

Chapter 2

The Next Bit

“What happened last Tuesday?”

School rolled on. I tended to get on very well with most folk and was on speaking terms with pretty much everyone ranging from the school hard-men to the most mamby-pamby swots. Unfortunately this ability would regularly land me in the embarrassing situation of talking to both at once, and, as they didn't appear to see eye to eye with each other I was left to conclude that I would drop in the estimation of each for being friendly with the other!! How sad the paranoically self-obsessed thoughts of the adolescent mind.

I continued to work hard at my studies, or at least I continued to *believe* I was working hard at my studies. The truth is I was actually doing the bare minimum I could get away with - such as writing reports on novels I had never read, based on the testimony of a sympathetic friend, and revising for exams only the night before (starting at nine). However, in spite of the fact that I was lining up to sit eight O-Levels all in 'academic' subjects, this minimalist approach seemed to work - a fact which was confirmed by the string of A's I achieved.

But there is a principle at work in the universe of which I knew not, and it is the principle of reaping and sowing, or as a certain ancient

book (of which also I knew nothing¹) puts it, ‘he that soweth sparingly shall also reap sparingly’.

I went on to sit seven Higher Grades (overkill!) and reaped sparingly. It’s not that I didn’t pass, but much to my dismay I never got a single A. Mostly C’s. The problem really (apart from the guitar) was that I was sitting a load of stuff that I didn’t need. As it turned out, although I had always been committed to a scientific course, I was actually better at languages (and Art, which I stupidly dropped to do German). But since science held the answer to life, the universe and everything, it was necessary that I continue on that course.

Woe, woe and thrice woe...

As far as rock and roll was concerned, the world was fast becoming my oyster. The year would have been 1973. Much glitterous pulp filled the charts (in my very ‘eavy very ’umble opinion at the time, that is). My sister used to play end-on-end Donny Osmond and sing along with it to boot - rather well actually I would have to confess. I can still hear them both (her and Donny) clear as a bell, “*..and they called it...puppy lu...u-u-uv...doo,doo,doo,doo..*”

¹ The Bible, 2 Corinthians 9:6

What else was on the go? David Bowie/The Jean Genie, The Carpenters/Yesterday Once More, David Essex/Rock On, Elton John/Goodbye Yellow Brick Road, Lou Reed/Walk On The Wild Side.

Anyway, new music teachers came to the school, a husband and wife team - not in itself an event that was likely to affect the career of any budding rock star in 1973 you understand. Being into rock, me and my mates had no truck with the school's concept of *Music!* The only types who did Music at that time were classical types, and rock and classical very definitely did *not* mix. Deep Purple's keyboard player, Jon Lord tried it in 1970 at the Royal Albert Hall with the LSO and see what happened there - an LP of an *orchestra* with a steaming great Ritchie Blackmore solo in the middle of it which was what deluded me into buying it! They referred to it as a 'guitar cadenza' on the liner notes, which was probably a kind way of saying that Ritchie couldn't read music so they just let him loose for five minutes to play a solo. After all, posing in front of the mirror (which is what he did as a kid) whilst thrashing the living daylights out of six strings that you can neither play nor tune is probably not the most sensible way to go about learning the five lines.

Since those days many better educated guitarists - especially in the 80's - have waffled on at great length about being influenced by Bach and Paganini, but frankly I don't buy it. Michael Kamen did some nice things at the Albert Hall in the 90's with Eric Clapton mind you,

but I have reason to believe he had to show old Slowhand where to put his fingers!

Having said all this Jon Lord's recent Durham Concerto is nothing short of a joy to the ear, so I take it all back!!

Anyway, I digress. The very forward-thinking new music teacher husband let it be known throughout the school that he was keen for the formation of a 'school group'. As we were obviously incapable of organising one ourselves, he was talking our language. And so along we dutifully trooped and put our names down - all the guys that strummed a guitar.

Can you spot the flaw in the system?

Correct. Guitarists. No singers, no drummers and no keyboard players¹. But the good thing was that at dinner-times we got to hang out in the Music room which, being four floors up, had rather a nice view of both the countryside and the passing talent...

