

## Spark #1.01 - The Day Job

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- 06/18/2000

(First of an occasional series of essays on a necessary fact of an artist's life) Every artist has a day job, and every artist wonders when they will stop working the day job. What do you want to do? "I want to make music, paint, and write." What kind of music do you make? "Ambient Electronic Noize." What kind of paintings do you paint? "Large abstract paintings that make manifest immanent spiritual, psychological, and emotional forces- much like my music." What do you write? "Essays, memoirs, and love letters to my readers." Don't quit your Day Job, buddy...

I don't personally know anyone who makes a living solely from electronic noize. I know people who make a living from painting, but it is a tough life; one filled with enormous struggles for the most meager acceptance. The complexities of life as a writer are too well known to bother recounting here. With a wife and child, I cannot (in good conscience) put them through such difficulties, when I can just as easily...

Work A Day Job.

I fervently, sometimes desperately, hope that someday I will not have to work a Day Job. But until then, work one I must. I am very fortunate in that regard- I have a really great Day Job - I run a computer software testing lab. My title is Scientist/Engineer. I like that title. It makes me think of men with spectacles and white coats labouring over some arcane device that will change the world as we know it, in order to prove some basic and fundamental understanding of that world and make it a less mysterious and more interesting and productive place to live.

Overall, I'd have to say that most of my Day Jobs have been "interesting" at the very least, and sometimes even creative and otherwise worthwhile. But not all of them.

It wasn't always worthwhile. No, no no no... Like every artist I've ever known, I've worked some truly horrendous Day Jobs. I think it is good to reflect on that, because I believe we learn a lot from difficulty, and the Day Job is the most adverse, yet tragically necessary, (hence difficult) part of an artist's life, be they painter, musician, writer, or all three...

My first amazing disaster Day Job was at Two Guys. Two Guys Department Stores don't exist anymore. They were too far ahead of their time, in a sad and evil way. They were huge — truly enormous - stores that had everything from groceries to stereos to clothing to lumber to car parts- like a WalMart on steroids. Unfortunately, their merchandise was second rate and they treated their employees poorly, ultimately dooming the store to failure.

For minimum wage, my job was to scrape bubblegum off the floor, and then wax the floor before the store opened. I would spend the rest of the day attending to emergencies as they developed. In

principle, it was an OK summer job for a long haired arty musician type barely out of High School with no job skills. In practice it was a torture pit.

The place was run by this monstrous and abusive asshole we called Ming - from the old Buck Rogers movies- Ming The Merciless. To call him a creep and a jerk would be an insult to the nasty fiends and sentient nodes of evil in our world and the next. He was simply one of the vilest creatures Mother Nature has ever suffered to crawl upon the surface of this Earth. Everyone hated him, and everyone hated Two Guys, even the people who shopped there. There was an underground river of merchandise leaving the store in the pockets and cars of the customers AND the employees. It was an enterprise so universal, the manager of the electronics department was even caught shoplifting- by Ming, no less!

The thieving manager was pushing one of those giant tacky fake wood console TV/Stereo/turntable/Radio sets out the door at closing time. Ming saw him struggling to get it out the door, and asked, "Why don't you have one of the kids move this? Where's the customer's TRUCK to haul this thing away? Hey - isn't that YOUR VAN parked there with the door open and motor running???" Busted...

Morale was non-existent. Employees would regularly sabotage the place just for the sake of something interesting to do that would irritate Ming. One fine afternoon, some whack job let all the gerbils out of the cages in the Pets Department. The fuzzy little guys, being hungry little critters, quickly hopped off to the Grocery Department, where they merrily tucked into the lettuce and surrounding produce. A little old woman with rhinestone cat's eye glasses rattled some celery at me and shouted in a thick Yiddish accent- "My boy- der's RATS in zee lettuce! Call zee Police! Do zomsink!" We chased them all into the back of the building and set up little food stations for them.

One day, we, the porters of Two Guys, the lowest of the low, had had enough of Ming's white glove treatment of the crappy linoleum floors, and figured- we have to shut this place down. We took all the rubbish, display cases, boxes — anything we could find- and packed it into the trash compactor room. A clothing rack was quickly heaved into the compactor, and in moments, the compactor's motor burned itself out. Then the trash REALLY started piling up. The next day, we anonymously called the health and fire departments for numerous violations. Yes, it was a stinking mess. Yes, they should have been fined and closed until it was fixed. Yes, we needed a day off. But Ming met the inspectors at the door with a case of booze for each of them. They never set foot on my polished linoleum. The reports of Two Guys's crimes against man and nature were never made, and the store opened as usual. Ming had us compacting trash by the afternoon.

This kind of open warfare between workers and management (actually, the sides were unevenly divided into: Everybody versus MING. Even the department managers hated him, and would regularly work to sabotage him.) was a regular feature of the workday. As a porter, I had free range to the entire store. Regular retail employees were required to stay in their departments, so, I would cruise through the store and see who needed any assistance in keeping their areas orderly. Paint and Lumber needs a break? Oh Gee. It seems someone spilled FIVE GALLONS OF TURPENTINE. Eeek! The fumes were nasty! Oh

well, looks like "We're going to have to rope off Paint and Lumber for the afternoon. For the safety of our customers, of course."

Four boxes of laundry detergent spilled in aisle 6 of Grocery? I wonder how that happened... Hmmm- let's send in the new kid with a wet mop. Ankle deep suds for hours- guaranteed - right in the middle of Grocery. Beautiful.

It was a bad job, in a bad place with an evil boss. One day, I finally had to quit - Ming the Merciless crossed the line.

