and said that he was embarrassed, ashamed and had a long way to go to get his life back on track. How can you stay pissed off at a guy who's in that hole?

Despite its spewy inception, my venture into music publishing had some good beginner's luck and I'd managed to bag a few TV placements for some mates' bands, including one for Cat in Taiwan and one for Aled in the US. My roster was growing steadily and by spring I'd managed to land a big US TV ad for an amazing unsigned artist from Brighton named Bunty. It was fortunate timing for me, as I was now jobless and needed this to work, but it also felt great to be able to send opportunities my mates' way. Perhaps all those rejections were a blessing after all.

Our headline UK tour was booked for April, but I was a little sceptical as to some of the choices of venue. Apparently, to get the booker on board, our (now ex) manager had told him that we could fill five hundred capacity rooms up and down the country, any day of the week, no problem. We couldn't. To make things worse, another of his roster bands from the States, an amazing band called 'Gooding', was mad keen to get some UK shows, so he plonked them onto our tour as the opening act.

Now, at our level the standard practice is to have local support bands in each town to draw some extra, local ticket sales. You certainly don't have a band from thousands of miles away who can't shift any tickets, especially when it's going to cost said band a ton of money to get over here, hire equipment, transport and accommodation, only to play to hardly anyone. I was worried for them. There was no way we'd fill these rooms. We'd had zero promo and all the big talk from everyone at the start had been more empty bullshit. And yet it was us who would have to go out there, play to half-empty rooms, and look these poor American guys in the eye every night, knowing that they've probably remortgaged a house to come on the road with us.

‘It’ll all be fine’, the agent said. Well, you can call me a cynical, miserable bastard all you like, but I began to suspect that this tour was going to be a fucking disaster.

Our opening night at The Globe was a layup. Home turf, easy crowd, great gig. The support bands were buzzing – ‘this tour was going to fucking rock!’ But as the week dragged on and we were playing giant rooms in Wolverhampton on a Tuesday night to practically nobody, the mood started to sour. You could feel the distance and discontentment growing between the other bands and us; they blamed *us* for this shit. Don’t get me wrong, I have no problem playing to small crowds – it’s what I’ve done my entire life – but we just felt fucking terrible for that poor American band. And they knew. We knew. Everyone knew; this was a joke tour thrown together so that a booker could get three bands off their ‘to do’ list. But it was *our* name on the poster.

Soon the US band were just playing for themselves and instead of sticking to their half-an-hour set time, they’d jam on for over an hour, meaning that we, the headline act, had to cut our set down to twenty minutes some nights. Words were had, and ignored, and resentment just continued to build on all sides. It was cringeworthy. In Nottingham, their singer and I got it all out on the table. I explained to him that I had *begged* our agent not to put them on the tour, and he told me they’d paid over seventeen grand to come and do these shows, on the promise of packed rooms every night. I couldn’t fucking believe it. Nobody had been able to get hold of the agent for weeks, until he called to tell us that he’d added another band to the bill – a good local crowd-puller up north.

They were neither good nor a crowd-puller. Genuinely believing they were Oasis, these posturing, swaggering, sunglasses-wearing, fisherman hat-wearing, raincoat-done-all-the-way-up bunch of absolute fucking morons descended on our already shambolic travelling travesty like a proud steaming turd on a six-year-old’s birthday cake. None of us were in the mood for their arrival. Turning up late, drinking everyone’s rider, having to borrow everyone’s gear ’cos they had fuck all of their own (and then breaking it), playing way over time, falling over pissed on stage in front of four people and absolutely fucking *sucking* every night. if the tour wasn’t a

joke already, it was comedic genius now. I was counting the seconds until it was over and spent as much time as possible in an alcoholic stupor. The only good thing to come from that tour was that Glyn met his future fiancée, at the (now closed) Square in Harlow.

It was also our first true subjection to Glyn's nightly exorcisms, otherwise known as snoring. I have never before nor ever since heard anything quite like it. One night, squeezed, three-in-a-row, in the back of our airless van, which was mostly full of gear, merch and god knows what else, I recorded it and it honestly sounds like Satan is screaming all manner of filth at you through a scrambled alphabet of twisted, gargled seizures. It is a medley of jagged howls, staccato grunting and blood-curdling sleep-talk from some bizarre otherworldly dimension below.

Matt and I would lie there staring wide-eyed into the darkness, denied sleep for days on end, desperately yearning, praying, pleading for just one night of fucking silence – which never came. Obviously, the next morning, the well-rested drummer is bouncing off the walls and loving life while Matt and I are barely able to pull our faces off the dashboard. Thank god there were all the other trappings of road life to make up for it, such as the aforementioned Evian Shower, where you strip down to your pants in a car park and throw cold, bottled water over yourself in a pitiable attempt to rid yourself of all things smelly and sticky. And how about drying off? Well, nothing is ever really dry on tour. You can give towels and t-shirts a little blast on the van roof or hang them up in the back, but they're never what you would call...dry.

After a stint on the road, all your clothes become a homogeneous mass of moist, creased, smelly papier-mâché. Except socks: you can spread a whole row of those bad boys along the dashboard vents and have toasty warm foot cuddles by the time you get to Hull. And hey, the food is spectacular! If you really, really love expensive processed ham and cheese sandwiches from petrol stations, then touring may just be for you! And the money, too...oh, wait.

What does keep you going on tour is 1) band camaraderie 2) the show and 3) the fans. No matter how frazzled, hungry and pissed off you are by the time you've finally arrived at the venue, no matter how much you get

dicked around by the promoter and the other bands, no matter how much you wish you were home and no matter how shit it can get, you have an extended family excited to see you in every town. People who have also travelled for hours, queued up, spent their hard-earned money, arranged babysitters, and been excited all day to see you play and hear your songs.

In fact, I don't like the word 'fans', because I've formed real, lasting friendships with many of our fans and we've always felt a deeper mutual connection and respect that far outweighs any simple notion of a 'fan'. From the very start, we've been given sofas to sleep on, a helping hand, incredible moral (and financial) support, parties, good times and memories in every single place we've been, either at home or abroad. The industry will relentlessly drain your morale and faith in humanity – the antidote to that is spending time with your fans. Knowing that songs you wrote in a dark little room while penniless have been played at people's first dances and funerals, seeing people singing your words through tears, seeing your lyrics tattooed on people's hearts, seeing the same faces at venues all over the country and seeing just how happy you can make someone by spending just a little time with them – all of that, there is absolutely nothing like it in the world and it makes all the pain, failure, doubt and struggle disappear in a flash. The relationship between band and fan is an equal, two-way relationship and I hope that all our incredible 'fans' know just how much they kept us going.

That said, I was glad that this tour was over. We 'amicably parted ways' with our agent and never spoke to him again. Yet, despite grating at our soul, it seemed the tour, along with the reviews, radio-play, videos and general activity at camp Kyshera was at least giving the *perception* that we were doing stuff, because we were quickly approached by another manager, this time based in London.

James Black had been on the scene for years and was well known on the rock/metal band circuit (sound familiar?). We had a meeting with him, and he talked a lot of sense. He said our tour was organised to fail, it was a shambles, it never should have happened. He listed all the things that he would have guaranteed were in place before we even agreed to do it. He asked us about our endorsements (they were scant), about our PR campaign

(‘don’t worry, I know someone who can fix that for you’), about our plans to tour abroad (‘*None?! Leave it with me*’). It was music to my ears – but don’t forget my ears are screwed. We didn’t sign anything with him, it was only a meeting but then two days later, he called up:

‘Do you want to tour Europe with cult Nineties metal band, Snot?’

‘Uh...yes?’

‘Great. It’s in two months. Leave it with me.’

What?! OK, so as well as saying the right things, this guy was *doing* stuff. That’s different. My instant reaction, as with all things, was not to call my missus or my mum, but Matt. Needless to say, he was beyond up for it, as was Glyn. I checked their upcoming dates online and they were playing in Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Netherlands, Switzerland, and a few dates in the UK, too. We *had* to do it! It would be the peak of summer, we’d be doing proper shows with a proper touring band, none of that small-time bullshit we’d been doing over here. Mentally, we’d all already made our minds up without knowing anything about the deal.

The deal, as it predictably transpired, was a buy-on. For those that don’t know, a buy-on is where a smaller band pays a bigger band to give them a support slot. It’s rife throughout the industry and don’t be fooled, your mate’s band is doing it, too. The smaller band gets to jump on an awesome tour and play to the bigger band’s audience, and the bigger band gets its drugs paid for. Win-win. Not entirely. It’s an unfair, corrosive exploitation of the fact that for most bands, practically every other door is firmly closed to them, making them desperate and easy prey for a quick buck. But this wasn’t the ideal world of fairies and unicorns and we’d tried every door going over the past five (ten?) years and yep, they were all *very* firmly closed with a big ‘go fuck yourself’ sign on the front. So I wasn’t writing off the option of a buy-on – if we could afford it.

As it turned out, we could. We were still doing cover gigs every weekend and had stacked up some decent cash. This seemed like a worthy thing to spend it on. The deal was half upfront, half before we leave. Sweet. I’d spoken at length with their agent and all was kosher. Blackie, as Matt had named him, would facilitate the deal and get us the best terms possible.

As well as paying for the buy-on, we had to pay for ferries, international van hire, fuel costs, merch, food, tolls and all those other little things that add up, so I had to lean on credit cards again, which I hadn't done since the dark old days. Still, we could figure that out later. We had two months to prepare. Unlike Snot, we didn't have a tour manager, driver, guitar techs or our own sound tech; we were on our own. Nor could we afford accommodation, so the plan was to sleep in the van. But that was familiar territory. Lugging gear, doing crazy ten-minute pack downs right after your set, getting a five-minute soundcheck, being given a square inch of the merch desk, doing all our own driving and staying the fuck out of the adults' way – we knew the ropes and we were willing to earn our stripes. With our costs cut down to the absolute minimum, we managed to cobble it all together in time and, after years of trying, we had ourselves a European tour, baby!

Our last gig before we set sail was at Camden Rocks Festival in London, and who did I see as I looked out into the crowd but our ex-manager Sean with our hapless ex-PR guy and some new band they were undoubtedly rinsing for mini-bar payments. Still feeling guilty about stiffing us on our campaign, hapless ex-PR guy tried plying me with a random group of girls he'd assembled from somewhere and who didn't seem to mind being pawned off onto a stray musician for less than savoury motives. I politely thanked him, and them, and declined. We were rapidly shinning up that greasy pole and guys like these were old news.