Sorry, did I say no drummers? Not *strictly* true.

There was Pod.

To everyone's horror, Pod went and put his name down.

¹ The latter being too busy doing classical whilst waiting for Bob Moog to invent a synthesizer that could fit into one room.

And why was this such a problem? Well, more serious than the fact that Pod didn't own drums, or had never actually tried playing them, Pod wasn't *one of us!* Pod was in fact one of the more notorious hard-men in the school and if Pod said he was the drummer, I knew of no-one who was going to argue, although the fact that he didn't have drums was obviously in our favour.

But not for long.

He turned up at school about two weeks before the Christmas break with a complete drum kit - an ill-matched glittery conglomeration, but drums nonetheless.

Checkmate. And ten out of ten to Pod for commitment. He was taking no stick from us *prefects!*

Cozy Powell's 'Dance with the Devil' was riding high in the charts at the time - arguably the biggest drumming hit of all time - and Pod set out to master it. For this he didn't actually require a band, which was just as well because we were all far too busy with the petty internal politics of the music business to contribute in any practical way to Drumfest 73. The teacher did show up I think once, and attempted to show Pod how to play All Right Now, but he soon realised he was wasting his time and disappeared again. For Pod, playing the drums was all about clatters-per-second, and he had a word for the idea of maintaining (or learning to maintain) a steady beat... *bo-ring*. Cozy Powell rules! (or was it the devil?)

And so came Christmas. God himself had been born into the world and all we could think about was velvet jackets and Henry Cooper “splashin’ it all over.”¹

On our return to school, we were completely stunned... *Pod could play the drums!* He had experienced a bit of a revelation over the Christmas holidays which he expressed roughly as follows,

“Flashin’ about’s nae ees - playin’ beats is fit it’s a’ about!”

And so the band had a drummer - but did the drummer have a band?

The problem of excess personnel still had to be addressed. A secret meeting was convened and Pod was duly despatched to break the news. Nobody argued. “You’re oot the band” was all he had to say.

Do I feel bad about this now? Of course I do, but this is regrettably how things tend to be done in bands - Black Sabbath fired Ozzy Osbourne in the same way (funnily enough they sent their drummer too, Bill Ward was consigned to execute the dirty deed). Deep Purple, Yes, Pink Floyd and even The Beatles could all testify to giving someone the sneaky boot, never mind the hundreds of thousands we never hear about. Sadly it is the way of the world. Music, ambition,

¹ Not getting Brut 33 for Christmas was considered evidence of social ostracisation.

ego, money - *everything is more important than people*. If there did exist a more gracious way to fire band members, at the age of sixteen I certainly wasn't interested in it.

What I *was* interested in was...

The Occult.

It all began with ghost stories. That and the exciting scary feeling I got as a seven year old when occasionally allowed to stay up extremely late and watch *The Outer Limits* in black and white (which made it even more scary). Then there was Halloween and that same tingly sensation. It's true that I knew as much about Halloween as I did about the Bible¹, but the thought of the possible existence of another dimension - an invisible world as real as the one we live in - really excited me. Of course, this is all somewhat at odds with the orthodox scientific worldview, but in spite of my (as yet fairly brief) lifelong commitment to science, I was not prejudiced as such - merely passionate! Whatever I believed, I *believed*, and that was that.

But then... at the age of about fourteen I had a very bad experience using the ouija board. *Nothing happened*.

I was completely fascinated by the spiritual realm and desperate to experience something that would prove to me that it was real. Yet, in

¹ Zilch.

spite of all the horror stories told by others (none of whom I had ever met), it seemed that whenever I put my hand to the glass the spirits had more important things to do. Frustrating! How long could I go on convincing myself that a spirit world existed without *proof*?

We stayed across the road from the Public Library (in spite of which my books were invariably late, but in the days before computers the nice old ladies used to let me off) and I fed my appetite for the weird and wonderful from there. I preferred true stories to fiction. I suppose it was because my interest was more investigative than thrill-seeking. How I envied the people I read about who appeared to have experienced real encounters with the supernatural. This appeared to be denied me.

