A Young Metalhead Comes of Age

The music business is a Crüel and shallow money trench, a long plastic hallway where thieves and pimps run free, and good men die like dogs. There’s also a negative side.

—Traditional folk wisdom (often attributed, incorrectly, to Hunter S. Thompson)

The record business is fucked—it’s kinda funny
It’ll separate a boy from a man
You can buy every copy of your record with your money
But you’d be your only fan . . .

—Butch Walker, “Song for the Metalheads”

Screw or be screwed—in the music industry, those aren’t mutually exclusive concepts: it is possible to do both simultaneously. The term “rock and roll” actually comes from a euphemism for screwing, and with good reason. From the beginning, the music held such a sexual allure, Ed Sullivan felt it necessary to censor Elvis Presley’s hips on national television. Since those early days, musicians have also been getting screwed out of their earnings by managers, record company dudes, greasy promotions men, ponytailed, burned-out, non-
musical disc jockeys, alleged songwriters with nicknames like “the Doctor,” and so on. Yes, screwing and popular music prove inextricably intertwined—although, for me, it was a bunch of grown men wearing makeup and platform boots that put me on the path to losing my innocence, fiscal and otherwise, to rock and roll. When my ears lost their rock-and-roll virginity, it led to me actually losing it as a whole, which led to me getting screwed (several times) in the music business. As a wise philosopher with a seven-inch tongue rumored to be surgically enhanced with cow parts once wrote, “The first step of the cure is a kiss.” Or, in my case, KISS . . .

In Christianity, they call the period before spiritual enlightenment “Before Christ” (or BC). For me, that period is known as “Before KISS” (or BK). Today, I am considered a decent success in the music business (well, when it actually was a functioning business): you may not know my name, but chances are if you even occasionally listen to the radio in your car, you’ve probably heard a song I’ve produced, or written, or maybe even played cowbell on. As a producer and songwriter, I’ve worked on songs for the likes of Pink, Avril Lavigne, Weezer, Katy Perry, Dashboard Confessional, Fall Out Boy, and—please don’t hold it against me, I can explain, really—Lindsay Lohan (okay, that wasn’t a hit, but it makes for a hell of a footnote). In 2005, Rolling Stone even named me “Producer of the Year,” graciously overlooking the whole Lohan thing. As a performer, I’m often derided as a one-hit wonder thanks to “Freak of the Week,” the ubiquitous-on-the-radio-for-a-minute single from my old band Marvelous 3, which is typically lumped in with the other “number bands” populating the second wave of the ’90s alternative rock, like Eve 6 (number band), 3 Doors Down (Southern rock number band), and yes, Horseshit 6 (asshole by numbers). I’ve even had a long-standing solo career as a “mid-level artist,” which among music professionals can be considered both an insult and a compliment simultaneously: basically, if you’re a mid-level artist,
you’ve obviously got some talent, but you’re both too smart and too stupid to sell out effectively.

In the music biz, I’ve seen it all, from playing stages in the lowliest dive bars to taking meetings in the lowliest corporate boardrooms to being in the first rock band to ever tour Communist China, bringing late-period hair metal to confused locals surrounded by Red Army militia in rural sports arenas. It’s been one hell of a colorful ride, and I owe it all to my mother, father, sisters, cousins, wife, Peter Criss, Ace Frehley, Gene Simmons, and Paul Stanley.

When I was a child, it would take me some time to discover the healing qualities of my future career path in hard rock and heavy metal. Indeed, metal would prove the catalyst, the spermal conduit, to the social diseases, problems, and relationship woes that bratty little teenage snot punks get themselves into. But even “br,” I was still very much into music, even as a little kid. I grew up a white boy, in a white family, with very white taste in music. My parents came from beer-drinking, sometimes embarrassingly loud, working-class folk from the backwoods of Tater Hill, Georgia. Rome, Georgia, however, is the city I was born in on November 14, 1969, and I was raised there until I was one year old. Then we moved to Columbus, Georgia, where my dad worked for Southern Bell (pre-AT&T, y’all) until I was five or six. Then we settled in Cartersville for the rest of my youth. In our house, we didn’t listen to blues or jazz music, say, or anything that cultured. Growing up in small-town Georgia in the ’70s, I heard more of the epitome of whatever bad music was on the radio at the time, like, oh . . . maybe Leo Sayer.