CHAPTER 19

FEAR AND LOATHING

After two months of frantic planning, renting, and liaising, the van was packed, and we were on our way. A warm, promising sun shone down on leaving day and we were all buzzing with excitement like a group of kids embarking for a month at the best amusement park on earth. Everything was finally paid for, booked and prepared – all we had to do now was enjoy the ride. No work, no commitments, no bullshit, and no fucking Wonderwall. For the next month at least, we were rock stars.

A ferry from Plymouth would do the first stint to Santander, taking a good day or so, and I for one intended to get blissfully shit-faced as soon as I hit the deck. There would be a lot of van time on this tour so we each heaped a bulky stack of our favourite CDs across the dashboard, eagerly spreading them out like a personal mobile jukebox menu, only to discover a hundred miles later that the van didn't have a CD player, it was Bluetooth only. A fucking disaster! The only one of us who had any music on their phone was me, and I only had three albums, two of them by Sia. The other was the incredible first album by Marmozets. And so it was that three old rocker blokes would spend the next month cooped up in the front of a squashed, sweaty van all day every day, with fucking Chandelier on rotation. It wasn't the only thing that would unhinge us.

Once on the ferry, I did as promised: I hit the bar. Matt and Glyn had remarkably similar plans, oddly enough, and so it began. Unable to afford a bed on the boat, we would sleep on the communal chairs, and thus the need for copious amounts of alcohol was both recreational and strategic.

We boozed and half-slept our way to Spain, with the first show due the following day. As I mentioned, we wouldn't be seeing a bed at any point on the tour, unless it was built from drum hardware and amp cases, but we had pretty much mastered the ole 'sleeping in the van' business and this is how we'd do it:

Tip number 9 for upcoming bands: service stations are your friend. Kind of.

The trick is to start driving towards your next gig right after you finish the previous one. If you stay at a nearby hotel, you'll have inner-city, daytime traffic to deal with the next morning, but if you slam a few hours out in the night after you've finished the show, you'll have clear roads and you'll cover some distance, making tomorrow a little easier.

Sleep? That's where our trusty service stations come in. As soon as the post-gig adrenaline starts waning and you're nodding off at the wheel, pull into the nearest service station, park up and get some shut-eye – yes, in the van. The next morning you wake up, and guess what? Not only are you already on the motorway and out of the city, but you've got showers, coffee shops and petrol right there, too. It's like a free, shit hotel.

What we hadn't anticipated on this trip was a scorching heatwave in the Mediterranean, turning the van in to a sticky, claustrophobic, airless vacuum that smelled of farts. And the first time we tried leaving the doors ajar overnight, we got infested with cockroaches. It was fucking deathly in that sealed, aluminium box at night. I'm amazed that one of us didn't pass out at some point, but I guess it would be the maker of men. Or something.

Day one in Spain. James practically tears roof off van. Our overwhelmingly cautious hire company had photo-catalogued every hair-sized surface scratch on the van before letting us loose with it, so god knows why they never pulled me up for the metre-squared gouge I took out of the roof. I made the unfathomably thick decision to squeeze our high-rise touring van into a mini underground car park – in Spain. And everything is half-size in Spain, I'm certain of it.

Let's explore Gijon! we said. The van will fit in there fine! we said. And it did. But when it was time to leave, the exit seemed to have magically shrunk. It was physically impossible for us to get the thing out, and after two hours of different angles and letting the tyres down, our giant, cumbersome van was creating havoc and causing traffic tailbacks in all directions. Soundcheck time was looming and among the growing din of beeping and Spanish swearing, I panicked and just fucking went for it. The sound of metal slowly buckling and grinding against concrete is a

physically painful sound – everything about it says stop. I didn't, and as a van-length dinosaur claw ripped its way through the roof of our day-old rental, we finally saw sunlight again. No one mentioned it; it didn't happen.

Thankfully, it was gig time – the reason we were all here in the first place. We were the first to arrive at Sala Acapulco, unloading our gear and merch into the venue and hanging around until the other bands got there. We hadn't met the other bands yet and we were so fucking excited, man. For me, the adrenaline starts brewing as soon as I arrive at the venue. Even though it's cold and empty, the house lights are on and you can see the rooms, warts an' all, as staff empty bins, clean the floor and stock the bar. The second I see that weathered stage, that bare canvas of potential, I start envisioning battle.

With the bustling Gijon streets bursting out onto the packed beach right outside, the pre-gig battle spirit was starting to simmer in me good and proper. A battle was how we described it to each other. We would get so pumped before a gig, as if psyching up for a fucking bar fight. In this spirit, we'd made our 'walk-on music' for the tour the soundtrack from the film *Zulu*. It was Matt's idea. Surely *that* would let everyone know that a delicious ass-whipping was a-coming. Inside, the venue was BIG, and the other guys had just arrived in their equally BIG, laughably-unfit-for-Spanish-roads, supersized, double-decker, motherfucking tour bus. How they got it there, I'll never know.

'Hey man, how you guys doing?!'

'Thanks for coming, guys. Fucking stoked to have you out with us.'

'Thanks for having us, man, we can't fucking wait!'

Bro hugs, handshakes, fist bumps and the like are exchanged, and everyone gets acquainted. In the universally standard format, drummers chat drums and become instant best friends, guitarists eye up each other's equipment and become instant enemies, and bassists grab beers and chat up women. The tour had begun! And then – and this is not for dramatic effect – at that *exact* moment, I shit you not – my phone started ringing. I almost ignored it but then randomly clicked the green button.

'Hi, is that James?'

'Uh, yes, who is this?'

(If this is that wanker calling about my fucking trousers again, he's gonna get it.)

'Is Glyn with you?'

'Nah, man, he's upstairs. Who *is* this, please?'

'It's his cousin. He's going to need to come home *now*. His father has had a stroke.'

* * *

Fifteen minutes later and we're speeding our way to Asturias Airport. And in a blink, Glyn is gone. Matt and I sat dumbstruck in the airport car park for ages, shell-shocked and trying to process what the fuck had just happened. Information had been scant on the phone and the immediate priority had been to get Glyn on a plane and figure the rest out later. Thrown out of our depth, devastated for Glyn and clueless as to what to do next, we were both in a state of extreme confusion and violently mixed emotions.

Why Glyn? Why us? Why now? Do we make our own plans to go home? Announce that we're leaving the tour? We've got this huge van full of gear! Maybe we should stay here until we hear further? No, he can't come back, so no, we make plans to go home. But what if that's the wrong decision? What if that's not the decision that Glyn would want us to make? We decided to postpone any decision-making for the night and sink some well-needed beers. Eventually dragging ourselves out of the airport, for some reason we ended up driving back to Gijon and parking up in a dusty, off-road car park near a stretch of late-night bars. What the *fuck* was happening?

We ended up living in that car park for days, but it felt like a year. And nothing much happens in Gijon, it seems. We had decided that Glyn needed to be a part of whatever decision was made and that we'd just have to wait until he was ready to have that conversation. We'd had fragments of communication with him but, outside of checking to see how things were and if he, his father, and his family were OK, we were leaving him alone. As it stood, his father was still unconscious and there had been no real

change in his condition, so nobody could say how things might develop. It was agony. All we could do was wait and hope for the best. But the longer we hung in this conflicted limbo, the wilder our mood swings became. We were tired, emotional, sunburnt, and living like tramps in a dusty, barren purgatory that was *always* on siesta.

The whole thing seemed so...*unfair*. Unfair on Glyn and his family firstly, but unfair on me and Matt, too. All of the planning, preparation, hope and sacrifice we had spent building up to this. We felt terrible saying it, but it was there. It was a cruelty of fate that seemed eerily personal. After all the years of trying desperately to get on a tour like this, was it really to be tugged from under us at the first fucking gig?

And there was no one to blame. It was no one's fault. It was a family tragedy and we were not the victims here. So we had to bottle up our personal frustrations and wait – and wait. As the days rolled on and living out of the back of a stuffy, oppressive oven with no shower, toilet, privacy or dignity began to grate at our already hurting souls, we made the executive decision to wrap it up.

Glyn, on the other hand, had decided, astonishingly, to come back out. It was not a decision that either I or Matt agreed with initially, but I could understand his thinking and we had to respect his choice. The thinking was that his father, a drummer himself, who had always dreamed of going on tour, was beyond thrilled to see his boy living both of their dreams. As a supporter of the band, he would have wanted Glyn to do it. It was proposed that his dad's state could stay unchanged for weeks and that if he found out that Glyn had sat by his bedside all that time when he could have been kicking ass, he would be disappointed.

The consensus was that Glyn should come back out *for* his dad. To take tons of pictures of the experience to share with him when he got home, and to play his fucking heart out, for the two of them. With the benefit of hindsight, I can tell you it was absolutely the right decision but at the time my feelings were all over the place.

Matt and I made the ten-hour drive to Barcelona Airport to pick Glyn up and we were glad to finally see the back of Gijon. No offence, Gijon. So far, the week had been an absolute clusterfuck. We were due to play a show that

very night in Barcelona and after everything that had happened, we *needed* it. It was emotional seeing Glyn again. The ramifications of him choosing to come back out and the weight of what that meant was not lost on us. There was much hugging and unspoken understanding.

That first show at a dingy little rock bar in downtown Barcelona would carry a deep significance for us all now. I announced on stage that the rest of the tour was for Glyn's dad, and even though no one could understand a word I was saying, it didn't matter. That first show in that grimy club in Barcelona was pure euphoria. It wasn't a gig. It was catharsis. Transcendent, overwhelming, multi-dimensional love. We were back.

After finally seeing the other bands play, reintroducing ourselves via the usual 'bros', 'dudes' and funny handshakes, and soaking in the buzz of a packed room of wild Barca metallers – we began to feel like we were on tour again. For an hour, anyway. Fun time is always short on tour, and before long it was time to pack everything away again and start making tracks to the next gig, in France.

This is what many people don't realise about touring: there is a surprising dearth of partying. It is mostly an unforgiving cycle of travel, more travel, traffic jam, get lost, travel, unload equipment, wait around, soundcheck, petrol-station food, hang around, show, sell merch, pack equipment, more travel, petrol-station food, sleep, repeat. Those rare occasions when you do have the opportunity to cut loose – a day off, perhaps – are usually so disgracefully, myth-makingly wild simply because you're so pent up with boredom, cabin fever and inhumanity that it all explodes out in one go. Like a pack of tormented circus chimps let off the chain for a night.

