

The End of the Gig

by Con Chapman

It was Monday, the day after the State Fair ended, the first day of the last week before school started. David woke up and, once his head was clear of the otherworld of dreams, he remembered that today was the day they'd get paid—\$125 each—for a week's worth of playing at the beer garden down at the first turn of the race track. He felt satisfied with himself. The most you got for playing a dance after a football game was maybe \$100, split four or five ways depending on how many musicians you had. That was nothing compared to this. And there weren't many other bands in town that had played for a whole week, or ever made \$500 for a gig, and now The Rooks had done it twice.

They'd played all week and had been through a lot. The phrase “paying your dues” occurred to him as he tried to swallow; his throat had turned red after just a few days of singing, and when he looked in the mirror after they'd finished up on Sunday, he'd seen little sacs of white pus, like pimples, in the back of his mouth. “You got to pace yourself,” the big black woman who sang at the other beer garden, down by the Midway, had said to him. She told him they shouldn't play a second more than they had to. It was going to be a long week, and if you got carried away you'd wear yourself out.

Sal, the guy who ran the place, told them more or less the same thing for a different reason. “Don't play when the place is full,” he said. “You play when it's empty to get the people to come in. Once they've bought their beer and sat down, you stop. That way they don't stay too long, and I get more people coming through.” He thought like a carnie, the boy realized at some point during the week; everyone was a mark, everything was a scam.

It was hard to do, though. It was more fun to play when people were there to watch you and clap. Who wanted to play when the place was empty, especially empty of girls? So they played more than they should have when they shouldn't have, even to the point where the big boss who had the office under the grandstand, the guy

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who had hired them, complained to Sal. "What's the name of your band again?" Sal asked sarcastically one day after they'd played probably half an hour after the place filled up. "Quick Eddie & the Meatbeaters? You should have cut it off fifteen minutes ago. People been sitting there free for half an hour, and you're just encouraging them."



The four of them—David, Billy, Wayne and Tony—had gotten along for the most part. Tony, the lead guitarist, was so into his music and his girlfriend he was in his own little world. Billy got along with everybody. Wayne he'd had enough of, though. The guy had joined the band at the last minute when Kevin decided to spend the summer with his dad in California. Wayne didn't play anything except bad harmonica and saxophone, where Kevin played rhythm guitar. You could play more songs with two guitars, but they were kind of stuck so they let Wayne into the band. David could barely sing by Thursday, so Wayne ended up singing most of the time, and getting most of the girls. Wayne's dad was a caretaker and lived on the fair grounds, so sometimes he would take girls who were staying in the camper lot on the edge of the fairgrounds back to his house. The guy didn't deserve it; the country girls didn't realize he was new to the band, and not that good of a singer. Wayne had longer hair than the rest of them because his dad didn't care; he only had

custody during the summer, during the school year Wayne stayed with his mom.

They had agreed to go out to the fairgrounds together at 11; they'd go in Tony's car, since he was the only one who was sixteen and his mom let him drive everywhere because his dad was dead and she needed to work.

When Tony honked David said good-bye to his mom and went outside. Wayne was riding shotgun and acting like he was really cool, shooting off his mouth about how they were going to win the Battle of the Bands in the fall. David didn't say anything, just looked at Tony and Billy to see what their reaction was. He was disappointed that neither of them stuck up for Kevin. When he came back from California he'd want to be lead singer again, and he was a lot cooler than Wayne. Wayne was a hick who woke up one day thinking he was going to be a rock star—the day before he probably wanted to be a champion bass fisherman or something.

"What are you guys gonna do with your money?" Wayne said to the two of them sitting in the back.

"I'm gonna buy a new cymbal and a high hat," Billy said.

"I'm going to save mine for college," David said.

"*College!*" Wayne said, almost spitting the words out with laughter. "Man, you don't want to save it for college. You go to college on student loans."

"What do you suggest I do with it?"

"Why don't you buy a good p.a. system," Wayne said. "One of those kind with the black pleat-and-roll leather covers. Those are cool."

All the better for you to sing through, David said to himself. "I'm not spending all my money on something like that—the rest of the band would have to chip in," he said, but quickly regretted it. It made it sound like Wayne was being invited to join the band permanently.

"I'll give you an IOU," Wayne said.

"Why don't *you* buy it if you want it so much," David said.

"Hell, my money's got to last me until we get our next paying job. I don't get an allowance like you do."

Crying poor again, David thought, just like his dad. They had practiced for awhile in the shed behind Wayne's dad's house until one Saturday the old man came out back in his undershirt, smelling of beer in the middle of the day, and started yelling about how he was going to fix it up for himself, he wanted to have a nice house just like David's parents. They had taken their amps out and never gone back, and had practiced ever since in Tony's basement or David's garage. The house didn't even belong to Wayne's dad, it belonged to the state according to David's dad.

They drove into the fairgrounds without trouble now that the fair was officially over. There was no activity in the mule and sheep barn, the first one you saw as you came around the homestretch outside the track.

"Who's gonna do the talkin'?" Wayne said to no one in particular.

Billy shrugged his shoulders. Tony was so quiet, you wouldn't expect him to do the talking for the job. "Kevin got us the job out here last year," Tony said after a while.

