



Excerpt from TRIUMPH OF THE WON'T

by Tim Hall

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UNDIE  PRESS

Club It Up

1.

I got off the five-nineteen express and went across the street to Dingle's. Dingle's is one of those ten cent Buffalo wings, ladies drink Jell-O shots free all night suburban bars that advertised on local radio, with a gravel-voiced announcer shouting over the sound of a car engine revving. Classic rock cover bands, Monday night football on a projection screen. If I stayed on Long Island much longer I would kill myself. I knew several people who already had.

The bartender had just pushed an overpriced pint in front of me when someone slapped me on the back. I turned around. It was Ted Donner.

"Tim! Long time no see! I didn't know you were in town."

"I'm not. I'm just here a few more days. Then I'm moving to San Francisco."

“What’s out there for you?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

Ted laughed. “You haven’t changed. How’s the music business treating you?”

“I’m retired.”

“I thought you were working for a big jingle house.”

“I quit.”

“Are you kidding? People would kill for that job!”

“Don’t you think they knew that?”

“I heard you wrote a song for some big movie.”

“I did. I got screwed on that too.”

“Bummer. Can I join you?”

“Please.”

Ted sat down and ordered two beers. I had always liked Ted. I had known him since grade school. In high school we each had our own bands and used to jam with each other at parties and dances, and bring our acoustic guitars to late-night golf course grope fests. But Ted had always been serious about making it in music. Whenever his band played he would build a whole two-level stage out of plywood and milk crates, and rig a light show that he would control with his feet during the show. Ted had always been a hard rock guy: Outlaws, Zeppelin, Molly Hatchet. He still had the long, curly locks down past his shoulders, and wore cowboy boots and silk shirts.

I had never been very focused. I just sort of dicked around, doing one thing for a while then moving on to something else. Bands, jingles, soundtracks, whatever. No dedication. That’s what my last girlfriend had said, that I just couldn’t seem to finish anything I started. Right. I finished the beer and ordered two

more.

“You should see the place I’m at now. It’s a new record company out in Huntington. Lots of money behind it, great place. I’m the studio manager.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Want a job?”

“Are you serious?”

“Sure, we’re getting really busy and I’m short handed right now.”

“What would I have to do?”

“Not much at first. We have to finish the construction first. But eventually you’d be writing songs.”

“Let’s have another,” I said.

Ted told me about the place. It was called Monsieur Records, he said they wanted to be the next Motown. Monsieur had been founded a few years earlier by a millionaire named Izzy Klein, who Ted claimed was some kind of financial genius. They had started out doing rock, then jazz, and now they were focusing on pop and dance music. They wanted to hire songwriters to build a catalog of original material, which the company could then release. They wanted to develop their own sound, their own artists, everything.

Ted made everything sound magical, happening, exciting. I told myself I wasn’t really interested. The whole point for me was to get the hell *off* of Long Island. But the more Ted talked the better it sounded. He kept saying, “Just give it a shot, come out and see the place.” I agreed, and we had a round of Jell-O shots to celebrate.

The next day Ted drove me out to the studio. It was in an industrial park in Huntington, near the Railroad station. We pulled

up to an unassuming brick building with a small sign over the door: Monsieur Records.

We went inside. Ted hadn't exaggerated, the place was really nice. There was more construction to be done but there was already a lot of impressive equipment. They were sparing no expense to make the place first-class.

I spent the day hanging around, watching and talking, and before I knew it I was doing stuff. I helped set something up, fixed a computer glitch, carried a box down the hall. I went back the next day, and the day after that. Ted offered to pay me for my time, and I made it clear it was only temporary, that any day I was going to book my flight to California.

At the end of the week Ted handed me a paycheck, then took me to a strip club near the studio. A glassy-eyed dancer with bruises on her legs and a caesarean scar gyrated to ZZ Top in nothing but a pair of beige pumps. I'm not usually into shoes but something about those pumps really set me off, they were the most obscene things I had ever seen. Perverted. My last girlfriend had called me that, too. Maybe if she had had a pair of beige pumps I wouldn't have dumped her.

A pile of singles appeared before me. Ted balanced one of the bills on his nose.

"Like this, dude. Watch how she does it. No hands."

"Sweet Jesus."

One week turned to two, then three. Just one more week, I'd think. San Francisco would always be there, unless it fell into the ocean, and in that case what would it matter? Monsieur wasn't a bad place to be at all. Huntington was a nice town, green and peaceful, and the studios were always quiet and dark and air-conditioned. I would go in when I had a hangover and find a dark corner and nap for an hour or two and nobody would bother me.

After about a month Ted took me into his office and showed me a stack of papers on his desk. It was a big pile, at least a foot high.

“See these? These are letters, from people who have applied for your position. There are tons of qualified people dying to work here. I’m not trying to pressure you but I know you’re still talking about moving to California. If you want the job permanently you should make a decision fairly soon.”