And so, off we went. Next stop Montpellier. We drove until we got into France, parked up at a service station in the middle of nowhere and tried to buy some beers. There were none. We went to sleep. Hashtag rock 'n' roll.

Within a few days we were operating like a well-oiled machine and bulldozing our way around France, Italy and Switzerland, just as we came to do. It was awesome – a sleepless, sticky, mosquito-ravaged, sick-of-bread-and-cheese, exhausted, homesick, delirious, testosterone-charged kind of awesome. From underground dungeon metal bars to large open-air

gigs on sunny beaches, we loved every single show and gave a thousand per cent every night.

Don't get me wrong, though, it was far from easy and we were working incredibly hard. The other bands had crew and drivers and beds and aircon and power sockets and a toilet – we had a transit van and ourselves. We were paying our dues and we were hungry for it. Come stage-time, we'd already have driven for many hours, lugged our equipment through busy city streets and endured all sorts of degradation to be there, so when it was finally time to play, we left it *all* on the stage. Being the shortest, I started sleeping in the van's front cabin, literally lying across the driver's seat and gear stick, because 1) I had more room that way, and at least five minutes alone-time each night, and 2) Bateman + snoring = me not sleeping.

We were often too late to get any beers from the bar after we'd finished playing so we filled the back of the van with cans, which all got cooked to sludge in the daytime heat. My little moment to myself at the end of each night would be to sit in that front cabin with dirty t-shirts and towels gaffer-taped over the windows for curtains, suffering a few of those lumpy lagers and watching the goings-on in the car park – which was always absolutely nothing, unless in France, in which case people would mostly be having sex. I'd flick longingly through pictures of Cat on my phone and wish that she were here. And then, head on the door handle, it was time for a few hours' sleep.

Despite the vast discrepancy in our comfort levels, the other support band seemed to be having a lot more difficulty than us, with each other. They'd piss about for ages between songs, tuning up and arguing. In France, the singer stormed off stage and after the guitarist threw a bottle at him this erupted into a car-park brawl. It was hard to take too seriously, as they were all dressed up in ridiculous gothic face paint, so it was like watching two fat, sweaty emo pandas rolling around on dusty tarmac.

In Italy, the guitarist stormed off stage – and kept walking. He fucked off out the front doors, mid-song. No clue as to what triggered the tiff, he just started marching off down the street and kept marching. We didn't see him again. Remember the fifth law of thermodynamics (the bigger the prick, the lesser the talent)? Well, this pretentious, thespian nonsense continued daily

throughout the entire tour and we prided ourselves on the fact that despite everything we'd been through and everything we were *still* going through, we would *never* be like those fuckers.

Until Germany. We were made aware that none of the money we'd paid for the buy-on had ever been transferred to the band's tour manager – not a penny of it. Blackie said he'd done it months ago. I was tired, low on patience, living out of a van, listening to fucking Chandelier all day, having been through hell and back, and now this! Livid isn't the word. Murderous is closer.

I called Blackie. No answer, of course. An email, text and voicemail were sent and then my phone died; another constant feature of being on the road – having no battery. I was reserving judgement, but my instant conclusion was that Blackie had pocketed the money and that we'd probably never hear from him again. Snot, on the other hand, seemed to be suggesting that this was all an intentional blag on *our* part, and that blaming it on our elusive manager was just part of the scam. All I could think of was how many pubs I'd had to play, how many weekends I'd had to sacrifice in order to earn that money, and how many more I would have to play to earn it all again.

We had another two weeks in each other's daily company, and this had just wedged a sour-tasting distrust between us all. No one trusted us now and we were treated like cunts by pretty much everyone for the rest of the tour. It was grim. We were excluded from everything: dressing rooms, riders, hellos. I called Blackie day and night but to no avail, and kept making promises to the band and their manager that we *would* sort this. Their response was always the same: 'we don't care about your excuses, *get* the fucking money and get it now, bro.' I began to hate them intensely.

I was finally starting to slip; I could feel it. It was starting to unravel me. Not the tour, specifically, but *all* of it. It was now ten years since Kyshera had done its first gig and it had brought mostly nothing but struggle, disappointment, expense, confrontation, sacrifice, rip-offs and a sadistic stream of bullshit, exploitation, time-wasting, incompetent, needy, manipulative, dysfunctional fuck nuts, and I was *finally*, after a decade of

optimistically trying to keep my shit together, *finally* feeling myself descend into madness. And then our van broke down.

CHAPTER 20

SORRY, LILLE

We arrived in Amsterdam just in time for the show. The insanely thorough German call-out repair guy had kept us for *hours* over what turned out to be nothing more than a fucking flat battery, and Amsterdam isn't a place to drive through with a jumbo, right-hand drive transit van. We had to park miles away from the venue and were keen to get moving right after the show because the next gig was in Nantes, France, about a ten-hour drive away. If we were going to make it, we'd have to avoid the notoriously horrendous daytime traffic in Paris. I also wanted to avoid any nauseatingly horrendous talk of money and 'where the fuck is it, bro?' All the frustration and rushing brought something to our gig that night, apparently, with Snot's Mike Smith saying it was the best gig of the tour, but I couldn't have given less of a fuck by that point.

Within minutes of finishing the show, we breathlessly lugged our gear back out through the electric night life of central Amsterdam – smiling, tipsy, happy weekend faces everywhere – to the distant canal we'd managed to squeeze our van by, and immediately got the hell out of there. Except we never made it past Paris.

After a mere few hours behind the post-gig wheel, the exhaustion took over and we were falling asleep on the road. Despite our most valiant efforts, we made it *to* Paris, but no further. Dragging ourselves up a brutal few hours later at some shitty service station to hit the road early made no difference. Paris was already carnage. Gridlocked in every direction. Engines off. I did the first stint and I was behind the wheel for over six hours, barely covering a few miles. Soundcheck was in two hours and we were still four hours away *without* the traffic.

As time went on, we had to make a decision. The chance of us getting to Nantes at all was not good, yet tomorrow's gig was only three hours away in the opposite direction. Did we continue to sit in six lanes of steaming hot,

smoggy gridlock or admit defeat and head to Lille? After much deliberation, we chose the latter. We were gutted. Cancelling a gig is just *not* what you do. We were aware that it looked shit, was shit and it certainly felt shit. It was not a decision we made lightly, believe me. I called the tour manager, Jurgen, and explained the situation.

Tip number 10 for upcoming bands: Use a combination of sat nav *and* map. If we hadn't blindly followed our sat nav right through the heart of the Parisian daytime traffic, and instead looked at a map, we would have seen the simple alternate route that bypasses Paris altogether and we would have made it to the gig in Nantes.

Having done the deed, we accepted our lot and sulkily drove off to Lille with our tail between our legs. On the upside, we'd gained a free night and I knew *exactly* what I was going to do with it. Can you blame me? The venue there was a boat, which was awesome, and we managed to park right outside it. After washing ourselves down with dregs of warm drinking water (classy, I know), we hit the town. We were on our last legs. We'd really done this tour the hard way (meaning the cheap way), not to mention the extra, unbelievable bullshit we'd had to surmount along the road.

Glyn's dad was still in an unchanged but stable condition and tomorrow's gig in Lille would be our last on the mainland before heading back to the UK. We'd made it to the finish line, but we were broken and in rags. There was a quiet absence to us all now. I was missing home, I was missing any form of comfort, privacy and humanity, and despite us not being together any more, I was missing Cat big time. I knew the other guys had their own versions of the same.

In contrast to my dire situation, things were going just great for Cat since not having me in her life. She had recently become the lead singer of the awesome band, 'Hey Hello', joining forces with one of my childhood musical idols, Ginger Wildheart, and was off touring around the UK in a swanky double-decker tour bus. Many nights I'd lie in the front of that van – by now, just a bin on wheels – and I'd skim through pictures of us together on my phone, cursing myself for being such a stupid twat. And all for what? So I could do *this*? Dragging my sad arse around the place in a van, getting ripped off and let down.

I'd heard back from Blackie. He said he'd tried to kill himself and that dealing with our money was the least of his concerns. I felt like a bastard for not believing him, but I knew that money was never, ever going to materialise. This tour was going to continue to haunt me even after it had finished; I was going to have to go home and do yet another hundred fucking Wonderwalls to get Snot the money I thought we'd already paid. Or I could tell Snot to fuck off. But I'm not a wanker like that and that is why I would never get anywhere in this evil, ugly disgrace of an industry. I was just so sick, sick, sick of all the bullshit and I didn't know if I could take it any more.

Pizza. That's always a good idea! A couple of beers, see the sights, take some chill-time, pat ourselves on the back for our hard work; let's at least do *that*. The weather was still bang on and it was nice being by ourselves, not having to be somewhere or being bossed around by an American metal band with a grudge. We found a cool-looking pizza place, ordered some beers, and got comfy. I needed to remember that I wasn't the only one struggling here; the other boys had endured the same journey, been ravaged by mosquitoes, were sunburnt, missing home, pissed off and exhausted, and Glyn, bless him had suffered the biggest tragedy of all. Once I'd had a laugh, a couple of drinks, and fed my soul, I knew my humanity would return and I'd perk up, making better company of myself.

No sooner had my pizza arrived than I got a message from Cat. It was a picture of her and her mate standing outside some club or other. Random, I thought, until I saw it: 'Le Ferrailleur'. Nantes. She was at our show in Nantes. The show that we weren't at. What the *fuck*? I charged outside and, with my last remaining bars of battery, I called her up.

'Surprise!'

'Where are you?'

'We're at your gig in Nantes! Where are you guys?'

'We're...*not* in Nantes.'

It transpired that they'd both taken three days off work and driven all the way from Cardiff to Nantes to surprise me at the show – the *one* fucking show we had to pull out of. You couldn't make it up. There wasn't a person in the whole world I wanted to see more right now, and this had happened.

She thought I was joking. I was livid. Not at her, but at all of it. Absolutely all of it. Not just this tour, but every single, pointless one of them.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming! You could have come to Lille! It’s closer *and* we’ve got a night off!’

I was a dizzying cocktail of sadness, fury, shock, guilt, exhaustion, and thoroughly fucking gutted. Then my phone died. I snapped. I snapped at some deep, primary root in my soul. Storming back into the restaurant, I started fucking smashing my useless phone into our table, taking chunks out of both as Glyn discreetly paid our bill, apologised to the onlookers, and ushered me out. Then blackness. I vaguely remember being denied a drink at a bar somewhere but nothing else. I woke up covered in clay, in a van that was also covered in clay with all its contents thrown around the street. Had I been in the river? A fight? Running around the street screaming again? To this day, I am keen to know, but maybe it’s for the best that I don’t.

