

ANNALS OF LEARNING: MY FIRST DEGREE by Warren Zanes

Circa 1984, success smelled like a brand new Ford Club Wagon. The Del Fuegos bought a twelve-seater. Two-tone. Blue and white. A deal with Slash Records paid for it. The van was off the lot for one week before I totaled it, at 6 A.M., just outside of Dayton, Ohio. The nose of the vehicle was pointed toward Hollywood before it caught on a guardrail and flipped.

We'd packed as if we were leaving a burning building—"Take only your most valuable possessions!" This meant that Stax/Volt and Atlantic 45s were scattered across Ohio Interstate 70. It looked like some serious skeet shooting had gone down. The sun was just coming up. It could have been a painting.

Later in the day, in a rare, purely coincidental moment of unity, our parents and our record label both asked us to, please, return home. As they insistently reminded us, the accident left one group member in the hospital—couldn't we take that as a sign? But we were young men with a fresh record deal, on our way to record a debut album in Los Angeles. Our imaginations were on a killing spree.

If you've ever been in a band, you understand this. In the best cases, a fine line separates delusional thinking from an honest inventory of things. More typically, there is no such fine line. Bands are generally collections of people nursing on the same plump fantasy. Something happens, at some point, that leads the members to think maybe, just maybe, they have a sound that is uniquely their own—and the rest of the world might, just maybe, catch on. Wasn't it, after all, magical when they all hit the same chord at the same time? If only the world could feel that power.

We knew it was going to happen for us. It was a taste in our mouths. We saw Huey Lewis in a truckstop and took *that* as a sign. Huey Lewis. Like a loose conglomeration of self-proclaimed mystics, we could have taken almost anything as a confirmation of our ultimate beliefs. Signs were everywhere.

There was no discussion to be had in Dayton, Ohio. We knew that if we let up for a minute, our success would be the next guy's to get. Turn back? Back through Ohio to Pennsylvania, cutting around New York City to make our way to Boston? We borrowed money and bought another van.

Part of me wants to simplify the story and say that it was all ugly from there on out. But to do so would be immodest. It got uncomfortable, certainly. There were disappointments on a scale that *felt* grand. There were clothes

that today make me feel ashamed of myself. There were adventures in the bedroom that were altogether artless. And then, of course, there were critics who failed to admire our bid at mainstream success, fans who talked about the good old days, when the band played at Cantone's in Boston to five people. Longer hair, tighter pants. Drunk. Enthusiastically laughing at some drug dealer's every remark in hopes that something free shakes loose. There were four years of that.

Around the time I left the band, I was absolutely sure that I was going bald. I can remember the very second it hit me. That I had remained oblivious up to that moment shocked me, mortified that it took me that long to notice. Everyone in the audience was looking toward the stage. They knew. How had I missed it? We weren't playing in an arena but in a suburban club, where the bus parked out front, about the size of the club, could never have been the symbol of a career on the *upswing*. I was torn between playing the guitar and feeling for damage. I have two cowlicks, placed like horns, and though they were once in the middle of a swarm of hair—I felt very sure of this at the time—they were now on the edge of my hairline. The cowlicks were either moving, or my hair was receding. I was devastated. Twenty-two and the end was in sight. The show seemed to last forever. I felt like I was just about to begin paying for all the good times (see above).

The only person I could trust was my mother, so I called her the next day from a place where the other band members couldn't hear. I certainly didn't trust them. If she had no immediate concern for my predicament, this was based on the fact that I had a very full head of hair. She was more concerned with the territory beneath the hair. I wanted her to set up an appointment with a dermatologist (this was a scalp issue—scalp is skin, right?). She had another kind of doctor in mind.

Within a matter of months, shortly after a summer tour with Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers, I quit the band in order to work full-time on disillusionment and paranoia. The first part of my education was over.

I'm not sure what to think when I see elementary and middle-school kids forming bands and playing gigs, their parents, acting as roadies, dressed in Ramones and CBGB shirts. They watch their kids perform as if they're watching the school play. There's so much pride in the room you feel a little high. I'm dubious about this latest phase in the domestication of rock & roll. But I still say that among my degrees, my first, a four-year degree in Band, is my most valuable. Let me list a few important lessons.

