

# The Spaceman and the Venusian Vampire Vixens

*by Benjamin Kral*

It's late July, and I've just been given the assignment to cover Paganfoil's 'Warbird' tour. To tell you the truth, I really loathe this assignment. I never, ever, EVER cared for hard rock or heavy metal or whatever they're calling it this decade. I've become notorious amongst my peers for declaring this genre "butt rock"- the music of buttheads, for buttheads, by buttheads. Three chords, some hamburger-gargling vocals, and a slave-driving percussion section- I don't care for it at all. I'd rather hear some Miles Davis, John Coltrane, or if it must be rock, then something a little more poetic, like Pearl Jam or Wilco.

But no, no chronicling THOSE bands for this writer, no sir. I get stuck with Paganfoil, who in my opinion, embody the worst qualities of metal excess, and do so unrepentantly. Some might find this worthy of respect, but did anybody REALLY respect Motley Crue in the late 1980s? Hell no. A lot of people wanted the money and girls and drugs the Crue had, and I don't blame them for that, but look at the toll it took on them. In the early 90s, they were blindsided by grunge, got rid of their lead singer, went through some more nonsense, and now they're trying to recapture their old glory. Hardly the life I'd care to lead or read about, and I'm kind of disappointed I knew all those facts about a band I don't like. I know it's just a matter of time before Paganfoil experiences the same.

That aside, I decided to meet each member of Paganfoil at their homes, after completion of the new album and before the start of rehearsal for the tour- the time in which they're decompressing. The band's management wanted me to take a warts-and-all approach to this, which adds to my suspicion that they're aware Paganfoil is getting a little big for their britches and may be on the verge of collapse, and hope that my account will serve to humanize them in

the public's eye and maybe take some piss from the band members themselves. If there's one thing I love, it's taking a motherfucker down a peg.

I pick Spaceman Spliff, the guitarist, first for a few reasons. One, he's the most approachable, being the only member of the band not over 6 feet tall and not physically intimidating. Two, he's the most recognizable, what with his onstage costume consisting of black spandex, a space helmet that looks like it came out of a bad 1950s sci-fi movie, and the wildest-looking Gibson Flying V's ever designed. And lastly, he was the first one to return my phone calls.

I arrive at a mansion somewhere outside Detroit. I wouldn't wish to bore you with details of the surrounding neighborhood, other than that if the world ever needed an enema, I know where to put the tube. I'm of course struck by a rock star that doesn't have a residence in Malibu or New York. Why this dying dump of a city? I hope to get my answer later. The hired help shows me into the study. I marvel at the woodwork, and the fact that it's used not to support a great collection of literature, but rather, what must be the Midwest's largest collection of science fiction memorabilia.

I'm marveling at a poster from a movie called 'Venusian Vampire Vixens' when Spliff walks into the room clad in an old Star Wars t-shirt, torn jeans that probably cost a small fortune, and what must be North America's last surviving pair of Vans. He's very eager to tell me about this movie.

"Great poster, isn't it? My first and only directing gig."

I notice the director's name- Alan Smithee. I mention that's the guy that gets credit when the director doesn't want to put his name on the film.

"Yeah, it's kind of ironic that I chose that name as a 'pen name' if you will. Shit happens."

I get the feeling I'm going to hear "shit happens" an awful lot in the coming months.

"So, Mr. Spliff..."

"Call me Michael. Or Mike. Spliff is the helmeted guy."

"OK, Mike. What would you like to talk about first?"

“About what kind of drink we should have.”

I ask for a beer, whatever kind he has.

“Sure thing. Grab some chair and we can get down to this thing.”

I sit down in a high-backed leather chair you'd expect to see in such a study. Mike has vanished from sight for now, so I gaze alternately at my notes and the table in front of me. The table has a big book on it, which I recognize as *The Beatles Anthology*. If this copy is anything like mine, it's never been read. Also on the table is a half-full pack of Marlboro reds, an ashtray, and a Kiss Zippo lighter. Mike returns bearing two bottles of Rolling Rock. “It's the best,” he says. I agree, and open the bottle with gusto and take a drink. Mike does the same, but finishes the bottle. I sheepishly set my bottle down as Mike takes a seat.