The standard, subdued, ‘it’s OK, man, don’t worry about it’, was all I could get.

The guys hardly mentioned the night before and we just went about our daily routine as normal, which in this case meant another Evian shower, another awful fucking ham and cheese supermarket sandwich, lugging our gear into another venue and waiting for another inevitable battle about Snot’s money. I couldn’t *wait* to go home. We did the gig and got the fuck out of there. I drove us straight to Calais and paid for us to get on the next available ferry. The mood on the boat was...let’s say, *different* than it had been on that first ferry to Gijon a few weeks back.

Something changed for all of us that night in Lille. Not that I’d done anything particularly wild (I hope) but there was just an unspoken consensus that all this might not be worth the horror it was bringing into our lives. Back in the UK, we were able to mop up the last few shows and go home afterwards. I’d never wanted to see my bed more. Ironically, despite my aching homesickness throughout most of the tour, the first thing I did upon getting home was have an explosive, unprecedented row with my parents. A casual comment was made about me being seeming ungrateful for the experience I’d just had, and my lid just fucking flipped again

without warning. My internal nervous wiring had been yanked all over the place from years of extreme emotional flux and I was just misfiring and shooting indiscriminately at anything that moved.

This could not go on.

CHAPTER 21

METAMORPHOSIS

I was a mess. It had become brutally obvious that this was going nowhere, and that was a tough pill to swallow. Most bands go crazy and explode because too much success ruins them; I was going crazy and rotting to the core because of too much failure. And I felt guilty for taking the guys down with me. I felt a crushing, daily pressure that they'd invested their belief in my music and my decisions, and I'd failed them. I'd wasted their potential on my stupid venture. After ten years of grind and struggle, I just couldn't do it any more; it wasn't healthy. There's more to life, and I was missing out on so much of it.

My parents were getting older, I hadn't had a week off in over a decade, I'd lost the love of my life, I was spending twelve-hour days in a tiny square squat at my parents' house at the age of thirty-five, I was broke, underweight, sleepless, drinking every night, unemployed and I was just fucking tired. I was beaten. Truth be told, I was chronically depressed. Suicide had crossed my mind a few times. My life had been a total fucking washout and so was I. The world wouldn't miss me. OK, so I took a gamble and lost. No harm there, but I kept taking the same gamble for over ten years and now here I was, approaching middle age with nothing. Nothing! I didn't own a bed, a sofa, a chair, or a kettle. I knew that if I didn't do some serious soul-searching soon, one emotional late-night drunken impulse might not end well for me. We had one last gig for the year, a sold-out show at the Marble Factory in Bristol with the Dutch band 'Delain', and whatever was going to happen after that would have to wait.

There was still this fucking Blackie bullshit to deal with, too. Long story short, he Daghorned me. I couldn't believe it! Fool me once and fuck me a thousand. He disappeared, deleted his websites, changed his phone number, his address, and was untraceable. Sound familiar? You can't sue someone who doesn't exist, I've tried. A while later, someone sent me a staff photo

from a company website with him in it – he'd even changed his name. We had to re-earn all the money we'd stacked up to pay for the tour in the first place, so we were straight back on the weekend Wonderwall racket with Rhys. There was no end in sight, and it was seriously, profoundly grating me. Every time some pissed wanker accidentally kicked my mic stand, I had to struggle not to beat them to fucking death with it.

And Cat can't be blamed, she didn't know that her timing was shambolic, but when she told me that she'd met someone else, it sent me plummeting to worrying depths of further self-loathing and despair. After feigning happiness for her, I booked myself in to the nearest cheap hotel, bought a ton of booze, locked the door, and cried my fucking eyes out all night.

When you've devoted this much of your life to something, when you've given so much of yourself to something and when you've sacrificed almost everything for something, it's not easy to walk away. The band was my identity, my purpose, my meaning, my life's work, my pride, my passion, and my shot at a better life. If I removed it from my life, what would be left? Who would I be? What else could I possibly do? It was all I knew. I'd worked so hard and I was certain the struggle would be worth it eventually, yet here I was at 35, having to acknowledge that I was going to be one of the guys who didn't make it. It was harder to accept than you'll ever know.

I'd stopped talking to my parents altogether. Even though I lived under the same roof and saw them every day, I was angry, bitter, resentful and *everyone* was a cunt. No exceptions. It went on for months and I hardly muttered a word to them. I'd eat alone, would ignore them if I passed them; no hellos, no goodnights, nothing. Despite this, my mum, bless her, refused to stop coming in and giving me a nightly goodnight hug. No words were spoken, just a hug and then she left. Every night without fail. Mothers *know*. I dragged this disgraceful petulance around with me unashamedly, almost like an entitlement. I was *allowed* to be such a horrible piece of shit because life had fucked me over. Then my dad said three words to me which froze everything with physical force, punching the air out of me and rendering all previous bullshit instantly insignificant.

'I've got leukaemia,' he said.

Nothing could compare. I sat there speechless, thoughtless, formless, numb. It hit me like a train. A violent, cold, and very real wake-up call. I spent the night crying desperately into my quilt, hoping that my dad wouldn't hear me in the next room. What the fuck was happening? I was falling apart and so was everything around me, it seemed. Life had been passing me by and for far too long I'd been living for the future. That future hadn't come and until my dad gave me this paralysing news, delivered in his trademark jokey style, that realisation was the most devastating thing I could conceive of. But this changed everything, and it registered within me deeply.

I had to change. It was time to let go. It was time to start appreciating and prioritising those closest to me for the first time. Maybe my parents didn't *want* a house and a stack of money in the bank. Maybe that was a problem that I thought they had. Maybe what they wanted was just to see their son now and again and see him happy. I hadn't properly engaged with 'normal' life much since I discovered guitars all those years ago, but the transition back was almost instantaneous. I had gone from wallowing in the depths of hell to hurtling back to reality with one short, sharp shock. Still, for my life to be more balanced, some changes would need to be made.

Changes were already underway in the band, with Glyn quitting his job and moving to Cambridge to live with his girlfriend, and since getting back from that tour, there was a noticeable change in Matt's energy; he seemed to be enjoying a bit of distance from it all. With no gigs or plans on the horizon, now seemed like the best time for us to take a break.

I spoke with the guys and explained. I needed some time to reassess some personal things – it wasn't 'the end' but I needed to go off the radar for a few weeks and figure some things out. They both totally got it. They were having similar realisations of their own. Glyn's dad was conscious and making good progress, and Glyn's decision to come back out on tour had turned out to be the right one, thank god, as his dad relished all the tour pictures, videos and stories.

So, I was going to take a big step back, spend time with family, rediscover the 'me' that existed before all this music stuff, and feed my soul for a while. The 5am jogging marathons were gone. The fifteen-hour days

on the computer were gone. And the resentment, bitterness and anger would have to be gone. Something else that would have to go as well were the fucking cover gigs. I hadn't had a weekend out for most of my twenties and thirties and it just wasn't healthy; I needed some balance. While most people were out getting pissed with mates and having a laugh through early adulthood, I was gigging. I hadn't celebrated a New Year's Eve with family and friends since 1998, as I'd gigged every single one of them. And doing music just for the simple, pure *enjoyment* of it was something I hadn't done since I was twenty. It was time to start having fun again. It was time to become human.

I spent the next few weeks walking in the hills, reading a ton of philosophy books, spending quality time with friends and family, and just generally trying to lighten the fuck up. I started enjoying music again, recording a series of cover songs just for the simple fun of it, and even though I was still deeply bruised, confused and drinking every night, I was starting to feel...*better*. I'd had an existential awakening.

I didn't have all the answers just yet, but I knew that I'd been looking for them in all the wrong places. I love my parents profoundly but instead of trying to prove this by delivering some grandiose future gesture of riches and comfort, I simply spent time with them. Unsurprisingly, this seemed to be all they wanted. It was a period of complete physical and emotional metamorphosis. I felt my body chemistry change as if I was shedding skin along with years of extra baggage. The transition was a bitter-sweet, emotional mix of liberation, confusion, empowerment and fear, and it needed to be done. Yet something in me still compelled me to create a new folder on the computer desktop, called 'Kyshera – Album 4'.

What I've skimmed over is that a mere *one week* into this existential turbulence, I received an online message from Glyn's girlfriend, for the first time. In it, she expressed her uncontainable disgust with me for ruining a great band, and said that although I have a 'nice' voice, I am not bigger than the other guys and that they don't deserve to be shat on by a 'single-minded ego' without even a goodbye or a thanks. If I thought I was confused before, I was delirious now. What the *fuuuuuuck?*

I'd seen Glyn just three days before; we'd been out for a curry and all was as it always had been – fucking awesome. This was weird. Despite a fervent, boiling rage at the notions suggested in this random message, as well as the realisation that they must have come from *someone*, I bit my tongue firmly and replied, ever-so-politely dispelling her concerns and assuring her that I'd chat with the boys tomorrow. I didn't know where any of this had come from, but it had *not* come at a good time.

As mentioned, one of Glyn's many charms is his limitless capacity for believing even the most outlandish of blatant piss-takes. Matt had been exploiting this particular trait in him since day one, to consistently hilarious ends, and the scale of the guy's naivety and innocence was a constant source of amazement and comedy gold to us. If there was anyone in the home camp who could convince the poor drummer of literally anything, with a better poker face than Lady Gaga, it was our professional prankster on bass. But surely this hadn't come from him? Then came the messages.

'I'm sorry to hear about you and Matt. That sucks. Hope you get it sorted, man.'

'What's up with you and Matt, dude? How come you're not speaking to him any more?'

'Congrats on going solo, that must have been a tough decision?'

I called Glyn. He said that Matt had told him all this stuff, so I called Matt. It hadn't been long since we'd last spoken but this time it was strange. He seemed absolutely convinced that I was abandoning them both, and had created an irreparable wall of distrust in the process. We ended up caught in a bizarre and pointless loop, with me asking Matt to tell me exactly why he thought that, and Matt replying that I should be able to see why he thought that. It went round and round and we got nowhere. Matt was adamant that I had abused his loyalty but his refusal to elaborate any further made it impossible for me to address. He began the second wave of my punishment – shutting me out.

