

Chapter 3

The Bit After That

“Look guys, ye dinna have to play the Bay City Rollers...”

The band’s name was Rat Salad, a name nicked from the aforementioned Black Sabbath - off the album *Paranoid*, a particular favourite of ours. Line-up: Eric Paterson, vocals ; Malcolm Johnston, drums ; Ian Lyall, bass ; Billy Brown, guitar. ¹

We were into heavy rock, it has to be said. Sadly at the time no-one else was, or at least relatively few. We invited the local agent, Gordon (Gogs) Wilson, who basically ran all the dances at that time to come and audition us. He took us on as one of his bands with the words, “Now look, I’m the boy around here, and if I hear of you taking on work but not through me, you’re out!” Such awesome power conferred upon one man! (He’s actually quite a nice guy these days and I get on very well with him now - till he reads this!)

The problem with Rat Salad was very simple: we were attempting to play early 70s rock in the early 70s.

¹ For a bit of innocent nostalgic fun, check www.ratsalad.co.uk

I mean, you can get off with it now as long as you don't get too obscure in your choice of material and people are enabled to gyrate¹, but at that time the only thing local audiences wanted to hear was stuff from the charts...

Slade, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Rubettes? Great.

Cream, Led Zeppelin, Alex Harvey, Groundhogs... *No!!!!*

And so it was that our poor long-suffering agent tried to steer us in a more 'commercial' direction.

He was actually trying to help us, but we couldn't see it at the time. Unfortunately the young know everything, and we were no exception. As he did his rounds on a Saturday night, keeping a watchful eye on his expanding media empire (Foggie, Macduff, Rothie...), the cry would go up from our illustrious roadies in the middle of a gig (if they weren't sleeping), "*Gogs is here!*" - and I would immediately switch off my fuzz box as the band launched into the second-weediest ever rendition of 'Shang-A-Lang' by the Bay City Rollers. Gogs would sigh a gentle yet exasperated sigh and say to us, "Look guys, ye dinna have to play the Bay City Rollers - maybe just the Eagles or something."

But we had far too much musical integrity to listen to Gogs.

¹ In fact, since the advent of 'classic rock', you can even be a legend in your own lunchtime!

Finally achieving my lifelong ambition of going to Aberdeen University in September 1975 proved to be the biggest anticlimax of my life. Most of the students got rooms in the Halls of Residence. I got to stay with my dad's Auntie Betty in Dyce¹ on the outskirts of Aberdeen - approximately five miles from all the action. I mean, let's face it, there *is* such a thing as the student lifestyle, and - aside from the lectures - I was very definitely *not* living it.

But what did that matter - I was there to get a degree wasn't I?

I suppose I should be thankful really. My folks had become fairly successful in business over the preceding few years and we had a colour TV. However as a direct result of this flushedness I got the minimum grant of £50 per annum² and my folks were expected to pay my way. This meant of course that the uni was not bound to do me any favours (such as letting me into the halls - sods!)

But I did have a car. Not many students had cars it has to be said, but I needed one to commute from Dyce! It was a Singer Chamois - the Rolls Royce version of the Hillman Imp.

Let's just imagine for a moment what Clarkson might have to say about it:

"The designers at Singer were of course more accustomed to designing sewing machines - the car idea was probably just someone's

¹ Dyce... famous for its Asda.

² £50 more than they get now!

idea of a tea-break joke. It had absolutely nothing under the bonnet, because the engine - all eight hundred and fifty easy-overheating, lightweight aluminium cc's of it - was in the boot! Yup, my little white friend, it's the trebuchet for you..."

I once had a city centre accident and the featherweight front of my car reared up like a stallion and literally bounced out of control across to the other side of the road. A once in a lifetime experience, I hope.

Unfortunately, this enviable trapping of wealth only served to further alienate me from the poor, struggling, self-made, working class geniuses with whom I had gone to Aberdeen. The other effect it had was to put me in my parents' debt - not financially but morally.