My dad ran an antiques dealership on the side, so all the furniture in the house was old, which I hated: cast-iron bed frames, turn-of-the-century quilts, and tiny old crank telephones were everywhere. As such, the family stereo was a big, antique flip-top Victrola record
Butch Walker

player that must have weighed nine hundred pounds—very ergonomic. It had settings for 33, 45, and 78 rpm, along with a built-in radio. On that dusty, crackling machine, I would listen to my mom’s records—Creedence Clearwater Revival, Barry White, Grand Funk Railroad, Neil Diamond, and whatever else was lying around.

I always went first for the albums with the coolest-looking covers, the ones that intrigued me with their artwork (something that doesn’t happen too often in the current iTunes era). Mom had a live Creedence album that had photos of the band playing in concert, which looked so high-energy and amazing to me as a little kid. Grand Funk, meanwhile, had a record called Survival, where they all dressed up like cavemen on the cover: it was so retarded, but to me, I was like, “Look, long hair, loincloths, and afros! These guys are crazy!” The way they looked, standing in a cave holding clubs and bones, they could’ve come from an import black metal album from today, but they were, in fact, the cheesiest ’70s band ever.

The visuals were crucial for a dyslexic kid like me—not that anybody knew what dyslexia was back then. I remember figuring out who the Beatles were for the first time because my cousin Molly had the 45 rpm single of “I Want to Hold Your Hand.” I found the green Apple logo on the label visually striking; when I listened to the song, though, it made me realize that music was not just about the album covers. The Beatles were like the original boy band, and I just wore that single out because the power of their melodies hit me so hard. All their great amazing chords, the way John and Paul harmonized—they just freaked me out so hard that I went into full-on Beatlemania mode.

And then there was my first Elvis experience—Presley, that is; Costello would come later, and provide perhaps an even stupider tattoo choice (that’s a story for another chapter). That’s actually hard to believe, considering the Presley ink on my arm. It comes from the cover of an Elvis record from my mom’s collection, Aloha from Hawaii via Satellite: I got that tat while on tour ten years ago, to remind myself why I got into
music. Admittedly, it’s probably not the best Elvis album to choose skin art from. Of course, I got an image of the fat, pill-popping, drug-added, suicidal, fall-asleep-on-the-toilet Elvis permanently etched into my flesh; then again, I have no regrets about it—really, the first memory I have of rock and roll is the cover of that record. It was a double album: I would just sit and stare at the pictures and think, “Oh my God, this guy is really sweating.” In the cover photo—set in outer space, naturally—a satellite projects onto the moon’s surface an image of “The King” sporting a white sequined jumpsuit and that infamous crazy hair get-up. *Aloha!* When I was a little kid, that visual burned into my tiny brain. I just did not see people walking around the streets of Columbus, Georgia, looking like that. To me, he looked like a space alien; soon enough, I would look like one, too. I remember listening constantly to this Elvis record. He was the first person I have ever heard on record with a *growl*—you know, “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog!” It was like the metal voices I would hear years later: it just sounded so angry that I immediately was fascinated with it and loved it.

Elvis was the perfect gateway drug, however, to lead me to my next obsession: KISS. Talk about space aliens. When KISS hit, it was all over for me: they borrowed the melodies of the Beatles—Gene Simmons, KISS’s own “God of Thunder,” is an avowed Fab Four freak—but they had visuals and a heaviness like nothing I’d ever seen or heard. Even to my third-grade sensibility, their stage show and costumes made the circus seem totally lame. In fact, I saw KISS in concert before I ever even went to the circus.

For my induction into the KISS Army, I have my cousins Zack and Nick to thank. They were from my mom’s side of the family, and lived in Columbia, South Carolina. They were both very talented—like, *stupidly* talented: good-looking, smart, funny, and popular at school. In fact, they were such attractive kids, they even modeled for
the local department store. I was the exact opposite of that: dorky, antisocial, and kind of chubby. I did not have “it,” and they always did. I lived for visiting Zack and Nick, and for them visiting us, because I just thought they were the coolest guys. Almost none of my friends my age in Cartersville were into music, which I was into excessively. In Cartersville, it was all about gun racks, pickup trucks, deer hunting, farming, quarterbacks, and meth heads—sometimes all at once. There, it was not socially (or religiously) acceptable for a kid to play a guitar and listen to rock music as much as I did. That’s where Zack and Nick came in.