Glyn's head was cooked. Despite the long phone calls and assurances that Matt had likely just said some things in anger or got the wrong end of the stick about something, the ship had sailed. Glyn didn't know what to

believe, who to believe or what the hell was going on. Somehow, me ‘taking a few weeks off’ seemed to be fucking things up good and proper.

The essence of that first surprise message didn’t sit right with me, though. Harmful misinformation was in motion and obviously wreaking havoc. The universally accepted line seemed to be that I had gone solo and left the band. How this came about, I had no idea! We’d had long conversations before I began my short break and even snuck in a cheeky band practice, which I live-streamed. The words ‘solo’ or ‘fuck you guys’ were never mentioned.

I’d learned the hard way the damage that bad communication can do, from the parting of ways with Carl back in the day, so I’d made sure since then to communicate everything – often too much. But as time went by and my messages remained stubbornly ignored, my mind started working overtime, contributing my own conspiracies to the awful mess. Hadn’t Matt recently unlinked himself from all the band’s social media pages and email accounts? Wasn’t it he, and he alone, who was spreading this nonsense, not only within the band but our social circle too? Why was he doing it? I was convinced that it all stemmed from something daft and easily explainable, but Matt’s unshakable silent treatment enabled it to fester and turn into something real.

It hurt to think that Matt may have felt that he couldn’t speak with me. I knew I could be an intense, bossy, overly serious pain in the arse, and Matt had suffered me the longest. But I also knew Matt. The joker, the nice guy, the fun guy – but by no means stupid. Surely, he must have known that filling Glyn’s head with this stuff was going to destroy the band? And as the weeks became months, there was a very real risk it would destroy our friendship, too. Matt was my best mate. We’d been through everything together; sunk a thousand beers and laughed till we cried. I had called him every day. I spent more time with him than with my missus. Shutting me out of his life while talking openly with everyone else – about me, it seemed – was cold. What was this really all about? The distance between us broke my heart but, as things dragged on, I started to feel burned. I started to feel like the victim. At least I was trying to talk it over, but he refused to tell me what the issue was, so how could I apologise? As for Glyn, it was

too late. The seed had been sown and I became deeply offended by how easily he'd accepted the narrative that the singer was just a cunt.

Tip number 11 for upcoming bands: Communicate, dammit!

I've been on both sides of this one. As the person causing problems by sulking rather than talking it out, and as someone on the receiving end of it. The harm caused is avoidable every time. I didn't want it to harm these friendships, though. I really didn't. What we overcame together on that last European tour was 'friends for life' stuff. I loved Matt and Glyn. Kyshera had finally found the line-up it was made for and it could never be any other way. This didn't need to happen!

But after a few more months of it, with everything else I had going on, I started to think 'fuck those guys'. Fuck 'em. Matt had clearly invested a lot more time and energy into his propaganda campaign than me, and with more success. I decided to step away. Let him get it out of his system, let it all come full circle. I wasn't going to add fuel to that fire, I was gonna let the fucker fizzle out on its own and then maybe, maybe, if not too much damage had been done, we could pick up where we left off.

And so, the self-fulfilling prophecy came to pass: I stopped speaking to Matt. As tactics go, it was disastrous, but I was trying hard to adjust to the aftermath of an emotional meltdown and I couldn't let anything get in the way of that. Even so, the whole thing was an infuriating, unnecessary and thoroughly peculiar shit show, and I missed the guys like fucking crazy.

CHAPTER 22

HOME

I had no desire to make another album. I had no desire to make music, full stop. But through my tangled crash of soul-searching and revelations, music and words were pouring out of me like never before. I stubbornly continued my programme of spending time walking the mountains, thinking, reading and going easy on myself – trying to get to the bottom of exactly *why* I was so sad when I had so much to be thankful for. Band bullshit aside, both of my parents were still alive, I'd had a good upbringing, I had good physical and mental health, I'd been able to do what I love for the past twenty years, I'd had incredible experiences in life and I had amazing friends and people around me.

But it doesn't work like that. I started hating myself for feeling sad when I had so little to feel sad about. The only way I know how to fully express myself is through music and so, more out of necessity than desire, I began involuntarily channelling what would become my third solo album. The album became an unintended journal of that period of my life; songs like 'Just A Man' and 'Entertainer' were written while in the depths of despair, whereas 'Unconditional', 'Hometown' and 'Misfits' were born from my new-found appreciation of the true gifts of life, which were already abundant. As it had done so many times before, music came to save me.

Of course, I'm aware of the irony that my band-mates' unfounded suspicions of me 'going solo' were followed by me releasing an album (despite my releasing two previous solo albums with no issues), and I'm aware that it didn't help my cause. But the whole 'James has gone solo' campaign was grinding away long before I'd written a note of *Home*. Once I had, the rest just flooded out of me so fast that within three months I had written and recorded the entire album. Because these songs had a deep, personal meaning to me. They were an unrestrained, unpolished, and uncomfortably honest collection of songs capturing the most challenging

and transitional period in my life. For that reason, I didn't want to do what I'd always done with my solo albums, which was to throw it out amid the blizzard of Kyshera activity.

Why should I? The band was hanging in a daft, man-made purgatory until further notice and I had a fully produced album sitting around that I was proud of. So, for the first time ever, I released a solo album properly: CDs, videos, the full works. Thanks to the endless generosity of my incredible fans, I was able to crowd-fund the entire thing with no label, no manager, no PR, no booker, and no help whatsoever – just me. Videos were shot, once again, with the brilliant Scott Carey and come 31 March, 2017, *Home* was out.

Did I mention no PR? Proud of me?! For once, I didn't want a good thing being tarnished by lies and liabilities; I just wanted to release an album without the bitter-sweet pang of having been royally shafted in the process. There was no radio, no magazine reviews, no money grabbing, useless PR people, no bullshit. It was therefore fitting that the album went straight to the Amazon Top 50 Best Sellers list on its day of release and became my first album to go over a million streams. By now, a new model for the music industry had fully blossomed and I was able to fully embrace it for the release of *Home*.

During my time as a musician, the industry had gone from the old-school way of doing things (get a deal, gig your arse off and get screwed by fat cats for a few years until you start making coin), fallen into a decade-long abyss where *nobody* knew what the fuck was going on, and had settled again with a new digitally-oriented, DIY model reigning supreme. I have fought, lost, and kept on going through that entire transition and I'm one of the few to have come out the other side. The last band standing. Standing knee-deep in shit for much of the time, but still standing nonetheless... Kind of.

Almost all my mates' bands broke up long ago and that's a devastating loss of talent. It's easy for me to feel bitter about the industry's crash happening during my time: poor little self-taught village kid with bad hearing devotes his life to music after being lavished with praise and promise by the industry, only for it all to be tugged away, leaving him

desperate and destitute for the next twenty years. Sure, cue the violins. It's easy to take it personally and think 'why me?', but the cold truth is that it wasn't personal. It had nothing to do with me.

It was a worldwide zeitgeist that started with the music industry and went on to affect movies, photography, books, communication, news, social interaction, health, education and almost everything else – and, many would argue, for the better. My generation getting caught up in the changeover was just shitty, unfortunate timing – *someone* had to be there, and, in this case, it was my lot.

What *hasn't* changed, is people's love for music and their willingness to support it. Direct artist-to-fan relationships minus the middlemen, with the artist able to release whatever they like, whenever and however they like, with no commercial fucks needed, is the new norm. These days you can write and record a track at home for free and release it the very same day without asking *anyone* for their sign-off. That is fertile ground not only for a ton of amazing new art but also for a shit-ton of shit. And how you make money in this new utopia is The Big Question to which there is no simple answer. But my honest feeling is that shouldn't be the artists' primary concern. I don't want to live in a world run by people who are 'doing it for the money'. I want to listen to records made by people with passion, doing it against all odds, not sitting by the side of their pool. I want records with grit, struggle, pain and resistance in them – not impotent, sugar-coated, dollar-shaped conformity.

Ever noticed how your favourite bands start to suck once they become big? Ever noticed how they lose their fire, their edge, their connection to the world and start churning out album after album of over-polished, over-produced, watered-down, commercialised tripe devoid of social comment, meaning, message or angst? Fuck that! I want my artists to live in the real world. I want my politicians to as well! And my journalists, business leaders, advisors, and scientists. I want them to have to struggle for their art, their cause, and their vision. That way we only get the guys who truly want – and deserve – to be there. The people who still want to affect policy and society despite any lack of lifestyle that comes with it.

The ones who jump ship the second shit gets uncomfortable? Fuck 'em! We don't want them. How they pay their bills along the way beats me, but I think the cold truth is that the heyday of the multi-million-selling rock star is over, for all but a very few major label artists. There will always be those cultural phenomena that come along once in a generation, those lucky bastards for whom a staggering variety of variables all happen to align, but for the rest of us, the good ole days are over. It's not that big a deal. It was all a little bit over-the-top, anyway, wasn't it?

Paying bills was an urgent priority of mine, though, since quitting my teaching job, and the easiest thing for me to do was dust off Wonderwall again. I know, I know, but I hadn't played live in a year and it was a familiar quick-fix to my worrying financial situation. So, I went for it, and by putting the earnings into my own pocket instead of a Kyshera kitty, I was able to start enjoying the fruits of that unforgiving but well-paid vocation. By the end of the first year, I'd done over two hundred and fifty two-hour gigs. My record was three in a day.

Some surprise highlights from that first year's overkill were: playing a secret VIP gig with the Stereophonics at a little pub in Cardiff the day before their sold-out show at the stadium, and being stage-invaded at a gig in Swansea by a very drunk Max Boyce, who stole my guitar and led the room in a powerful singalong of 'Hymns And Arias'. My vocal stamina was getting a serious workout doing these six-hour marathons and my bank account started to thank me, too – but my hands soon started suffering. Too much G, D and C will do that to you, and I started getting stabbing pains shooting up my arms like electric shocks.

I didn't want to get carpal tunnel or tendinitis from playing Mr bloody Brightside one too many times, but when you're self-employed there's no sick pay, baby. Playing high-energy, two-hour gigs while drunk people claw at your skin like hungry zombies takes its toll on you, to say nothing of setting up and packing down a PA system three times a day and racing to the next gig with no time for food. People think it's easy work but, trust me, it isn't. In fact, there are many misconceptions about performers in local bars and clubs, so let me iron some out:

They're usually not there 'for the love of it'. They might seem like they're having fun – it's called entertaining – but in truth, they're only there because they're getting paid. They'd rather be doing what you're doing: enjoying a night out with their mates or partner who they never see. Like you, they also have a home to go to and possibly a family, so, no, they don't want to do 'ten more' or 'play on' for beers. They're driving and want to get home before 3am. You've had your gig, now leave the poor bastards alone.

