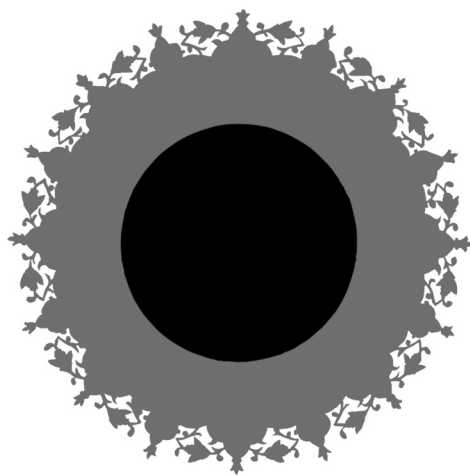


THE BLUE BOURBON ORCHESTRA
CARSON MELL



You know, we all made the same promise around the bonfire. Me and you, your best friend Curt, Adam Smith in Tennessee and Willy King in Brooklyn, New York. Staring first down into our green and brown bottles, then up into the faces of our young friends, fire in every eye, we said with utmost sincerity that we were never going to become one of them. No, the cycle would end with us. No three piece suit, no nine to five, no washer, no dryer, no bullshit. And I kept my end of the bargain. I kept my fucking promise. And where did it leave me? High and dry.

Every couple of years one of the others will come and see me. They feel horrible about being here, even for twenty minutes. You can see it in their eyes. They come out of pity of course, but even moreso I think they come out of guilt for having broken that ancient promise. They ask me about my hobbies and flash phony smiles and nod. And then they go back to their homes and wives and wind chimes and a drawer full of different sized batteries and Paul Newman's salad dressing. And I go back to my cell.

It's no exaggeration to say that I'm a haunted man. But when I manage to shake off the ghosts for a moment or two and catch my breath, I like to reminisce about a few of the good things I did with my life. And often I think about The Blue Bourbon Orchestra. And even though it was joining up with them that ultimately led me here, sometimes I think this is where I was destined to end up anyhow. Who really knows? You only get to choose one path. And it's not even a path. We just call it that to feel comfortable. Really, a whole bunch of shit just happens and then there you are. Dead or alive, rich or poor, free as a bird or serving out a life sentence in Dominguez State for felony murder.

But when it comes to the Orchestra, and the time I spent onstage with them, regardless of the rest, I can't help but feel good about that part. I'm still somewhat in awe of all the music we made together.

PART I

THE RED CREAM SODA BAND

When I first met the Orchestra I was living in a castle. The place had been discovered by an old drinking buddy of mine, a polite but insane Jumano Indian named Jack-Steven Carl. He was a displaced person from a displaced people, his tribe hailing from up northwest in Indianapolis. We were down in Austin, Texas. My hometown.

I'd run into Jack-Steven not too long after getting evicted, during the first couple of weeks that I was living on the streets. At first he was a bit elusive about his good fortune, only telling me that he'd found "a real good place to sleep."

Then I bought us a bottle of Night Train.

"Two go choo-choo on the Night Train," he said, cracking the cap, "All aboard!"

And choo-choo we went. Ride it we did. And by the last stop, the last drop, he had his arm slung around me and was leading me home.

Jack-Steven's little pink castle only came up to my chin—rain-warped particle board nailed to a frame of two by fours. For a

playhouse it was on the larger side, with two rooms big enough to lie down in and a crooked little turret your head would peek out of when you stood up straight and tall. The thing was abandoned out behind the studio of a local cowboy artist along with a thousand other useless rusted things—old stoves and washing machines and antique cash registers. Amongst the junk, it was real easy for us to hide from the artist. So we lived there.

It was spring at the time and the weather was near-perfect all day and all night. When it did get a little too warm in the castle we just went and slept under the leering arms of the great big prickly-pear cactus beside the carport. Sometimes you'd wake to Mexican grandmas padding up the dust as they trimmed off cactus pads with steak knives and hands so callused they didn't need wear gloves.

Eventually Jack-Steven and I started taking from the artist too. During the day when the back door to his studio was propped open, Jack-Steven would sneak down the drawbridge, tiptoe into another junky storage area, and tiptoe back out with a bottle or two of a pomegranate wine. "There's so many cases in there," he said, raising his hands up above his head. "Cases to here."

At night, after the artist drove home, a few other bums would notice his pickup gone and come crowd into our little castle to share the syrupy wine. They passed the bottle and picked at the castle's medieval decals and hammed it up. "Mirror mirror on the wall, who's the *rarest* of them all. And Mirror-mirror, tell me where *she's* at."

Things were easy then. I was just living day to day, bottle to bottle. Getting drunk outside the donut shop and walking the world and marveling at everything. I used women's restrooms at fancy restaurants and picked the buds off the pussy willows. I wandered grocery stores and sampled odd bagel creations and spicy chicken slivers. Sometimes a can of creamed corn would fall off of a shelf and right into one of my pockets. There was a definite grace in this way of life. It was a cheap, unearned kind of grace, but a grace nonetheless.