It’s not that I could relate to them: I wanted to be them. They were only two and four years older than me, but they played guitars and drums and sang, too. They even had a band, called Aries: Nick, who was the younger brother, played bass, and Zack played drums and sang. They played concerts at their school, for which my aunt made them stage costumes: satin one-piece jumpsuits with bellbottoms and sequins all over them.

With a little portable recorder, my grandmother made a tape of Aries’ performance at their sixth-grade talent show. I would just listen to it religiously, freaking out: I could not believe these superstars were my cousins! I knew there was hope, because these guys were close to my age, but just shredded. In sixth grade, Zack was ripping it, and remains one of the best drummers on the planet: he would later go on to be the singer and drummer for the legendary metal band Savatage—he’s still doing the metal to this day.

Zack and Nick were so cool they actually gave me an inferiority complex. At the same time, they were totally generous and gracious, giving me my first guitar lessons. The first song they taught me was “Rock’n Me” by Steve Miller Band, and the first chord I ever learned was the D-chord. I have come to use it so many times since, that when I shake people’s hands, they feel my fingers in the formation of a D-chord in their palm. Even as kids, they could really play. Instead of
playing along with the record player and lip-synching, like I did then (and like pretty much most pop stars do today), Zack and Nick actually played their instruments, doing covers of whatever was popular at the time: stuff like “Brick House” by the Commodores and “God of Thunder” by a band I’d never heard of, called KISS.

Naturally, it was Zack and Nick who turned me on to KISS for the first time. One day, we were hanging out at their house going through all their albums, and they pulled out *Love Gun* by KISS. “This band is the shit!” they told me excitedly. I was quick to agree: *Love Gun* was the first KISS album I ever heard, but then I went back and got all of them. The cover of *Love Gun* just bewitched my eight-year-old mind: the cover was full of scantily clad, half-naked women lying at KISS’s feet, in a harem. It was the best thing I had ever seen.

I paid so much attention to the details in KISS’s imagery: at school, I would draw their logo on everything and everybody. I could replicate every lizard scale on Gene’s dragon boots, and perfected the teeth at the bottom in perfect verisimilitude. My whole world revolved around KISS: I had KISS bedsheets, the worthless KISS AM transistor radio, the action figures, all the comic books that were supposedly inked with their actual blood. I can’t tell you how many times I watched their movie *KISS Meets the Phantom of the Park*, which might actually be the worst film ever made—well, until Mariah Carey made *Glitter*. I found two friends in my third-grade class, Andy Smith and Kelly Wade, who shared my KISS connection. They agreed with me that *Hotter Than Hell* was clearly KISS’s best album—the title track is still one of the sexiest KISS songs ever. We would perform concerts together, making guitars out of cardboard and drums out of Lego tubs covered in aluminum foil, using Lincoln Logs for drumsticks. We’d set up in the classroom and mime along to *KISS Alive!* on the school’s record player, playing air guitar and lip-synching even the obnoxious
between-song patter: “How many people here like the taste of alcohol? I know it’s getting so hot outside, you need something to cool off. I know some of you out there like to drink tequila. But when you’re down in the dumps and you need something to bring you up, there’s only one thing that’s going to do it for you . . . ‘COLD GIN’!”

It must have been a hilarious sight, and it was probably incredibly weird for our homeroom teacher. Andy, Kelly, and I, however, were absolutely convinced of one thing: we were going to make it as rock stars. You see, the weird thing is, when we did these little “concerts” in our classroom, one thing would always ring true: afterwards, everyone there treated us differently the rest of the day. The teacher was always nicer and would let a lot of things slide, and our classmates (especially the girls) were much more accommodating to us. “You can have the rest of my egg salad.” “You can go in front of me in the bathroom line.” This was the common thread that would lead me to believe that when you are famous, people will go out of their way to make you happy because you can do something that they can’t.