1) Men don't change color.

In 1986 we played New Year's Eve in downtown Washington, D.C., attendance around a hundred thousand plus. Experience Unlimited opened the show. James Brown closed the show. The Del Fuegos played in the middle slot. We bragged for months in advance about this bill. We said little about it after the fact. Four white guys from New England can listen to all the soul music they want, but they should never assume that they can initiate any kind of lasting change to their heritage.

After their set, Experience Unlimited managed to pull every fuse from our amps without our roadies noticing. When we took the stage, standing before an all-black audience, we opened with a leap in the air and a power chord, followed by silence. The audience looked at us. We looked at them.

2) The indies don't have a special relationship with fair practices.

We have yet to receive a statement from our Slash publisher (Big Thrilling Music). They have placed our songs in movies and on television without ever consulting us or paying us. A greatest hits CD came out in England, with extensive liner notes, and not a single member of the band was contacted or knew anything about the release. An ad in *Uncut* caught someone's attention. For years we waved the indie flag, claiming a purity that was somehow unavailable to acts on a major label. That flag has since been folded and put into storage with the other ideals that didn't cut it on the street.

3) Look before you leap.

In my view, Boston in 1983 was a place of magic. Perhaps this feeling is nothing more than a byproduct of being in my late teens at the time. Music will never mean more than it does at that age. But I think Boston's difference can't be explained away. I have yet to see something as cosmic as the Lyres on a good night in a small shithole of a club. And the Lyres aren't a lone example. There was a scene. The Neats, the Classic Ruins, the Neighborhoods, Mission of Burma. The scene was reckless, thick with misbehavior, populated by casualties in the making. And it was fully alive.

That was a time and a place that I wouldn't trade for anything. There was a collective sense of purpose. Clubs were packed each night with people who wouldn't want to be anywhere else. There were labels like Rick Hart's Ace of Hearts imprint. No two bands on the label sounded the same—but they

couldn't have been anywhere else. Every element in town seemed to be in place: the college radio, the fanzines, the "legitimate" press, the clubs, the bands, the audience. Everything lined up. To be a part of something like that was remarkable. The Del Fuegos willingly walked away from it, loaded the van in search of more. There's no regret. But a good look around would have been worth the extra moment.

FINDING THE LEVEL by Sven Birkerts

Steven Tyler, that was his name. Like the Aerosmith singer. I think—though it has been a long time. This was the mid-1970s in Maine. I was living in Biddeford Pool with Sally, both of us scratching for a living. That much I remember about the time. Sally was probably just starting to sell her watercolors on consignment at a gallery in Kennebunkport, and I had my part-time job working in the so-called College Relations Office at Saint Francis College, going in every day half-day to spin ideas with my boss Dave DeTurk and to then follow up with whatever legwork was needed to write the story or press release. Dave, who I enjoyed so much, my first "hip" boss, was the co-author of a book I actually knew, called *The American Folk Scene*. He was a thin, nearly chain-smoking—back when people still chain-smoked—enthusiast of a guy, radically out of place at the College, though probably less so than I was. When we originally met in the hallway, I was weeks into my original job for the College, working as night-janitor. We got to talking, and must have talked long enough for him to realize that I had been to college and read books. Anyway, something clicked between us. And a few weeks later he found a way to get a bit of funding for an assistant and then he offered the job to me. It was a very big lift for us on the home front. Our money problem did not go away, but for a time our scrambling at least had some net under it.

I hadn't thought of Dave for many years, but—this is odd—last month while I was in Indiana giving a talk I mentioned him to someone. For his co-author on the folk book had been the poet A. Poulin, Jr., whose name came up in a lunch-time conversation, and I was able to announce, as I otherwise never can, that I had once lived in the same apartment Poulin had lived in (which was true—at Winter Harbor Apartments in Biddeford Pool). And that I had worked for his then co-author Dave DeTurk. And though no one at the table had any interest in that last bit of information, I felt very happy to offer it. I felt