Then one night a young grifter appears amongst the rabble of thirsty bums. He had a deck of cards with him and we started a poker game in the gravel. Though I swallowed the first few shuffles, when all was dealt and done I was fifteen dollars richer. The next morning I rose before Jack-Steven and headed out to celebrate my success with a few Bloody Marys. The closest bar, and our favorite as such, was called The Wander Inn.

Now to think that my deliverance to this place at this time was hinged on nothing more than those last couple of hands, that if the grifter's nimble fingers hadn't dealt me that last Queen I'd most likely be living an altogether different life right now. That it was all, quite literally, the luck of the draw.

When I walked into the Wander Inn early that morning, two things were unusual. First, even though it was nice and cool outside, inside it was warm as a womb and humid as hell. Second, even though it couldn't have been any later than seven thirty, there was a band playing. A scrappy country four-piece. And off to the side was a slicker group of guys waiting to take their place.

On bass was a tall and calm fellow with a face not unlike mine—too much man for that small a space. Though his hat was a cowboy's, his clothes were army surplus so he looked half cowboy half soldier. I guess you call that a ranger.

The drummer was a handsome Indian, surgery-serious in his work as he scowled out at an audience that wasn't there. His black hair ran straight down until tassels took over. Like the others he was drenched in sweat.

And then there was the singer. He was tall and lean, not what you'd call a big man, but he took up a lot of space nonetheless. He had one cauliflower ear, a long scar cutting down into a brown moustache and a lumpy cast on his right arm, sealed up at the end so that even his fingers were covered. His name was Guy Fisher, but there should have been two names for him—one for the way he looked and another for the way he sounded. Just like with thunder and lightning. Because as ugly as this man was, the sound coming out of him was nothing short of beautiful. His voice was

fragile and warbling and unrestrained, almost like a lady's.

And then, when I started listening to the words he was singing, his voice sounded even better. He sang of madness and love, mystery and pain. These were things I needed to hear, things it seemed I'd been waiting my whole life to hear. Every word seemed true to me, and right away I was sure I was in the presence of something extraordinary.

The guitar player was the only one who looked out of place up there. His belt buckles was perfectly polished, the shoulders of his crisp red shirt embroidered with bright, flame-tailed cocks.

The band played two songs before cowboy-clean stepped down off the stage and another from the group waiting took his place. This confused me. I called the barmaid over for another and asked, "What's with the live music?"

"That's, uh, the Red Cream Soda Band," she said. "They're auditioning for a new guitar player."

I played guitar. It'd been a while since I'd picked at anything, but I did play, and better than any of these guys auditioning could. I had my dear departed dad to thank for that.

Quick story about it, cause my dad is always on my mind. A good dad always is. When I was real young, four or five, the old man called me into his garage and told me quite plainly, "No one in this family is smart, strong, or good-looking." He turned and grabbed something bigger than I was off his workbench. "Meanwhile, music," he said, unbuckling the big case, pulling out something even bigger, "Anybody can do music." And he put the instrument into my hands.

He was wise to start me out so young. Unburdened by the concept of perfection, every sound I made with the thing sounded great to me. I played it just to play it. I never wrote any music, but by the time I was thirteen I could play just about anything you wanted to hear. Dare I say I even had some talent.

Back in the bar, the second guitar player left the stage and was replaced by a third as a couple more walked in. One was a youngster in a straw hat carrying a nice old guitar and laughing like he

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owned the world, which at all of twenty-one, was true to an extent he couldn't have possibly understood. I was forty-two there on my barstool. Twenty-one twice. The year was 1988.

While the third auditioner was getting ready, I walked up to the stage and coughed for the lead singer's attention.

He turned and looked down at me. "Oh my God," he said, his dry, rubbery speaking voice more in step with his looks, "We got the world's largest dust-bunny here."

I guess he was referring to my appearance. I was hiding behind lots of curly hair, a big beard, and big greasy glasses I wear on account of severe nearsightedness. I was little more than a nose.

"Good music," I said.

"Look, I'm sorry," he extended a hand to me. "I'm Guy Fisher." He pointed to the calm bass player, "That's Gavin Ramstead," then to his faithful Indian drummer and navigator, "Joe Eagle. We're the Blue Bourbon Orchestra."

"Got time for me?" I said.

"Time for what?"

"To audition."

"You play guitar?"

I nodded.

"Sure then, we got time for you. We'll do these last few, then you, okay?"

I nodded again. Then Guy asked me my name and I told it to him. My name was Charles Leslie deBeau. People called me Chuck.

Three more cowboys auditioned before Guy finally called me up. All out of drink and cash, it seemed to take forever. One of the guitar players was better than me and just by the way they all shook his hand I was sure he was the one they wanted. I was wasting my morning waiting and wasn't happy about it.

"Let's go," Guy finally said to me.

"Mind if I use one of your guitars?" I asked.

Guy looked back to Joe Eagle and Joe said, "S'back in the room."

“We don’t got one.”

