

Spark #1.07 - The Bad Gig

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Last week I touched on a blast from the past- how an old college friend inspired me. And the week before that was a column about a concert I saw way back in my misspent high school career, and how a certain famous band had a Very Bad Day. Well, this column mines some of the same material, only this time, from the perspective of the performing end.

We've all had bad gigs. The secret is how you can turn something horrible into something worthwhile. The super secret secret is that usually, you can't. Ask SNAFU about that. And the super duper ultra secret secret is that in the greater scheme of things it doesn't really matter, so you might as well look on whatever tragic disaster befalls you with some positive light — from this sense, all experiences are operatively equal, so it's a matter of how you deal with them when they happen, and how you look at them in hindsight.

I've had some bad gigs. Oh Boy Have I Had Some Bad Gigs. Over the course of time I'll recount some of them, but today I'd like to talk about small rewards and justice.

The first Bad Gig was in high school. The band I was in was booked to play at a YWHA (Young Women's Hebrew Association) dance. They were expecting Disco, they were hoping for Motown; we gave them "21st Century Schizoid Man". I was playing bass guitar — I had a copy of a Gibson EB3 and played through a borrowed amplifier. We Were Terrible. Our song list, such as it was, consisted mostly of Pink Floyd, ELP, and King Crimson covers. We were uncertain as to what the expectations of the audience might be, so we went for some drama and opened with "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun" by Pink Floyd.

We cleared the dance floor, instantly.

The kids all stood around the periphery of the hall, nervously crossing their arms, sometimes putting their fingers in their ears, and always glowering at us. The people who were running the dance came to us on our break, pleading that we play something (anything, PLEASE!) that was remotely accessible and top 40. We played "Tomorrow Never Knows" by the Beatles. If looks could kill... I remember there was a girl from my English class there — when I first met her that semester, we talked often. After this gig, we didn't talk much.

The shining light- the one thing that made this all completely worthwhile, were these three sophomore girls who were totally captivated with us. They were lying on their stomachs, on the floor in front of us in the hall. After we played "Lark's Tongues in Aspic, pt 2" by King Crimson, we asked them why they were so interested in us- after all, (literally) everyone else seemed to despise us as they all glowered in our general direction from the back of the hall. One of them said that her dad had electronic music records — stuff like Switched On Bach, and some creepy old French Musique Concrete type stuff,

Tangerine Dream, and Tomita. She was used to listening to the unlistenable, and thought we were the bee's knees. The other girls were her friends, and they would come to her house when her folks weren't around and they would all raid her dad's weird record collection. Ahhhh- fans.

If I had been old enough to drive, I'd have said "Can I Give You A Lift Home, Sweetie?" Like adolescent angels in tube tops, they were the single shining saving grace, the simple little rewards, of that warped alien scene. But, no, I was too young to drive, and all I did was say goodnight, pack my junk and get a lift home with the guitar player and his horrible Stadel Amplifier, and wake up hours later in the middle of the night, thinking of what coulda shoulda been, and how I didn't even have the brains to get a phone number, but at least I had someone who believed in what I was doing for a few hours. That made this train wreck of a gig worthwhile.

A few years later, after the band had transformed itself several times, (I elected to do the mixing, lights, and slide projections) we found ourselves at one of the revered High School Musical Nightmares — a Battle of the Bands in suburban New Jersey. It was to take place in the gymnasium (of course) at some High School (of course) and there were to be Three Bands (of course) who would compete mightily for the accolades, notoriety, and eminent satisfaction for this one Great Victory in a grand and most august and noble Battle of the Bands. Shyeah- right...

The first band was energetic, if terrible. The singer was a snotty jackass -spunky, but devoid of higher brain function. He treated me very rudely. Now, had they tried to be the Sex Pistols instead of Led Zeppelin, they'd have put on a much better show, but they didn't and, they didn't. They finished their set with the song "Cat Scratch Fever", and mercifully left the stage. The second band came on. They were a few years older than either the first band or us, and they thought themselves to be something like a young tough Steely Dan or something equally ludicrous. They were tight, if utterly boring. They also played "Cat Scratch Fever". Then we came on.

We played much of Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon (tape effects and everything!), something by Renaissance, a few tunes by Genesis and King Crimson, some Beatles (we actually did I Am The Walrus with the tape effects!) and we were done. A few minutes after we finished the judges rendered their decision. Band #1 came in first, we came in second, and the Steely Danicians came in third. One of the judges told us that we'd have won had we played "Cat Scratch Fever".

Christ on a bike.

We schlep a few tons of gear to a crappy Battle of the Bands at some dinky high school in the hinterlands of New Jersey, and place second, just, MERELY JUST, because we didn't play "Cat Scratch Fever". Nobody said anything about this being the "Cat Scratch Fever Contest". Ack.

Several months later I was in a devastating car accident. Anything I didn't break, I had pretty well shaken loose, and I found myself peacefully ensconced in a big comfy bed with a TV set and a steady IV drip of Demerol going 24/7. On or about the third or fourth day - my mental state was pretty well fogged in - a young man was brought in to the bed next to me. His face, while puffy, seemed familiar.

He told me that he had gotten into a fight with the manager of a local roller rink - some altercation over a girl, of course. He soon found himself airborne and feebly attempting to occupy the same space at the same time with a large window. Needless to say, the window gave way and he was cut into bloody little ribbons. Once he landed/bounced about on terra firma, the manager and his henchmen basically pounded the living daylights out of him. The bleeding puffy result of this altercation was telling me this fascinating story of merry prank and misadventure when I finally wedged a word in edgewise and asked him, "Are you in a band?"

"Yeah- we do lots of metal and stuff like Zeppelin."

"Mmmm. That's a mix... I think I played at a Battle of the Bands against you."

"Really? Which band?"

"We did all the progressive stuff. I did the slides and tape effects and light show."

"Oh man- you guys shoulda played "Cat Scratch Fever" - you'd have won hands down. You guys like totally rocked!"

I didn't really answer him, or confront his hypocrisy — I remember his little victory dance on the stage at the Battle of the Bands, and calling us a bunch of dinosaur worshippers, the arrogant little snot.

Well, by the good grace and fine efforts of the three Fates — they found a way to pound this twitchy little dope into burger paste and cut him to bloody little pieces. And there we both were - in the hospital - broken, bleeding, bruised, and beaten, but -

I was the one with the Demerol Drip.

There is some justice in this world...