This pressure proved most unhealthy to our relationship. It introduced an element of deception. Deception because I couldn't bear to tell them the truth about my progress - or lack of it - because it was all costing them a fortune! My progressively poor performance and lack of effort at uni left me with an increasing load of guilt that from then on I had to carry.

It was around this time at university in late 75 that I first encountered drugs, through a friendship I had struck up with a guy who

lived near my auntie's house. He was a brickie [*a bricklayer*] and he owned a Les Paul [*a guitar*].¹

Drugs were nowhere near as widespread then as they are now. We were but a swallow's flight from the 1960s and the idea of trying drugs was still surrounded by a tremendous aura of glamour and mystique. I still remember that very first spliff². As I drove (*yes - drove*) back to my auntie's that night, the car seat had never felt so *comfortable!*

You see, that's the problem with drugs. As with alcohol, the effects in their milder form are extremely pleasant. It takes a lot of self-discipline and informed logic for a young person to avoid them simply on the basis that they are *bad for you*. They certainly don't seem to be. But of course, they are. But I didn't have much in the way of information on the subject - back then nobody had. I knew that Hendrix had died, that was about it. The rest was speculation, combined with advice from adults whom one knew had no more experience or knowledge of marijuana etc. than oneself.

Curiosity killed the cat, as I purred my way home on that fateful night.

¹ What is it about music and drugs?

² Joint - an outsized roll-up containing a generous sprinkling of dry tobacco and cannabis resin.

I would say without reservation that my early years were marked by a fair degree of foolishness, a sort of *unwisdom*, a willingness to always be the one to try things out, to take things to excess.

It wasn't that I was the one in the crowd who would always ring the doorbell, or jump off the ten foot wall. I didn't need a crowd. I suppose it was exploratory, combined with a basic lack of faith in the validity of any guiding moral principles. For me, although I had always believed in trying to be *nice* to people, moral restraint was a thing strongly associated with the past - something outmoded, hollow, restrictive and inhibiting, totally negative and synonymous with all the settling dust of man's (pre-scientific) ignorance throughout history, with all the irrelevance that that implied. *Progress* again - the *P* word.

If all this sounds a bit unfair to my folks, not so. They brought me up well. My father certainly did everything he could for me that he believed was best - he hadn't even complained as over the years I blew up both his amps, and in 1975 he even bought me my first Gibson¹. Unfortunately - as he would now be the first to admit - he was totally

¹ Another guitar. A '73 Gibson SG Standard, cherry red, fixed tail, to be precise. I've had four SG's in my time and that one really had a fabulous SG sound, ala Zal Cleminson/Angus Young. The dog knocked it over in '78 and the guitar neck broke at the headstock, as they do. Lyall fixed it, very well in fact, but I sold it the following year to a guy who sold it to Gerry Jablonski (the well-known former-BA bluesman) who resprayed it yellow! Oh Gerry...

materialistic, and a hardened atheist with the habit of slotting the middle initial ‘H’ *American-style* into the name of Jesus Christ!

My mother, however, had come a different road.

She had been raised in the ‘English Kirk’, i.e. the Scottish Episcopal Church¹.

The point is that my mam when she was young was a firm and dedicated believer in God. Off her own bat and oftentimes on her own of the family, she faithfully attended the church on High St, Banff from an early age. Unlike myself, she sensed something of spiritual worth in her experience of church, something that was active deep in her life, though her understanding was vague. She was later married there (to my dad the heathen) and I was baptised there (the first time²), though I hasten to add not all on the same day.

Although my mother was unable to communicate anything of rational significance to me regarding the faith, she imparted a deep sense of the importance of morality. Somehow it was just really, really important. But one thing stands out:

She always used to say to me (and I can hear her now),

“Billy! Dinna tak’ the Lord’s name in vain!”

¹ It’s not English at all, but episcopalianism is the system of government used by the Church of England, as opposed to the Church of Scotland which uses... oh who cares.