I looked into the audience, at all the other guitars, settling on the real nice old one in the hand of the laughing kid. I hopped down off the stage and walked over to him. “Excuse me,” I said, “Can I trouble you to borrow your guitar?”

He turned and looked at my fingers, considering whether or not they were good enough to grace his instrument. I reached for it and he pulled it away. “Where’s yours?”

“Long gone. Don’t worry about it. I’ll be right up there.”

Beside us, a peaceful dad-looking fellow held his out to me. “You can use mine.”

“Thank you, but I’m going to borrow the kid’s.” And I took ahold of the neck. “I’m going to use your guitar.”

The kid stared me in the eyes for another moment. Then I felt the weight of his instrument come to my arm. I got back on stage.

“You know *Little Sadie*?”

“Sure.”

“Then here we go!”

Joe clacked his drumsticks three times, and we started. I jumped right in, and though I lost the thing once or twice, mostly I ran alongside it pretty well. Next we played one of my favorites. Another standard. Mr. Bojangles. I got right in there on that one. Wove my sounds with theirs. I got totally lost in it and even started singing along towards the end, could see old Mr. Bojangles himself doing the ol’ soft shoe in that smokey parish jail.

With the last note still reverberating, I stared down at the red carpet and took a couple of deep breaths to try and stop my eyes from watering. It was the lyrics about Mr. Bojangles’s dead dog, but something more too. It’d been five years or more since I’d played with any kind of band, and I’d forgotten just how good it felt. How powerful.

I didn’t think I was actually crying, but soon I tasted the salt and Joe the drummer said with disgust, “Jesus, what’s all that?”

Guy snapped right back at him. “That’s passion, Joe. Take a fucking note.” He tapped my shoulder and I wiped my eyes and looked up. “That was good. *This* is good. Write down that ol’ name

and number for me, would you?”

I wrote my name and said, “I don’t have a phone access right now.”

“Oh, uh. What can we do?” His eyes landed on Joe. “We could have the Indian send up a smoke signal.”

“Wouldn’t know how to read it.”

He asked if I could just come back the next day at one in the afternoon. I told him sure, shook his hand, and waved goodbye to the others.

I walked out the front door and into the horrible sunshine. I shook the last from a soft pack and walked along smoking it. Then I heard bootheels pounding the cement behind me.

I spun around and raised my fists, ready for a good old fashioned “street attack.” But it was only Guy Fisher. “I’m very serious about you,” he panted. Outside of the sour bar, I could clearly smell the whiskey on his breath, oozing out of his flesh. He was trying to look me straight in the eyes, but his gaze was roaming. “I just want to make sure you come back. And I wanted to apologize for saying dust-bunny. I didn’t mean that. It was just from high up on stage you looked smaller, so with all the curly hair—” then he locked onto my eyes and set his cast on my shoulder, “In this light you look more like a dog. A great big mad dog.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He took out a bill folded tight into fourths and put it into my hand. “To show you I’m serious, okay? Just show up tomorrow.”

I assured him that I would, and with a nod he turned and ran back towards the Wander Inn. I unfolded the bill into what it was. A hundred.

“Can you break this?” I proudly asked the clerk. He could. I got a bottle of Thunderbird and a packet of strawberry Kool-Aid. We used to dump the powder inside to make that rotgut wine more bearable. I started walking around aimlessly, sipping my two-bit cocktail and putting the old “red ring of doom” on my lips.

Long after tossing the bottle into a wash, I spotted Jack-Steven at the Esso station. He was skulking around the pumps and singing the same tired song that’s been sung a billion times before.

“Excuse me, Sir. I’m trying to get to Santa Fe and my tank’s on empty. That car over there, yeah. Mom’s in the hospital. They’re not sure. Some kind of infections in her heart.” Saying these kinds of things comes as natural to a thirsty man as squawking does to the toucan. It’s only natural. Next time one of these guys is bugging you, calling you sweetheart or pal with a violin tucked under his tongue, just try and remember what it is you’re really hearing. It’s water burbling over stones, trees creaking. Nature.

“Jack-Steven!” I said, pulling out my wad of change. “Fill your Cadillac with premium!”

“Put that away, man!” We hid behind the dumpsters and he showed me a messy bouquet of ones and fives. “I’ve made thirty-seven dollars already.”

“Somebody gave me a hundred dollar bill,” I told him.

“Who?”

“A musician.”

He smiled and clapped my back. “Let’s make some more money.”

So we hung out at the pumps mining bourgeoisie sympathies for another hour or so, took a black plastic bag back home. Soon the castle became a real castle, the junkyard a creepy storybook forest. I was dreaming. Dressed for the olden times, the young grifter returned, showed me some impossible card tricks, and asked me to follow him.

We walked in darkness along an overgrown path where brambles snagged our armor. After some time we came upon a clearing and he pushed black branches aside to show me the sword in the stone, in a bronze anvil, exactly as it looks in Disneyland. It was lit with a single beam of moonlight. “You will pull the sword from the stone,” he told me. “You will be strong in Avalon.”