Being into KISS required a certain commitment that our local community did not share. Young boys wearing copious makeup just wasn’t something you saw every day in Cartersville, which is what my dad, Big Butch Sr., always used to say. Big Butch was a man’s man who wore a cowboy hat, listened to George Jones and Kenny Rogers in his pickup truck, and was always the loudest, drunkest, and funniest guy at neighborhood parties; I’m sure he was convinced I was going to be gay or transsexual when I grew up. When I was four, I would wear a tutu and dance on the coffee table with a fake guitar to Elvis records. Joining up with the KISS Army took my questionable sexuality to a new pinnacle, though: now, after school, I would get into my sister’s makeup collection and try to copy Ace’s “Spaceman” look on myself. If my dad was sitting there having beers with all his buddies watching
Dukes of Hazzard, I just knew I was going to get in trouble looking like that. As for my mother, a saint who doesn’t drink and plays piano for the church to this day, I can only imagine what she thought of Hotter Than Hell: she would regularly bust into my room upon hearing some risqué lyric blasting through the wall, demanding, “Do you know what they are saying?” I would always reply “No,” which was true. I was eight years old! I had no idea what they were singing about—it just sounded badass.

I kept dressing up like KISS, especially when I heard they were coming to Atlanta. I really have to toast my parents for letting me talk them into taking me when I was just eight years old to a KISS concert. I begged for it—it was my birthday and Christmas gift all rolled into one. The show was set for December 30, 1977, at the Omni Coliseum, and was completely sold out: this was the high point of KISS’s career—the Love Gun tour. That was the big, big tour, with the lit staircases, the risers that came up and moved back and forth, and Gene literally flying up into the scaffolding during “God of Thunder.”

Going to that concert changed everything. The whole experience freaked me out—my parents, too. Everybody was dressed up as their favorite KISS character. I smelled pot for the first time. I saw older kids in cool clothes. Everybody in the crowd was drinking: my dad was threatening to kill this twenty-year-old in Gene Simmons makeup who kept spilling beer on his brand-new leather jacket. KISS was a learning experience for us all. At this concert, my dad was as uncomfortable and paranoid as a whore in church. The whole time, people were passing joints down over my mother and my sisters and me, the youngest of three. Everyone was loving it, and of course I loved it. I loved it all.

I remember the opening band, Piper, had to play with the house lights on because KISS wanted to be the only band that played in total darkness. Ironically, Piper’s lead singer, Billy Squier, would later go on to a successful solo career. I thought Piper was amazing, even with
the lights on; this was, after all, the first band I had ever seen live! I couldn’t get over how exciting it was. For years, onstage I would throw guitars to my tech: that practice came from watching Billy Squier do that with Piper that night. He would throw his guitar fifty feet, then get another one thrown to him from fifty feet, catch it, and immediately start playing. I was like, “Man, that guy is rock and roll!” Did I just lose cool points? Probably.

Who cares—when KISS came on, they blew my doors off. I saw Ace Frehley make his Les Paul explode and fly up into the rafters and disappear, as 25,000 stoners went nuts. And the blood was obviously frightening. Paul Stanley, the effeminate, glammy pretty boy, was just shameless, and he made it okay to be that way: he came out smashing his guitar, clearly taking a tip from The Who—who, of course, I knew nothing about. I didn’t know who The Who were, I hadn’t heard of the Rolling Stones yet, I didn’t know any of these bands. For me, KISS was like Fisher-Price: My First Rock Band. At the time, I didn’t realize that Peter Criss was a sloppy drummer; all I knew was, I was mesmerized by the drum solo with the two cats on the riser that rose up thirteen stories as he played twenty-seven toms and eighteen cymbals (more than I had on my Lego drums), and the fact that he could play them all at once—well, that made him the best drummer in the world. Seeing that spectacle, I thought, “This is what I have to do!” After that, I hounded my parents for a drum set. Somehow I talked them into it . . .

Cut to the next Christmas morning, when I was surprised with a white five-piece Reuther drum kit. They were set up all weird (like in the music store window that sells lofty gear or the way that a parent with no drum background knowledge would), but it didn’t matter—the memory will be in my head forever: walking down the stairs and seeing drums in front of the Christmas tree. I still think it was the most
beautiful sight I have ever seen. A white drum set just seemed so rock and roll to me, and I had never owned anything that was rock and roll until then. Of course, it was later deemed a mistake by my parents to have given me those drums: all they would hear every night, from after school until bedtime, was me banging on them in my bedroom. Finally they were like, “Forget it, Butch, put them out in the shed—anywhere outside the house! We cannot hear this anymore.”