It is hard work. Everyone likes to think their job is way harder than everyone else's – we all know the type. But there's a lot more to performing than what you think you see on stage, especially at the pub level, where dealing with your offensive, opinionated and obnoxiously drunk arse is a skill in its own right.

The DJ isn't impressed by your exotic song suggestions, the guitarist doesn't want your mate to 'play' his guitar and the singer, believe it or not, can't have a personal chat with you while also singing a song. Drunkenly clambering onto the stage, spilling your cider over expensive equipment, tripping over cables and knocking over amps in an attempt to start a convo, grab the mic, demand a song or just fanny about aimlessly, is not your best idea and we will likely hate you forever. Please stay on the dance floor, Jonesy.

We don't need to see your balls. Thanks.

We heard you the first time you screamed 'oi, Indian Summer' in our face. Keep doing it and you'll guarantee that no Indian Summer will be forthcoming. Ever.

Saying things like 'oh, you're still doing this, are you?' or 'don't you ever want to get a real job?' is...well, it's fucking rude. We could say the exact same thing to you.

'Still working at the same place, are you, Steve? You mean you're not *running* the company yet? You mean you're not the head of global operations yet? Bloody hell mate, still *trying* then, are you?'

We *could* say that to you but it's a wanker's game, isn't it?

My apologies, that well-meaning list quickly descended into a bitter rant, but I feel better now, thanks! And I hope the preceding tantrum didn't imply that everyone in every pub is a dribbling, barbaric fuckwit because some of

them can be all right. I joke. You see the uninhibited extremes of people when you're in their watering hole, and as well as seeing the worst excesses of stupidity and abandon, you also see the purest and deepest forms of humour, empathy, and generosity. Basically, if you want to see the full range of the human animal in its rawest form, go to a pub after 10pm. It's universal. I've played everywhere: all manner of shit-holes, sports bars, and swanky dinner halls all over the country – hell, I've even busked on the streets, and the warmth of humanity is everywhere. I have seen things that no politician will ever see, and as a singer I've been welcomed into places that are closed to most. But that said, if anyone shouts 'Oasis' at me again, I might hang myself from the lighting rig.

I think of this time as my 'peaking in obscurity' period. I was doing so many gigs that my stamina was firing on all cylinders – I could fucking *nail* you a 'Purple Rain' or a 'Stand By Me'. 'You're wasted in 'ere', people would say. To this day, I can honestly say that some of my best personal performances *ever* have been in little local pubs, and often to no more than an audience of three uninterested old blokes at the bar who would barely deign to give a slow-handed golf clap.

My drinking was on point, too. As soon as I left the stage, I would race home, make my nightly visit to the twenty-four-hour petrol station, which was dangerously close to my house, load up on cheap booze and get absolutely rat-arsed until the early hours. Bearing in mind that it was usually 'last orders' by the time I finished my gig, my drinking wouldn't get properly underway until around 1am. Such a session would always be a solitary affair; with my parents in bed, I'd sit in my little room, watching YouTube videos and getting absolutely hammered in silence. I never saw it as 'sad' that I was getting wasted on my own every night, I saw it as a rightfully deserved reward and a necessary medicine for the existential turmoil I was trying to drown that day.

I was missing Matt, Glyn, and Kyshera like crazy, but was taking the moral stance that the whole shit mess was not *my* doing and, until Matt started talking to me again, I was going to dig my heels in and sit on my hands. A childish tactic which only made things worse. Glyn and I would chat now and again on the phone but he was working a full-time job in

Cambridge, playing in another band and very much girlfriended up, so face-time was scarce. Slowly, over time, it seemed as though the band had finally died out, although I always held a flicker of hope that we'd get back to kicking arses again. More than that, I missed Matt. He was my best mate, and whatever was going on with him and his anti-James conspiracies, I wished he would just speak to me about it.

Then came along Amy. I was notified of her death by email first – the campaign framing me for influencing her suicide came shortly after. Amy was a fan from the States, a *very* enthusiastic fan who would send me so many long messages that I just wasn't able to read them all. I frequently receive self-harm pictures from people and messages asking me for answers, help and advice, and of course I do my best to give as full and as delicate a response as I can, despite being completely unqualified to do so.

So, when I received a mail from Amy entitled 'Suicide Notes', I quickly opened it up, hoping to reply to her before something terrible happened. No reply. In the email she had written to tell me that she would be listening to my music as she said goodbye to the world. I was crushed. I had no contact with her family and had never met Amy, so for several days I just waited and prayed for good news. Then her brother contacted me. The news wasn't good. He had been through her phone, seen that I was the last person she had reached out to and thought he should contact me to let me know that although Amy had been rescued and taken to hospital, her condition was deteriorating. I stayed in daily contact with the family, sent Amy a handwritten letter and some gifts to the hospital and I was genuinely shaken by the whole thing. Were there warning signs in her messages that I should have picked up on? Could I have done more? I was way out of my depth, confused, guilty and just fucking devastated for the family.

After the news came that she hadn't made it, things took an uglier turn. The family began framing me as an influential force in Amy's suicide. An online campaign was set in motion, accusing me of all sorts of disgraceful things such as emotionally manipulating Amy into taking her own life and writing songs that encourage suicide. It caught on, and soon even some of my own fans started to join in the backlash against me. They had me in checkmate. I knew the family were hurting and I guessed they were looking

for someone to blame, which was totally natural and understandable. I didn't want to add insult to injury by retaliating, so I let them vent for a while and remained in contact. But boy, did it keep coming.

In the end, I had to put out a public statement requesting that they either take me to court or stop slandering me. It was like poking a wasp's nest. They went into overdrive and it became a 24/7, seriously ugly campaign which genuinely upset me. They didn't stop. It went on day and night, for months. Soon other people got involved, trying to find my home address by pretending to be courier companies, and the piles of concerned correspondence became an insurmountable distraction. That's when I reported it to the authorities, and that's when the truth came out.

You see, Amy wasn't dead. She was very much alive – in fact, it was all the other characters in the saga who didn't exist. Every single one of the many online accounts involved in the disgusting campaign against me was Amy. Each page had a unique tone of language and character which was staggeringly believable, complete with legitimate collections of family photos and newsfeeds running back many years.

I was stunned. The very person who was pretending to be dead had forged her own obituary and hospital pictures and was putting me through hell from her own imaginary afterlife. I'm such a dumb-ass that, instead of being furious, I felt sorry for her. She's still out there somewhere, probably doing something similar to other poor, well-meaning bastards. In fact, she still contacts me sometimes for a chat, as if nothing had ever happened.

Headfucks and obscurity notwithstanding, I was earning good money for the first time ever, thanks to a thousand 'Sweet Caroline's, and this enabled me to do some of the things I'd been feeling guilty about *not* doing for years. Cat and I had started hanging out again (again!) and for the first time in over ten years, we took a holiday together. Her 'meeting someone else' thing had fizzled out pretty quick and, as usual, we ended up seeing each other more and more until things were back to normal – as was the pattern of our entire relationship. We obviously loved each other and, on top of that, we were best friends. No matter what our characteristically opaque relationship status was, we were always a returning feature in each other's lives; as a couple, as friends or as whatever else it was.

So, instead of ‘not being able to afford it’ or ‘sorry, I can’t, I’ve got a gig’, we packed our bags and bugged off to Rome and Venice for a long overdue break together, and I loved every second of it. Then, a brief sun break in Spain, followed by the first big one off the bucket list: India. For the first time in forever I felt like I was doing ‘normal person stuff’ and I felt incredibly privileged to be admitted to the Normal Person Club. These simple, attainable treasures were awesome.

And it was awesome to finally be *able* to. I carried the daily weight of defeat, missing my band-mates, the loss of my identity as ‘a band guy’ and the wide, gaping hole it left in my life but I tried to use the gains I’d acquired (more money and free time) to make up for lost time with Cat, my family and my friends. I tried to get better at all the things I’d been so crap at for so long, like being present, remembering birthdays, and spending time with people.

That lifted a burden of guilt that had been gnawing away at me, but there was always an internal nagging; that yearning to play, to tour, to jam, to hit the road with my comrades. It was all I knew. I’ve become convinced that it’s something that’s in your blood. There is no logic to it, in fact, it is *illogical* to make such a commitment and sacrifice for something that is, for the most part, detrimental to your emotional, financial, social, and physical well-being. It’s a curse. A beautiful, indescribable curse, and once you have been under its spell, ‘normal’ life never feels the same again.

I knew the curse was still strong in me one night when I was playing another of my bill-paying pub gigs and there was *no one* there, not a single soul. Dead. Not that I cared, I was getting paid anyway, right? But facing me the entire time was a giant flat-screen TV showing live footage from Glastonbury. I was forced to have to stand there for two hours like some sick *Clockwork Orange* re-enactment, watching other people rocking out on that vast stage to thousands of adoring fans, living the dream, living *my* dream, while I, in a brutal juxtaposition, sang pub covers back at them, by myself, in an empty room. If I needed any reminder that my life was *far* from where I wanted it to be, this was a miserably good one.

The bug was still there all right. And it was yanking hard at my heart strings. But it was OK, because a few hours later I had drunk myself into

yet another coma and tomorrow, I'd never remember any of it. I was starting to suspect that this may be one of the main driving forces behind my need to drink. Anaesthesia and amnesia.

CHAPTER 23

BY SHOWING THE DARK, MAY I GIVE YOU THE LIGHT?

I never get nervous on stage. I suppose I've been performing so long that the stage is my natural habitat, as are smelly backstage areas, vans, service stations and windowless hovels called studios. Normal life, on the other hand, freaks me the fuck out. I just don't know the rules. I've spent all of my adult life lurking around with the other creatures of the night – DJs, cooks, bar staff, doormen, drunks and other musos – and we exist in a different reality to everyone else.

As a result, I've often felt alienated from the better part of society around me and felt that perhaps I'm just copping out of respectable, adult responsibility. But the more I live, the more I see, and the more people I meet, the more I realise that this life was always my true calling. I didn't choose it, it chose me. It's in my DNA. It's in my bones. And that's where I feel it when I play music. So much of what comes with it, *really* gets me down, yet I keep coming back for more.