"Well, Kevin's not here," Wayne said. "Davie-boy? You're next in seniority."

David didn't say anything at first. "I guess so," he said after a while.

They stopped the car at the near end of the grandstand, where the snack bar was located. You walked through a Dutch door to get to the back office, where there was a metal table, an adding machine and a folding chair, with a fat man sitting in it.

Sal was off to one side sitting on a metal soda cooler, drinking a Dr. Pepper. "There's my jitterbuggers," he said with a grin. "You guys had enough of carnival life and ready to go back to school?"

"Yeah," David said quietly.

"Good idea if you ask me," Sal said. "The world doesn't need another bunch of screamin' punks on dope."

The man at the table was counting bills and poking the numbers on the adding machine as the tape spilled out onto the table. "What can I do for you boys," he said without looking up.

"We came to get paid for playing at Sal's place," David said. It was hard enough for him to talk with his throat so sore, and the fact that he was talking to a man who barely acknowledged him made it worse.

"You did, did you?" the man asked, although it sounded more like a dare than a question. He kept counting the money and tapping the adding machine. "Sal, did these guys do a good job?"

"They were there every day Jimmy," Sal said. "They didn't eat too much neither. I guess they preferred the corn dogs down on the Midway."

"Okay," the man named Jimmy said as he wrapped a rubber band around a handful of bills. He put the wad in a metal cash box, and picked up another stack of bills with his left hand. He moistened his fingers in a little plastic dish, and began to count out bills.

"Twenty-forty-sixty-eighty-one hundred," he droned. "Twenty-forty-sixty-eight-one hundred," he repeated. He did this four times, then leaned back in his chair, his eyes half-closed, and looked at David. "Four hundred dollars. Thanks for adding a touch of music to the Giokaris Concessions dining experience," the man said with a smile on his lips that seemed like a taunt. The man then looked down at the table and began to count another stack of bills.

"We . . . we agreed on five hundred," David said after a moment, a lump in his throat where the abscesses had formed.

The man looked up at David with an expression of surprise. "I don't remember nuthin' like that."

"It was five hundred, I know it," David said, trying to sound firm.

"Do you know anything about this?" the man said as he turned to Sal.

Sal said nothing and just shrugged his shoulders.

"Sal don't remember that, and he was runnin' the place."

"I *know* it was five hundred," David said, his face reddening.

"There's only four of youse," Jimmy said. "Our standard rate is a hunnert dollars a musician for the week. Why would we pay you guys more?"

"Because you *agreed* to," David said.

"You got it in writing?" Jimmy asked.

David tried to swallow, but the saliva just collected at the back of his mouth. "No—you said we didn't need to," he was finally able to say.

"Maybe you shouldn't a listened to me," the man said. "If you don't got it in writing, you can't prove nuthin'."

"Hey mister," David heard Wayne say loudly from behind him, then felt himself pushed aside as the other boy stepped up to the metal table. "My dad's Earl Ramsey."

"Who's Earl Ramsey?"

"He's the caretaker of the fairgrounds," Wayne said.

"So?"

"So if you want to get out of town, you'd better pay us what you owe us. We've got three Highway Patrol men staying over at my house, and they all know carnies are the scum of the earth.

Jimmy put his hands on the table, as if to be ready to grab the money if Wayne tried to take more than he'd offered.

The boy and the man stared at each other for several seconds.

"They'd love to throw you in jail, those Highway Patrol men," Wayne said with finality.

Jimmy looked over at Sal, who just shrugged again. Jimmy exhaled, and a German shepherd lying in the corner of the room lifted up his head.

"Perhaps there was some kind of misunderstanding," Jimmy said. "I'll give you \$450 to split the difference."

"You said you was gonna pay us five hunnert, and you're *gonna* pay us five hunnert, or I'm telling the Highway Patrol," Wayne said, his mouth drawn back tight.

Jimmy bounced his head back and forth as if considering a business proposition. The dog whimpered a bit, then made a noise as if it was going to bark, but didn't.

Jimmy let out a sigh as if his business was a cross he had to bear, a great burden that weighed him down. He moved his right hand towards a pile of bills and slowly began to slide twenties off the top of the stack. "Twenty-forty-sixty-eighty . . . one hunnert," he said.

"Pleasure doing business with you," Wayne said as he scooped up the five stacks.

The boys turned and walked out the door as fast as they could without breaking into a run. When they reached the car, Billy started to laugh and pounded Wayne on the back.

"You really told that guy," Billy said as Wayne handed him his stack of bills.

"You can't bullshit a bullshitter," Wayne said with a self-satisfied look.

"Do you really have Highway Patrol men staying at your house?" Billy asked.

"We did, but they left this morning," Wayne said, which caused Billy's opinion of him to rise even higher.

"Here's yours," Wayne said as he handed David his stack of bills. "I guess it's true what they say."

"What's that?" David said hoarsely.

"Don't send a boy to do a man's job."

Wayne gave him a superior smile, and turned around to count out Tony's money.

David looked out the window the rest of the way home. He wanted to crawl into bed and stay there until his throat got better.

