

## Spark #1.03 The Band House

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Everyone needs a place to create — for me, it's a corner of a room in my basement where I make my electronic noises and a part of my garage (that isn't filled with laundry appliances) where I make my paintings. Being in a band, however, requires much more space, and if that band features a trap kit—you're Really Screwed for Space. You had better like where your drummer lives, because, in all likelihood, that's where you're going to be rehearsing. Forever. If you live in a city, you customarily end up renting a rehearsal space from some evil landlord who will gladly rent you a tiny space in a leaky warehouse located in some scary superfund industrial part of town for a price that is only marginally less than extortionate. Or, you end up in someone's garage that has been soundproofed to prevent the psychopaths/boring dweeby boneheads who live next door from going completely ballistic and come calling with an axe or to the local constabulary every five minutes.

The alternative is to find a quiet place out in the sticks so far from everyone and everything that you can make as much noise as you want and the only way anyone knows you're there is from the evidence collected by the county seismographic station. There is one big problem with this scenario—such bucolia is often so remote, that the band has to live there to really take advantage of the space the house provides. And this creates that bizarre socio-architectural entity, "The Band House". You or a loved one may have lived there at some point or may be living there now.

The Band House, usually based with lofty intentions, often degrades into a surrealistic scene of drug abuse, sexual scandal, wild parties, and a kind of dysfunctional behavior that one normally experiences in the first few years of college—when one has all the freedom of adulthood with few of the constraints of mortgages, careers, and children that usually constitute a few of the more salient features of one's parents lifestyle, which is often the very lifestyle one is in the Band House to avoid.

I've been to many band houses, and they are oddly similar. The living room is cluttered to the ceiling with music equipment—amplifiers stacked on amplifiers teetering over the drum kit, next to the PA system that's leaning precariously against the keyboards. A multitude of wires snake across the floor. Guitar cases are stacked up in one corner, while the guitars and basses sit on stands, like shining delicate sexy beacons so very oddly out of place in the filth and disarray that surrounds them, all the time silently crying out for attention, to be stroked, hugged (or to be wildly beaten into submission) or to be gently cradled for hours of creative practice and song writing.

The rest of the house is usually also very predictable: the kitchens are usually filled with appliances almost as old as the band members — floors covered with cheap cracking linoleum or ancient smelly carpets — cabinets filled with chipped plates and cups that had previously been silently moldered on a thrift store shelf — a cheap table that smells of spilt beer, sporting welts from cigarettes left to burn it edges, and enough drug materials in its cracks to send the residents to prison for decades.

The band members all have bedrooms, all of them frequently occupied by the band mate's lover du jour. The bathrooms are universally vile. I'm sure you remember such houses. I know I do, and one Band House stands out in my memory like a smelly beacon of rapturous depravity.

For this story, the band's name is inconsequential- they never put out a record and had the surrealistically bad taste of playing progressive rock in the late seventies/early eighties, when such music was at its nadir. Furthermore, this band rarely composed their own music- they played covers. Genesis, King Crimson, Yes, Pink Floyd- the canonical list of ProgRock greats — they played them all, and they played very well. For a short while, prior to the band getting a house together, I was actually in the band- I played bass guitar. Fortunately for them and the world of music, they soon found a better bass player, i.e., someone who could actually meander through the asymmetries of music by Gentle Giant, and I was cheerfully relegated to the mixing, lights, and slide projection for a time. After a while, I turned those duties over to a friend, and simply became a frequent visitor to the scene of the train-wreck-in-slow-motion known as the Band House.

The Band House was a small boxy ranch home with a full basement, and a largish back yard. The roof was in good condition, but the windows were old - many were painted shut, and the ruined back porch was a lawsuit waiting to happen. A stern, creepy, and irritating old weasel, Mr Morgan, who fancied himself a devout Christian, owned the place.

This Band House was like all the others I'd ever known- shattered kitchen, vile bathroom, living room filled to the gunnels with gear, and bedrooms filled with heaps of clothes and somebody else's underwear. Even so, this one was pretty special- even among Band Houses, which are by their very nature "special" places.

For one thing, it was the perfect band house, especially in terms of noise capacity. You see- this house was located in the middle of a gigantic industrial park- it was the only house, literally, for several miles. The "neighbors" were an interstate highway, and two huge office buildings with acres of parking around them.

The office buildings were key- they provided unlimited parking for parties, and free garbage disposal. And best of all, since they emptied out at 5.30pm every day, the band could make as much racket as it wanted any evening and all weekend long.