I looked down at all those applications, hundreds of them, from people desperate to break into the music business. I had seen similar piles back at the jingle house. Julliard graduates begging for a chance to clean the toilets for free, just to get a foot in the door, so they could some day make big bucks writing music for potato chips and incontinence briefs. Everywhere, it seemed, people were begging for the kinds of jobs that I just fell into. I thought of all those better qualified, dedicated and hardworking souls. Fuck it. If they spent less time dicking with their clarinets and more time drinking in bars, maybe they would get better jobs.

“I’ll take it,” I said.

2.

With the money I had saved I bought an old Toyota truck to get myself around. Then I found a room in a rundown old house on a dead end street, not far from the studio. My plan was to drive as little as possible. I had heard a saying that you shouldn’t drink and drive because you might spill your drink. Back then I didn’t know it was a joke. I’d walk.

Ted and I went back to the strip club a few more times, but that scene got old quickly, as well as expensive. I drove around

after work, looking for a regular bar. It wasn't easy. Most of the places were sports bars, chain restaurants, or just noisy, overcrowded places filled with drunken college kids. I finally found my place, a dim little brick box not far from my room called The Rusty Nail. The name fit perfectly: it looked like the type of place that could give a guy tetanus just by walking into it.

There was a cast of characters who hung out at the Nail. My favorite was Ben, a 50-year old geek who wore thick glasses, read science fiction novels, and still lived at home with his mother. Another regular was Jerry, a sort of genteel ex-hippie type, who brought his guitar to the bar and would sing songs until late. He had a good voice and once in a while he would hand me the guitar and I'd do a few numbers. Then I noticed Jerry got free drinks for as long as he played, and I began bringing my guitar too. We did a lot of Neil Young, Rolling Stones, and Gram Parsons. Occasionally I'd bust out an old soul song, some Don Covay or James Carr number that would blow everybody's mind, and Jerry would pull out a harp and blow along with me.

I became a regular. Anna was the Irish bartender who ran the place. Anna liked to play Yahtzee, and wouldn't take no for an answer. I had never played before, but eventually I got into it too. The radio was always tuned to a rock station out of Connecticut, which for some reason gave the place a kind of worldly feel to me. I would leave the bar late and stumble back up route 110, past the cemetery where some of my ancestors were buried; past the mini-mall where I bought my 40-ounce beers; and then past the seedy old black man bar that I was too scared to go into. There was always some crazy scene going on in there—pimps screaming at their whores, whores screaming at their pimps, somebody running out chasing or being chased by a swinging handbag. I once saw a woman take off her shoe and hurl it at the back of some guy's

head, and he spilled across the sidewalk. I always crossed the street until I was far enough past the place to cross back over and get to my room.

In the morning I'd roll out of bed, wash myself in the bathroom across the hall and get into some clothes. Then it was just a matter of walking a little further down route 110, crossing the train station parking lot and walking the last few blocks through the poor section of town to the industrial park. I'd usually get to the studio around ten, and more often than not the first thing I'd do would be to lie in one of the dark and windowless rooms and sleep for another hour.

When the construction was done Ted assigned me to one of the new composing rooms. There was track lighting with dimmer knobs, a leather sectional in one corner, and plush red carpeting. It had all the latest keyboards, samplers, and computer gear. There was even a turntable, so I could play my old albums. I was now officially a composer. My first day I went into the room, closed the door, put on a Don Covay record, dimmed the lights, and went to sleep.

Ted woke me up. "Dude!"

"Is it time to go to the strip club?"

"Ha ha! No. Okay, I got something for you to do. How'd you like to start writing some songs?"

"Sure, anything!"

"Great. Here's what I need you to do. Come up with ten song titles and give them to me at the end of the day."

"Just the titles?"

"I'll explain later." Ted left.

Strange, I thought. Maybe it was a test, or some kind of psychological screening. I got a pad and pen and made up some song

titles. At the end of the day I handed him the sheet of paper and left for the night.

The next morning I was preparing for my nap when Ted came bursting in. And I mean, bursting. He was always throwing open doors, running, yelling, announcing his presence in the most obvious ways. It was annoying. He sat down and handed me something. It was my list of song titles.

“I need you to work on these,” he said.

“You don’t like them? You want better titles?”

“No, no,” he said, “the titles are fine. What I mean is, I need you to start working on the songs themselves, the music that goes with them.”

“I’m confused.”

“Don’t worry about it, just come up with some music for these songs. Can you do that for me?”

“Sure, but—”

“Thanks, man. You rock. That’s why I hired you, because I knew I could count on you. There’s just one thing. What do you want to call this project?”

“I don’t understand—”

“You will, you will. Just give me a project name!”

“Ummm, how about Big-Eyed Beans From Venus?”

“Fine, fine!” Ted scribbled on the clipboard.

“Wait! I’m joking!”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s perfect.” Ted wrote some more on the pad. “You are now producing the Big-Eyed Beans From Venus project.”

I tried to protest but Ted was already gone. I consulted my list of song titles. It was all so strange, I didn’t understand what the point was. More importantly, how was I going to come up with lyrics for a song called “Beige Pumps”?

June 2007

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