I can deal with unfair, unreasonable, and unjust working conditions. There's a recourse to that- a social karmic order that works against such things. Rebellion against evil institutions has a long and glorious history in the annals of human affairs. From Spartacus to Seattle, people have fought hard for their rights in the face of implacable odds. What REALLY grinds me is when it gets petty, and there's nothing I can do about it. I hate that. Sometimes, you want to shake things up, and make the world a better place, and then sometimes, you're just the wrong person at the wrong time, and all you can do is get out of the way. And that's what I had to do.

One of our team was a fellow named John. John was of diminished intellectual capacity and epileptic. He was very nice, if very shy and quiet. Because of his epilepsy he was Always On Drugs and moved very slowly, if deliberately. Always polite, he did what he did well, and without complaint. John cleaned toilets. His job was to go to each of the toilet stalls in the building and scrub, mop, and sweep them clean. At the time I knew him, he was 30 years old, and had been doing this for 12 years.

One night, John had a number of severe fits. His mother called work, and said he'd be late, and moving a bit slower than usual, as he'd be arriving heavily medicated. He came in physically exhausted and mentally orbiting the Andromeda Galaxy around 10 AM, two hours late, and moving at a pace best described as glacial. By the time noon came around he had cleaned exactly one toilet stall in one of the Ladies' Rooms. Ming was furious. He saw me- "HENRY — WHERE THE HELL IS JOHN?"

"Ummm- doing the toilets I figure, like every day."

"Come with me. We have to find him."

So we wander across the store and find John bent over a toilet, slowly massaging it with a large soapy sponge. Ming exploded.

"JOHN!!! YOU STUPID GOD DAMNED RETARD! YOU IDIOT! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU WORTHLESS IDIOTIC LOSER? CAN'T YOU EVEN CLEAN A DAMN TOILET? YOU PATHETIC MORON!"

He continued in that vein, rapid fire, only louder, and with increasing vehemence and crude invective. John (ever so slowly) stood up. Ming went up to him, and with his nose just inches from John's face continued his indecent tirade like he was a fat aging Marine Drill sergeant giving a slow witted new recruit from Outer Space a taste of Military Discipline. Ming's face flushed in crimson anger, his fat

jowls quivered with rage, and his glasses slid to the end of his nose as his eyebrows arched over his cold, gray, vicious, hate filled eyes. For added drama and effect, Ming pounded the wall of the toilet stall with his fist as he screamed at John, accenting each moment of anger with a dull thump of his reptilian flesh against the steel. I was totally paralysed and, at the same time, oddly fascinated by this scene of poor manners and unspeakable cruelty. I wanted Ming to stop abusing John, but I was amazed at seeing this fat old near sighted comb-over jackass get all apoplectic. I couldn't say anything or even move, I was so blown away by it all. Finally, exhausted from his high decibel monologue, Ming grabbed the mop, threw it to me and said "HENRY - YOU DO THE REST!" and stomped back to his office.

John started to weep. He whimpered, "Ming's gonna fire me. Ming's gonna fire me." He put his head in his arms against the stall, and bawled like a little kid. I told him not to worry- Ming's not going to fire him. If Ming was going to fire him, he would have done it right then. I patted his shoulder- I didn't know what to say or do. I just told him not to worry- it would be OK. He looked at me with the saddest eyes I had ever seen- a small broken man, cruelly aware of his many limitations, thoroughly blasted out of his dysfunctional skull on pharmaceuticals, his red rimmed eyes filled with fear and grief and self loathing. He said "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." I said, "John- just go to the break room, and take it easy. You've had a bad day. I'll get the rest of the bathrooms. Go get some lunch or something." John said "Thanks, Henry" and shuffled down the hall back into the short-circuiting fog of his endless mental haze.

That night I went to a party, and (as usual at that time in my life) got completely stupid blind paralytically drunk. I woke up the next morning on someone's sofa. Looking at the clock on the table across the room, I thought about work. I thought about John. I thought about Ming. I didn't want to go back. I knew that if I had to face another eight hours of Ming again, it would not be pretty. I could do that- go there, make a scene, and get fired- or I could walk away, and leave a big stink. I called the store.

"Yeah- this is Henry- is Ming there? Yup I can wait."

I considered my options- I could go to work, and provide Ming with a new sphincter. I'd get fired, and knowing Ming, maybe worse. My folks would be REALLY MAD. If I quit and tell them about John, they'd be more sympathetic. Or, I could go back, and continue collecting their insulting little paycheck and continue my subversions, or I could just quit, and be done with that hellhole. Ming shouted over the phone.

"HENRY — WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU???"

"Cranford."

"What are you doing THERE?"

"Obviously, I'm talking to you on the phone. I'm going to be later than I expected."

"IF you're not here by NOON- YOU'RE FIRED."

"Man- you can KISS MY ASS you evil SCUMBAG!"

"WHAT?!?!?"

"You heard me- MING!!! Mind if I quote you - YOU STUPID GOD DAMNED RETARD! WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU, YOU WORTHLESS IDIOTIC LOSER? YOU PATHETIC MORON! YOU SUCK! YOU DOUCHE BAG! YOUR JOB SUCKS, YOUR STORE SUCKS! AND I QUIT!!! SO FUUUU.."

(click)

"DAMN!"

Ming hung up on me.

The Rat Bastard didn't have the guts to argue, and just hung up on me. He could dish out the abuse, but he couldn't take it. I despised him for what he said to John. As I said earlier, we learn a lot from the difficult. Sometimes you have to fight back, and sometimes the best thing you can do is get out of the way. It's never simple, it's never easy. And that's the curse of the Day Job. You're only there for the money, so you're really just visiting — this isn't your "real" life - and usually, you don't really care about the work itself, and sometimes you don't even care about the people you work with very much. But sometimes, you really do care. It's like being a tourist in hell.