In desperation I took out a book which was no less than an introduction to Cabalistic Magic¹ - a sort of *Teach-Yourself-Satanism!* What little old Macduff Library was doing with such a book I'll never know, but in any case I set out to become an 'adept'. I was a bit befuddled by all the ancient Hebrew terms and couldn't see the point of pretty much any of it. However, there I was in my bedroom across from the library, in the dead of night, marking out circles and attempting to perform a ritual known as the Cabalistic Cross, which basically involves a lot of standing, pointing and incanting. Predictably,

¹ Now made famous by Madonna.

the spirits appeared to be on holiday and as usual nothing of note (or not of note) happened.

That is, as far as I could see nothing happened, but as with most things to do with the Occult¹, the consequences of my actions (as I would later discover) were unseen. I was beginning to attract attention and the spirits were not ignorant of my devices - they were just giving me enough rope.

School-wise I made the mistake of staying on for sixth year. I deliberately sat all my exams in fifth year so I could lounge around for a year before going on to University in Aberdeen. As my place there was already secured I allowed myself to sit back academically. A couple of Sixth Year Studies certificates in Maths and Physics were attempted but as I knew they didn't count for anything I made no effort whatsoever. My week was spent between fifteen (out of thirty) periods of O-Level Art, lollygagging around the Prefects' Room, and (my favourite) sitting in the Physics Department cupboard.

I have very fond memories of that cupboard. I suppose it was the first time in thirteen years of school life that I had experienced privacy - and that elusive sense of individuality I hankered after all my schooldays. The purpose of my being in that cupboard (more of a storeroom really, with a window) was to perform a series of practical physics experiments with a toy car running down a track and a load of

¹ Meaning 'hidden'.

ticker-tape. However, the teacher (who couldn't have been less interested in what I was doing if he had retired ten years earlier) had made the prime error of handing me a folder containing the entire project on which I was engaged, as completed very well by a wonderfully conscientious student several years earlier. Presumably the teacher's idea was for me to use it as a reference, but, as I said earlier I wasn't really into working in sixth year, and very few cars rolled down that slope. My completed project bore rather more than a passing resemblance to the said folder!

However, as the Bible says, 'Your sins will find you out'. And as I came dashing up the road typically late for school the first day back after the Easter break I met one of my co-physics students¹ who immediately asked me in that loaded tone of voice so beloved of the young (a blend of heartfelt concern and glee) "Where were you last Tuesday?"

"*Last Tuesday?* What happened last Tuesday?"

"The Physics interview - you missed it."

Now there's commitment for you. I had *completely* forgotten the interview that was to take place during the break with an examiner who had driven all the way through from Aberdeen to grill me on my ground-breaking *Hotwheels* experiment.

¹ I believe that student was Mr Angus, now a Physics teacher at Banff Academy!!! [And a very good and encouraging one, according to my kids.]

I recount this episode simply to show the extent to which my heart was slipping away from my childhood romance with science.

You see, when I was a child, I believed that the further into science one got, the more of a complete picture would build up of the meaning of all things. The spirit of the age had raised me to expect this - the heady materialistic and upward-march-of-progress worldview that was our Enlightenment inheritance, passed down to us by 18th Century philosophers via 19th Century scientists, scornful of all things unseen (just think Dawkins), and so utterly dominant in the 1950's and 60's. But the truth was beginning to seem very different...

It appears that the deeper one goes into science and further education, the more one has to *specialise* - which basically means chopping up the universe into tinier and tinier bits! That was *not* why I had come. I was becoming disillusioned with science as my childish idealism began to dry out, crack, and fall away.

But it was too late. University loomed...

It was but a summer away and I had lost my enthusiasm (*that can't be the right word*) for Mathematics and Physics. In spite of this I was still quite interested in becoming an Astronomer (*not an Astrologer!*) but - to crown it all - the Aberdeen University Careers Guidance person guided me into the wrong physics course. Although I

remained blissfully unaware of it for the first six months, I was actually in Engineering. *Engineering!!!???*

It was the final straw...