“I wrote a new song yesterday. Care to hear it?” he asks. I say sure.

Mike picks up an acoustic guitar. “I call it ‘My Wife Left Me for My Girlfriend.’” Mike regales me with a tune about heartache, despair, and eventual acceptance when the subject of the song is invited to watch the ladies do their thing.

“An instant classic,” is all I can say.

“Yeah. I'm sure Tim McGraw will ask to cover it. It's a real tear-in-the-beer song,” says Mike, though I'm sure it would fit Merle Haggard better, but it's just a thought.

Trying to move the conversation on, I ask how he came to join Paganfoil.

“Hasn't this been told a million times?” asks Mike, but he tells me again anyway.

The year was 1998, and a young Michael Clark left his suburban Detroit home for film school at the University of Southern California, because George Lucas, his idol, went there.

“I snuck into this club near the university. I had barely started classes at USC, but already I needed to burn some stress off. There was this band there, calling themselves Snakesaber. They were fucking horrible. As has been said before, three quarters of that

band is now in Paganfool. Faceplant (Fitzgerald) was the drummer, obviously, Isaiah (Tomahawk) played bass, and (Matthew) Manhattan was warbling. What he was doing can't possibly be called singing. Anyway, there was this guy playing guitar who was just fucking terrible. His fingers were like those little sausages people love to cook in barbecue sauce, and he looked like a CC DeVille that didn't have money for good makeup. They were slogging through the worst version of Black Sabbath's "Paranoid" I've ever heard. Faceplant was getting more and more pissed off as the song went on, and as soon as it was over, even before the audience could react, Faceplant leaps over his kit and clocks the guitarist. He goes down like a rag doll, out cold. Manhattan and Isaiah are standing there, thinking they've just lost their share of the \$25 they were going to be paid that night. The audience starts cheering, glad to know they won't be hearing anymore from that guitarist.

"Then, Faceplant grabs the microphone from Manhattan and asks if there's a guitarist in the house. I raise my hand, and I'm told to get my skinny ass on stage. I take the guy's other guitar, since he's in a heap on the floor with a broken Les Paul copy. I properly tune it, and play a little something for a few seconds. I look up at Faceplant, who's quite a bit taller than myself, and ask what he wants to play. He says 'Shock Me' from Kiss, and we were off, never looking back."

I get the feeling he loves telling that story. I ask him what happened to the other guitarist.

"I don't really know. He eventually came to while we were playing the first song together. He took off his busted guitar, saw us on stage, and just left. He's like the Pete Best of the metal world, only nobody knows his name. I think I gave his guitar that I stole to a Hard Rock Café, but I'm not sure they ever displayed it."

I mention I saw it at the Hard Rock in Vegas.

"Well, isn't that something."

With the story exhausted, I ask him about his life.

"This isn't quite as interesting. But I'll tell you anyway."

“I wanted to be a filmmaker, mostly. As you can probably tell by this room, I like genre movies. I only dabbled in rock & roll and metal so I didn't feel like such a nerd all the time. I can't read music, but was always pretty good at guitar. It's just a thing, I guess. I love to read too, so I was always a bit of a loner.

“I don't like this planet or the people on it. If you don't like your city or state or country, you can always move to a different one. But if you don't like your planet, you're screwed. In my mind, all people cared about was fighting over dirt or the sludge beneath the dirt. So I decided I was going to make enough money to drop out of society by making art that either made people forget about how much this planet sucks or by telling them how much they sucked.”

That's cold.

“Yes, it is. And I'll probably see the royalties dry up after you print that.”

By now, we're up on the roof of Mike's mansion, laying back, watching the stars and smoking a joint.

“Just look at all that universe,” says Mike, pointing out the Milky Way that can be seen out here. I guess I know why he lives here instead of somewhere else.

“There's a kind of loser vibe around here. This city will probably cease to exist in thirty years or so, and it's like 'get out while you can!' but I like it here. If I ever feel the need for a change of scenery, I'm fortunate enough to be able to afford to go anywhere in the world, but I spend so much time traveling with the band that I just chill here when there's no album or tour or whatever.”

That's good enough for me. By now, I've had ten beers, so I excuse myself for the night.