For years I was saddled with guilt for not being home, missing social things, not seeing Cat or my family, and not having any money, but I didn't expect that once I stopped performing and made 'being present' my priority, that I'd quickly become subdued by a dull, grey shadow of familiarity. It was as though someone had dimmed the lights inside me. Like I was living a lie. Whether I like it or not, I am a musician. I am something that so many people would kill to be. I have a skill that moves people, can make them dance, forget their woes, cry, fall in love, be moved to action, or scream their hearts out. I didn't ask for this curse, but I have a duty to honour it.

A common trait of life as a travelling musician is a general feeling of loneliness. I know it seems unlikely but remember: even though we musicians are often at the *centre* of the party, we are not *at* the party. We're working, and afterwards there's packing up and more travelling – either

home or to the next show, either alone or with the same small group of equally frazzled, homesick band-mates. As a musician, you spend a lot of time in rapidly fluctuating colours of intensity. One minute you're haloed in lights, elevated on a stage with a room of people staring up at you in wonder, every word you utter bellowing god-like from a ceiling full of speakers. For *that* moment, you're the man (or woman, or...oh come on, you get my gist!). Yet within that very same hour you'll most likely end up sitting in silence on a dark, empty motorway or in an unfeeling hotel room somewhere, anywhere, the party still bouncing somewhere else, far behind you.

It's weird. And it's hard to describe but this constant rip and swell of adrenaline can take its toll on your soul after a while. The profitable mythology peddled by our industry is that touring is an endless buffet of partying, excess and sex, when in fact, it's very regimented and quite lonely. Most of the infamous debauchery found in rock 'n' roll folklore was born out of frustration, cabin fever, a yearning for connection and a constant conflict of emotions bordering on madness. Read any classic rock 'n' roll 'tell all' and you'll come away feeling a bit sad for all those involved – unless they're lying.

It was this stuff, and the ubiquitous scam artists, egos, disappointments and bullshit that led me to stay well away from touring for a while, but the itch was always there, a craving I just couldn't shake. So, in the summer of 2018 I tried something different. The idea was that it would be small – no promo, no band, no equipment, and no fucking agents, managers, or bands from California. All the dates would be free entry, so if no one came, no problem. It would be less of a tour and more of a road trip – the weather was gorgeous and it was just me, driving around the UK and Holland with my trusty acoustic on the back seat and a handful of stops at coffee shops and acoustic bars. We called it the 'Misfits Tour' and I'd never done anything like it before.

The songs would be stripped down to their rawest form and it would be a chance to meet some of my amazing supporters in person and hang out with them, instead of immediately disappearing in a billow of van smoke. And it worked like a charm. For the first time ever, it was just about the music.

Nobody was pressuring anyone about sales or promotion, no one was ripping anyone off, no one was being bought off, no support bands were being wankers and there was no pressure for me to do anything other than show up, play some songs and spend some quality time with the amazing people who showed up. I even did a stint at a little local pub in a village called Kilcreggan in the Scottish Highlands, and at Amsterdam Central train station. It was fun. It was the first tour I had enjoyed in a long while.

This was possibly helped by the fact that two months before, I'd decided to quit alcohol. I knew the day was coming when I'd finally have to shake that loving devil from my shoulder. As I write, I've just passed my first year without a drop – I didn't drink on tour, over Christmas or on holiday – and it hasn't been that hard! As with the smoking, I didn't use any programmes, I just fucking steel-willed it. Again, when you absolutely want to stop something – be it a substance, a relationship, or a habit – you'll make it happen. That said, I don't wish to downplay anyone else's struggle in any way – the demon only had a light grip on me.

My turning point was the morning I woke up with the single worst hangover I have ever suffered, after nailing a few bottles of wine, a crate of beers and half a bottle of Baileys, which I drank on my own, in the house. I was so angry at myself, so disappointed, so ashamed, that something just snapped in me. And my life is *so* much better without it.

For a start, my days are twice as long, and I get twice as much done because I'm not dragging a stupid fucking hangover through every day with me. My emotions are more stable; those wild highs and teary lows are more smoothed out. I don't make stupid drunken decisions, I don't make a loud, dribbling pain in the arse of myself. I'm healthier, my mind is sharper, I've got more energy and, ironically, I'm sleeping just fine. There is so much about it I don't miss that it overrides the desire to sink a few cold ones – *most* of the time. It's a strange feeling, though. Alcohol has been a constant in my life since my teens. It's like breaking up with an old friend, but sometimes that's just what you've got to do.

And I'm not as depressed. A respectful side note here – I do not have, nor have I ever had, clinical depression. I do not suffer with that unshakeable, biologically hard-wired black dog. My depression was always of a

responsive variety; a symptom of severe discontentment with my life, not the cause of it. I still get bad days. I still get crushingly horrendous days. Days where I wake up feeling like it's all pointless and I'm blind to the good fortune and love around me. On those days I just say 'fuck it' and write the day off. I go easy, I eat shit and I wait for the internal weather to pass, which it always does.

Throughout this journey I've learned a lot about myself, my triggers, my motivations and my patterns and I think I'm likely to always feel like I'm 'not *there* yet' – wherever 'there' is – and I just need to accept that and ride with it. I can never again beat myself up as bad as I used to though – torturing myself for things out of my control, letting every little bullshit disappointment fester into a fierce pit of ugly rage inside me and loathing myself for not living up to a million impossible ideals. My patterns of thinking gave me depression, but they can also give me happiness if I choose to harness that power. Don't get me wrong, I'm not going all Deepak Chopra on your ass; I actually like being a difficult, intense, moody, cocky wanker and the second I start acting like a hippie, shoot me.

That same summer, Cat and I finally got our shit together and got a place. I know, we'd only been together for like, a million years! Living in a cosy, detached country lodge in the beautiful valleys, situated halfway between both of our families, my quality of life has improved immeasurably since I stopped spending every minute and every penny on that abusive relationship, that addiction – the band.

With no neighbours and lots of green, it's an awesome house for a party and boy, have we made good use of that – yours truly on the water, of course. For the first time ever, I felt like I was able to 'provide'; give the best of me to my family and be a part of something other than an upcoming tour poster. Below the surface there's always that craving, that nagging lust for the stage and the road, luring me back into its sexy embrace. I'm still riddled with demons, damn it, but I'm keeping the bastards at bay. For now, at least.

My dad's circumstances didn't improve, and he had to start chemo. Coming back from the hospital with him that first day was upsetting and testing. Where was this going? Is he going to be OK? How will his life – all

our lives – change? He was treated at the same hospital where I spent much of my youth, in and out for my ear ops, so it was eerie being back there again. The familiar smell, strip lighting and drab colour scheme brought back a thousand memories.

Seeing your dad as anything less than a superhero is painful, but the way he faced his new dependency and fear with courage, strength and dignity – and banter, of course – made all other superheroes redundant forever. My mum, who was already known for being strong, endlessly patient and resourceful, rose to their change of circumstance with grace and compassion in ways that were inspirational. As the eldest son, I had to be a rock and play my position – I saved my crying for the drives home.

It is further testament to our incredible NHS, and the people who work there tirelessly, that my father is doing well. At the time of writing, he is undergoing daily treatment and receiving world-class care that we would never be able to afford if it wasn't for the National Health Service – which has now saved the lives of two members of our family.

The boys weren't to know (well, they would have if they'd been speaking to me), but Matt and Glyn chose that first, emotional day at the hospital to announce in a joint statement online that they had left the band. I hadn't been involved in any of the conversations that led to that decision or statement, nor was I even aware that such conversations were taking place. I was just living my life and assumed they were living theirs. I'd even reached out to Matt a few times and invited him round to the new house for a catch-up, but it had now been two years since getting much of a reply.

With no support from my closest mates during either my unique period of weakness or my father's ill health, this was the final nail in the coffin. If this was anyone's long-term goal all along, it was genius. By completely shutting out one of the band members, the band was forced to fizzle out naturally, while from the outside its demise looked as if it was caused by its egotistical singer and his new solo career. A classic narrative that people accepted without question. Checkmate.

Glyn's contribution to the whole sorry mess was to be paralysed by confusion when he could have been a necessary middleman and orchestrated a band get-together long before the rot properly set in.

Although I was angry and upset, I had no choice but to let it slide. You learn who your true mates are in times of need, and I can see now that I was a useful and productive band leader – not a person, but a prospect. They'd made their decision, and time, as they say, is a great revealer – or is it healer? The painfully passive-aggressive manipulation of these events confirmed this was not how I wanted to live my life any more. Not a day goes by when I don't miss the guys, and violating airwaves with them, but I guess this was for the best. I genuinely wish Matt and Glyn the best of luck and I'd love nothing more than to see them both living their dreams and being happy. We shared moments that I'll cherish to my dying day, and hopefully, there may come a time when we can put this behind us.

CHAPTER 24

ENCORE

I ask you, dear reader, what would you have done? Would you have given up years ago? Would you continue ploughing on year after year, blow after blow, forever trying to climb that mountain but digging a tunnel to hell instead? Would that have made you and your choices *wrong*? Would you be proud that you had the courage to give it a shot, rather than surrender to the safety of the straight-and-narrow, never knowing what might have been? Or was it all obvious from the get-go?

I still battle with regret and occasional bitterness, but I'm incredibly grateful to have had this unique journey. Were it not for my aspirations to be a musician and the various roads that it sent me down, I would never have known the indescribable euphoria of playing live, would never have met such a diverse range of people from all sections of society, and would never have met the love of my life. My horizons have been broadened by the friends I've made all over the world and the privilege of travelling to bizarre and spectacular places. I've tackled my hearing problems, confronted my confidence and self-esteem issues, and overcome a whole swathe of internal, external, and emotional obstacles. I've become tougher but more open, and experienced the dramatic highs and lows of life, pushing my resilience and staying power to its limits. I've created six albums, along with memories that I will cherish forever.

When looking back at our life, we imagine how much better it might have been if only we'd done this or that, but who honestly knows? It might have been worse! I might have signed that Sony deal at twenty-two and done a Cliff Burton (Metallica bassist who died in a bus crash while on tour in Sweden, aged twenty-four), or become a heroin addict. Or worse – been stuck on the shelf, having given ownership of all of my work to a label that didn't care to do anything with it, like so many major-label bands I know

who are now working in music shops and aren't allowed to even play their own songs. We simply don't know.