The band was charged with keeping the place clean- this meant no garbage in the street, and to cut the grass in the back yard. This was fine, except for one problem- being brilliant masters of sloth, the band mates never moved a certain lawn chair, and left it abandoned to slowly rust in the middle of the back yard. Soon, grass grew through and around it to several feet in height. The band ignored it, and cut the grass in a triangle around the chair, being far too lazy to move the damn chair.

For a while the refrigerator didn't work. At all. This was a problem in the summer, when it died, but not in the winter- they stacked their food on the stairs going up to the attic. For things that just needed to be cool, like beer, milk, wine, and beer, and juice, and beer, and cheese, and beer, the lower stairs worked

well. Things that had to stay frozen, like TV dinners and ice cream, were left on the top stairs near the attic.

And the parties- Christ on a bike- the parties!!! One of the things that makes a place special are the special times spent there, and there were many "special" times there. Probably too many. One Halloween party was exceptionally bizarre. How Truly Weird it was- I don't know- I was so finely lubricated with alcoholic beverages, I don't remember much of it ... except there was this cute girl named Lindsay in a cat suit that I wanted to \*get to know better\* but never did because I was so utterly hammered. Oh well. A few days later my friends told me that the party was definitely wilder than many of the previous debauches sponsored by the Band House. Something about people doing mescaline and spray painting the shadows on the basement walls, some girl getting kinky with duct tape, and some moron eating all the pot brownies and spending the night cowering in the corner and whimpering about the bats — whatever — I was too busy fumbling around trying to put a sentence together for Lindsay to notice any of that. But that party's another story altogether.

I do remember another party — well, not so much the party, really — once again, I had over indulged and most of that evening is a fuzzy patch of gin flavored haze in my memory — but the morning after was a real scene.

I remember waking up on the floor. The house was filled with an awful racket — it sounded like the back of the house was being destroyed by some axe-wielding psychopath. I opened one of my eyes and I could see through the kitchen to the back of the house, where, indeed, some bearded nutjob was hacking away at the back porch. Wonderful.

I heard James, the guitarist, yell from his room, "What the HELL is going on???"

I heard him stumble out of bed. I wanted to get up off the floor, but I had a skull buster of a headache, and the thick avocado colored shag carpet that stank of spilt beer and cigarette butts felt oddly comfortable, if not cozy, at that moment. James came out of his room and went into the kitchen, wearing only his Y front Fruit of the Looms, a three-day stubble, and his glasses. He grabbed a half empty bottle of room temperature Michelob off the kitchen table, took a swig, and opened the back door.

The chopping stopped.

Mr Morgan looked up at James.

James said, "Mr Morgan, like, just what the HELL are you doing to our house?"

"Well, Jim"

"JAMES!"

"Uh, James- I'm taking the porch off, like I said I would a few months ago."

They looked at each other for a second. James drank more beer.

Mr Morgan inquired, "Didn't I ask you kids to keep this place clean?"

"Yeah- and? I don't see any trash!"

"Right- well, I asked you to cut the grass, too!"

"And we do- every two weeks!"

Motioning to the overgrown lawn chair, Mr Morgan asked, "Well? What ABOUT THAT???"

Not dropping a beat, James took another swig from the beer, and with half a belch asked, "Well, gee, Mr Morgan- you've got a beard, right?"

"Yeah, but what's that got to do with that mess in the middle of the back yard?"

James waggled the beer bottle at Morgan and then at the chair, "Well- that's, ya know, like, the Lawn's Beard."

After a few seconds of staring at each other, Mr Morgan realized he was arguing about "the lawn's beard" at 8 o'clock on a Saturday morning, with a longhaired freaky musician kid who was barely dressed in smelly Y fronts.

Morgan just grumbled something like "I'll be back later" and left, leaving the porch a hacked up shamble of planks and mosquito screens. James went back to bed. I passed out in a heap on the avocado shag carpet. Sometime that afternoon, we all got up, and with furrowed hungover brows, made some coffee, and considered the splintered porch in mumbled tones of dissatisfaction.

There were many other times like that at the Band House. Those were the times that made the Band House special and truly unique. It didn't matter if the band never played out. It didn't matter if they were playing music that was completely out of fashion, if not a direct target of active disdain by the fashion police of the music industry. All that mattered was this: three times a week, several very fine musicians and their friends got together for the music they enjoyed, in a special house just for them, and once in a while - it all seemed right. Of course, there were plenty of horrible stories of slovenly behavior, political intrigue and infighting, arguments, drunken brawls, and Lovers Du Jour spending two hours in the bathroom- all those stories are found in most histories of group living situations. But how many Band Houses had a Beard? Every Band House should have a Beard.