a sweet little private click. As for Steven Tyler, that connection came about through someone at the College. Dave had arranged that I interview and profile the director of the school radio station, which I did, and after the interview, I got to talking with this person and mentioned in some context that I played the guitar. I suspect, remembering myself back then, that I exaggerated my level as a player. However it went, this radio person started telling me that there was a fabulous guitar player living just down the road from the College, a guy who had once played with everyone but who had run into some problems and was now living on the quiet. I should look him up, he said. Maybe we could play together. He gave me Steven Tyler's number. And of course—again remembering what I was like back then, which is not so different from what I'm like now, finally—I thought this was providential, a sign from the heavens that I should, indeed, follow up. I might not go the full distance nowadays. But nowadays there are people everywhere in my life, and back then, Sally aside, Dave aside, and maybe occasional visits to Dr. Rosenau, the blind German professor in our apartment house, there was no one at all. So I can be excused for imagining a whole new life unfolding as Steven Tyler and I consummate a union of musical minds and he introduces me to his vast network of like-minded musician friends. I made the call. I punched the numbers—my heart, I'm sure, pounding in my chest—and he answered right away. And—hard to fathom now—he seemed interested enough. He said, "Sure, let's get together." He told me where he lived—it was right near the College—and we made a date for me to stop by. Soon. The next day.

Oddly, I don't remember anything about getting there, though I would have had to have walked, since I remember quite clearly walking the long way home, shifting my case from hand to hand. I was on the phone, noting down his address, and then I was there, at his door, and a tall, long-haired, shambly-looking guy in jeans and T-shirt was inviting me in. He had a comfortable but run-down house (I do remember this), large open-looking living room, not much furniture at all. I noticed his guitar in a big serious-looking case in the corner. Mine? Well, I had my original old small Gibson in its amateur-looking case. I set it down, looked around. He offered me a seat at the kitchen table. I think we smoked (I'm sure I did), and we talked. He was—I took this in with a slight jolt—probably ten years older than me. I don't know what I'd expected, but I might have got the first hint then that I that I had blundered in over my head. Tyler offered me coffee. He asked me what kind of guitar I had (it was a

"B-25-natural," a designation that means nothing to me) and was—I see now—polite enough not to laugh in my face. I asked him the same, though my knowledge of guitars was nonexistent. I don't know what he told me. He asked about the kind of music I played. I probably didn't say "Freight Train" and "Candy Man"—the truth. Likely I shrugged and said, "Blues, folk...."

Was it at this point I started wishing I could dematerialize and walk through walls? I asked him the same question back. He told me—I remember he had a lean, angular, haggard-looking face—that he had worked with a lot of musicians before things messed up and he had to take a break. I asked who. He named some names, bands that I'd heard of. Then he said that he had jammed with Jimmy Page once. Keith Richards. He shook his head in a way that said it all. I felt my stomach go sour. Keith Richards. Jimmy Page. Suddenly there was only the question about how I would get out of the room and down the road. But there was some time to be gotten through. We had our coffee. There was no beer, no wine—he was obviously in what we now call "recovery." We talked—God knows what about. Until at a certain point there was nothing to do but take the next step. He asked if I wanted to take out my guitar and play something. I must have nodded. What was I hoping for—that the patron god of self-important young men would take pity on me and touch my fingers with lightning? And right there, before I even leaned over to unsnap my case, I understood with a perfect objectivity how good I really was. By which I mean that I was not good at all, not even in hailing distance. Whatever fantasies I deluded myself with when I was sitting up in our place drinking my cups of Merlot and picking, here was the truth: I was a ground-floor beginner, a guy with about three licks and no command of music. I had my labored finger-picking versions of maybe ten songs, a few notes I could bend when I was inspired. And I was about to humiliate myself in front of a guy who had played with Jimmy Page. What did I do? I sucked in a breath and marched right on. I took out my little Gibson B-25-natural and pretended to tune it, while Tyler maybe noted, "a bit sharp on the B," or something like that. And then I cannonballed my way through whatever I had that was closest to blues. After a few bars I stopped. Silence. I winced. But Tyler saved me. He nodded and said, "That's some good stuff to work on." And I nodded and laughed and said yeah, that I knew I needed to practice more. And he laughed, too, easier now, and said, "Gotta start somewhere, man." I didn't stay long after that. I packed up my guitar, we shook hands, I thanked him for the