² I was later to be baptised at the age of 25 in the swimming pool at Buckie, refusing to acknowledge the validity of the first one on the grounds that a) I was a baby and therefore neither agreed to nor remembered it, and b) although the certificate with which I was presented to mark the occasion stated that I had now received the Holy Spirit, my subsequent life was rendered not one whit more pious as a result.

What is it about a parental injunction like that? It acted almost like a curse on my efforts as an aspiring cool adolescent to achieve the *holy grail* of young adult life - *to be like everyone else!* My mates could swear. They could *really* swear. When they swore or took the name of Jesus in vain you could almost *see* their relative coolness factor soaring into the lower zeroes. They simply rolled it off the tongue. Me... I had to try. And trying, needless to say, tends toward stiffness, and stiffness simply... *ain't cool!*

But I persevered.

Rat Salad finally came to a sticky end after two glorious years at the back of Gogs's filing cabinet in February of 1976.

Two of us were invited to become one half of the reincarnation of the legendary Peterhead band, Gabby Eves. Although this wondrous accolade titillated our egos the effort was doomed to fail. After a spell with Jablonski's Underdogs, Lyall finally retired from live performance at the age of twenty one - a commitment he has maintained to this day.

Eric went on to greater things (a decent PA system) with Benny's Dream.

But saddest of all...

Pod developed a serious mental aberration - common sense! It happened quite suddenly and none of us had really seen it coming (or imagined it possible). Over a period of several months he had begun - secretly at first - to enjoy the Eagles, with the delusions quickly

mounting in intensity until near the end he could loudly and unabashedly be heard openly expressing the heretical view that “*Black Sabbath are boring!*” This was accompanied by severe hair loss and an irrational desire to become known as ‘Mal’, until finally (under a hitherto unheard-of cloud of parental approval) he joined the RAF, got married and settled in Wales, only to reappear with a pony-tail twenty years later as a forklift truck salesman, mega-talkative entrepreneur, and finally... successful hearing consultant.

Salad days indeed! (more at ratsalad.co.uk for the terminally living in the past)

Believe it or not, I still wanted to be a rock star. Well, who doesn't?

But I was serious. And the idea of spending another two and a half years at university horrified me more and more. It just seemed such a *long time* - and for what? I didn't want to be a scientist anymore, and I certainly didn't want to be an *engineer!!!* But there was still one teensy-weensy bit of a problem: I hadn't told my folks.

A few years earlier my dad had declared that “no son of mine is going into the music business,” (which was rich being as he was in it). This somewhat undermined my confidence in the idea of just coming clean, and further served to drive a wedge between my parents and I. All this was of course unbeknownst to them. As far as they were aware, I was doing fine.

Why wouldn't I be? I had always done fine in education. Up to this point I had successfully managed *not* to inform them that I had failed all my exams at Christmas *and* Easter, and, having now stopped attending most lectures, was firmly on course to fail my all-important end-of-year exams (without which there can be no second year).

University broke up for the summer. Results were due sometime in July and I went home to Macduff under a shining cloud of complete normality to await my doom.

Now, dear reader, you might at this point be thinking that I would now have sense enough to pursue the path of least resistance, taking care to be a model son so that the coming blow of the exam results (and the waste of time, ability, *not to mention* vast quantity of money) might perhaps be cushioned somehow.

Uh uh, because here's where the old unwisdom kicks in - *to overdrive*.

My folks weren't as poor as they used to be, so a holiday in France was scheduled. Noirmoutier, in Brittany, to be precise, and off they went with my sister and her pal, leaving me for three whole weeks in a state of imagined responsibility - in charge of the house.

I won't be writing in much detail about what followed, and neither will I be making light of it. To this day it pains me to think of how *incredibly* irresponsible I was.

To cut a long story short, a party was held. It lasted three weeks and affected the decor. My results came in. My folks came home. In that order.

This was a major turning point in my life. Everything was now out in the open. I had bitterly disappointed my parents and, after a lifetime of promise I suddenly had no future. If all this sounds like I was contemplating suicide, I was not - I've always been too much of an optimist for that - but I did resort to the next best thing...

Emigration.