And that brings me to an important insight that the age-old cliché of it all being about the journey is actually kind of true. In fact, given the abundance of awesomeness listed above that I've gained from dragging myself through this particular journey, I wonder whether there is an argument to be made for just getting on and fucking doing it. Many of the experiences described in this book were not pleasant or enjoyable at the time, but in hindsight I can appreciate the value they brought to my life. I had the show of my fucking life on a stage in Switzerland, shaking with anger after a raging argument with a conman. If I hadn't been doing that, what else would I have been doing? Sitting in work? Or the pub?

I'm not knocking either but what I'm trying to explain is that even though the situation sucked at the time, it was still damn interesting, and I grew from the experience. It was another contributing factor towards me eventually snapping, and making my life so much better as a result.

Instead of appreciating how lucky I was to be living the life I had, I measured it against the lives of the most successful rock stars on the planet. That is plain unhealthy, and no matter what you achieve or experience, nothing ever seems good enough. By many people's standards, my life was kind of awesome. But I wasn't seeing my life relative to most people's, I was comparing it to that of the one per cent, and despite knowing deep down that much of that lifestyle is airbrushed bullshit, I still craved it. It is important to be grateful for all the amazing things we have, and reflect on how much worse it could be, rather than how much better. The bombardment of Photoshopped taunting about us not having enough or being enough is a virus running through the veins of society, making us all sick.

We're indoctrinated as a society to believe that unless we're achieving at the highest level possible, then what we're doing isn't of value. Well, here's another truism that I've witnessed first-hand. Those guys at the top aren't happy either. They're pretty fucked up, in fact. You – we – are not missing anything at that party. Trust me. I've been to the party and it was shit. 'The top' is mostly populated by careless sycophants all wanting something from

the flavour of the week, and that shaky position comes at a price. I've mingled with multi-millionaire rock stars (no, I won't mention their names!) and I've seen how completely fucking baked they are. Too much time spent with yes-men, gold diggers, and industry snakes, and too much self-medication, has left them bereft of any clue as to who they are, who their real friends are and what the fuck is going on. Yes, they're loaded, but at what cost?

We all know that the celebrity world is fake – as ridiculously airbrushed as the glossy pictures it spews into the world. A team of expensive, unseen experts pulls the strings of every song, movie and photo, and this sets dangerously unattainable standards of beauty, success, and relevance for the rest of us. It's time for the fact that this is complete fiction to be hammered into the minds of our young. The destroyed family lives I've often seen among the rich and the famous have been tragic, with the children resenting their vacant parent and not giving a fuck whether they're a lead singer in some daft band or not. Their partners are usually off their tits on powders and sleeping with the house staff. Trust me; it's not all happy families up there at the top. Nor is getting to the top the result of hard work and talent; it is the result of uncannily fortunate, random circumstance and nothing more. Luck, in other words. And luck is not a reliable career plan.

The fruits of my endeavours were hard-won. Those self-help books would have you believe that it's easy: believe the right things, stay positive, work hard and it's all yours. Well, before you waste your time, take it from me – they're full of shit. I have seen countless hard-working, disgustingly talented people not succeed, give up and become depressed. They did everything the book says – they ground on positively for decades, writing better songs than you've ever heard, forever upping their game, and making sacrifices. They took every chance and kept on going despite horrendous conditions, and they still failed. Big time.

Do you know why they failed? Because the universe, let alone regular society, does not give a shit about you or your dreams. I don't mean that in a negative way – it's just the cold, boring truth. The world is a chaotically busy, imperfect and unjust place full of confused, damaged people making it up as they go along. It's not that they lack compassion, but everyone is

too busy dealing with their own bullshit to help you with yours. You are on your own. Your ambition and its consequences are your problem. Your success, if you have any, is your problem, and so is your failure.

Does that sound harsh? Ultimately, there is a freedom in accepting your own insignificance. Once you truly understand that you are mostly meaningless to all but a few loved ones, you start living a bit more freely. You drop some of your protective bullshit and you stop being so insecure. You are free to go for it and fuck up. And in that spirit, you will flourish. So put the manual down, stop preparing for some life test that no one is marking you on, and just get out there and have a fucking go, damn you! You can thank me later, when you're holed up in some Thai brothel with the Italian mafia after you, wondering when the fuck this whole crazy chain of events started. It started when you stopped giving a fuck.

So, if not hard work, talent or luck, what can we do to achieve our dreams? Nothing. The universe doesn't owe you success, happiness, or a fortune. But if you're lucky enough, you might get your shot. Outside of that, you're on your own, with your own baggage. This applies to life in general – all you can do is take a gamble and, if you don't win the first time, keep rolling the dice. You can increase your workload and roll more times a day, or you can roll every day over many years, increasing your odds. Only if you are out there, doing your thing, might that rare breeze of opportunity drift across your path. The one thing that's certain is that nothing will happen for you if you're sitting on your arse moaning or waiting for the perfect moment. Life is a lottery in so many ways and, as with all gambling, you need to know when to stop.

More importantly, you also need to be prepared to lose, because you're probably going to. The world is in no short supply of motivational books and exploitative speakers preparing you to win, but no one tells you how to live with the far more likely outcome that you will fail. Being a winner is easy. It's being a failure that's hard; trust me. It wasn't about fame for me, it was about creating credible art and being able to look after my family. It was about escaping that merciless lifelong bully of poverty and creating a platform from which I could help others and speak for the voiceless.

My failure wasn't just a little bit gutting; it was fucking soul-crushing. But life goes on and you've got to deal with it or spend the rest of your life being an irritating, moany pain in the arse, in which case the only people you'll attract into your life will be other whining losers. Expecting others to carry your emotional baggage will only lead to further disappointment – it's our baggage and each of us must learn to live with it, whether we like it or not. And hey, it wasn't your fault. You took a punt and that's worthy of respect. You tried to do something to change your situation and maybe it didn't work out but, guess what? That's the norm. It's normal for it to not work out.

What's the alternative? Live a life of denial? Never even trying something in case you fail? Well then, you've already failed – you've failed at life and you've failed yourself. Sure, you probably aren't going to be the next David Beckham (I'm just being honest) but that doesn't mean that all the other riches you'll experience along your journey are of no value. Fuck it, man! Take a chance. You don't know what you'll set in motion once you get out there and *start*. If it all goes tits-up, it's up to you to know when to throw in the towel. There is absolutely no shame in failure. It is the honourable trophy of those who tried.

And while I'm on the subject, when did being 'normal' become such a terrible thing, anyway? When did we start associating being normal with being a failure? What the actual *fuck* is that all about?! The worst part of this sick cultural trick that's being played on us is that it's the simple, attainable stuff in life that makes us the happiest: friends, family, laughter and love. And the pursuit of happiness? Another unfair lie. We're not designed to be happy, we're designed to survive, and life is a package deal – you can't see the light without the dark, and you don't know how high you're flying until you've suffered the lows. Unhappiness is part of the tapestry of life. If you're unhappy, tired, scared, and anxious, you're not missing out on some secret that everyone on Instagram seems to be in on. You're normal. And normal is just fucking fine.

There is great value to having a purpose in your life. It doesn't matter what it is, or how important it is, but those little routines and commitments give us a sense of control and meaning. Even if it's just making sure the

plants don't die. When I spent those weeks wandering the mountains and soul-searching, I expected to find some deep, eternal truths that would make everything make sense. What I actually found was boredom, and when you're bored, it's easy to start inventing more and more reasons why your life sucks and the world is a bastard.

We all need something to DO. We need a reason to get out of bed in the morning. It's been shown in studies that rats who are freely given food and water whenever they wander to the feeding tubes end up developing a long list of cognitive and physiological problems, including depression, whereas the rats who have to earn their food and water by completing a maze to get there or some other challenge, are healthier in every way, and they live longer. We all need something to do, and it doesn't matter what that is. Unless you're a serial killer, of course.

Through CBT, and sheer stubbornness, I've learned how programmable we are, mentally and physically. By forcing myself to change my habits, whether they were a destructive pattern of thinking (jealousy and insecurity), destructive behaviour (drinking, smoking and eating shit) or continuing to carry toxic people (no comment), I realised just how quickly the body and mind adapt to a new way of doing things, and it becomes habit really quickly. You just have to stick to your guns for the first few weeks while your body gets the memo.

The key to my life changes was having something more important to me than the dread of facing my fears, and that was my passion for music. If I'd run away every time I was nervous, I would never have played live. If I was too proud to admit that I had asshole tendencies and needed to change, I would never have experienced real love. If my disastrous rock 'n' roll pilgrimage to nowhere has taught me anything, it's this: there is far more to gain by having a go and failing. Your destination point is only there as something to aim for, it doesn't matter whether you reach it or not. The good stuff is what happens along the way. You'll meet new people, shed negative people and habits from your life, end up in crazy situations, learn a lot about the world and yourself, and you'll have some banging stories to tell.

Aled and I used to talk about regretting not learning a trade, something useful that earns good dollar. But we're both still here, managing to stay afloat exclusively through music. Sure, that has sometimes involved teaching, busking or playing covers, but it's kept us out of the dreaded office cubicle, kept food on the table and kept us abundant in good tales, good times and good memories. If I, an unqualified, uneducated, half-deaf, foul-mouthed peasant from the arse end of nowhere can manage this in an industry that died as soon as I arrived, you, with all of your awesomeness, are going to be great. Go get 'em!

I've got no idea where I'm going or what's next. There are still many unanswered questions, such as what exactly did happen with Kyshera (I, for one, don't know), and what was that red stuff all over the van in Lille? One thing I do know is that whatever the future holds, I will, whether I like it or not, continue to create and exist under the wondrous, horrific, magical curse that is music. That best mate your parents don't like, who's a thoroughly bad influence, but was there for me when I was the shy new kid in a strange new town, when I was bound in bandages in hospital, when I was an impressionable teen in need of an identity, and when I was a screwed up adult. No matter how bad things got, I could always, *always*, rely on the soul-restoring, life-affirming power of a good tune played loudly.

To all the bands who have touched my life and saved me on so many occasions, words will never be enough, and to all those bands out there doing their thing and struggling for the cause, I salute you – keep up the good work. I thank you for giving me your time and your ear, I hope you've enjoyed the chat. Maybe next time we meet, it'll be after we've fallen out of the back of respective vans in Romania, for an Evian shower in a service station, on some ill-informed adventure. I sure hope so.

P. S. Please support artists. It's harder than it looks.

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