The drums brought out the natural performer in me, which I genetically attribute to my mother, a truly gifted singer and pianist (my father, on the other hand, always would say he “can’t even play the radio good”). My talents especially bloomed at our school talent shows. At my first appearance, I played along to the 45 single for Eddie Rabbitt’s “Drivin’ My Life Away”—both the A and B sides—and just nailed it. I got so good, I started playing with older musicians. By 1980, when I was eleven, I was asked to play in an Elvis Presley tribute band—and all the members were in their thirties. I was only in that band for all of two weeks, however, because the singer’s daughter was hot, and I got the hots for her, which made her daddy/Elvis uncomfortable. This hound dog got kicked to the curb, naturally, but I was ready to move on from drums anyway. I was starting to learn how to play guitar in earnest: I just couldn’t stand sitting behind everybody at that point. “I don’t wanna sit in the back behind the drums,” I thought. “I wanna stand up at the front.”

The big turning point that took me from drums to guitar happened when this little band called Van Halen came along. I realized what shitty musicians KISS were when I heard early Van Halen classics like “Runnin’ with the Devil” and “Eruption” for the first time: they were amazing players, especially Eddie Van Halen’s guitar playing, but they played with a weird, almost punk rock attitude that I loved. I learned about Van Halen from a guy named Phil Orton, who was my sister Dana’s on-again/off-again boyfriend since elementary school. Phil was the neighborhood cool kid in Cartersville. I liked
him, but he was a passive hesher dude to everyone else, with dark circles under his eyes and a stoner bi-level mullet. I probably bugged him because I was a young brat, but I would go over to his house every day and hang out in an attempt to absorb his cool factor. He had the coolest stuff. I’d never seen a life-size poster before Phil, and he had every life-size poster on his bedroom wall: these huge images of Blue Öyster Cult, Rush, Van Halen, and the Police were his wallpaper. He got them from Record & Tape World, the record store in downtown Cartersville where I would buy KISS records and everything else that looked anarchic and cool. That moment when Phil Orton introduced me to Van Halen, Blue Öyster Cult, Rush, and the life-size poster represented yet another paradigm shift. Van Halen was in; KISS was now out. The way it happened was, Phil did me a solid. “I’ll tell you what,” he said to me one day as I was ogling Judas Priest’s Unleashed in the East gatefold album sleeve in his man-cave, “I’ll trade you—temporarily—KISS Alive II for the first Van Halen record.” I agreed to this Faustian bargain, took Van Halen home, and promptly had my tiny mind blown from the very first note.

To me, Van Halen’s music sounded like a robot was playing guitar: I was like, “That is not humanly possible. What is this?” I was so mesmerized and mystified by this album, I just wore the vinyl out. I immediately needed to find out everything about Van Halen. This was pre-MTV, pre-video, pre-porn, pre-everything; I couldn’t just turn on the google tube and see this band. I had to look at pictures; I couldn’t even see this band play live. Eventually I did find some concert footage of them somewhere, and I was like, “Oh my God, this is amazing! The singer is out of control! What’s going on here?” KISS seemed lame compared to Van Halen onstage. I realized that KISS’s reliance on lights and fire and everything else was used to distract from the fact that they were kind of whatever as performers. It’s like the line in Role Models where Seann William Scott is talking to the little black kid checking out his KISS pinball machine: the kid says, “I
didn’t know Jewish guys could sing rock music,” to which Scott retorts, “Oh, they can’t—that’s why they wore makeup.” This epiphany pushed me to really become an incredible musician: I wanted—no, had to—learn to shred like Eddie Van Halen.

Phil Orton had a family friend and guitar genius named—no shit—Huey Lewis; even weirder, Phil’s uncle played guitar in a local New Wave band called the Neuz! Strictly coincidence: unlike the other Huey Lewis, who wrote “I Want a New Drug,” this one actually sold them and took them and had a prison record—but he was also a mean guitar shredder who could play every note and lick on the first Van Halen album! I would freak out watching Huey jam at shoddy summer gigs at the pool park, which prompted me to start taking guitar lessons. I didn’t want to just learn “Oh! Susanna” and “She’ll Be Coming ’Round the Mountain” from the Mel Bay songbook, though; who wants to learn that shit when you’re listening to metal and rock? I wanted to start shredding as soon as possible. To that end, I found a teacher who wanted to be Eddie Van Halen more than Eddie Van Halen did. Chris Fowler was a strict Jehovah’s Witness, but he could also religiously deliver every Eddie solo note for note; he even had all his guitars (cars, toasters, and probably shoes as well) pinstriped in the Van Halen style. I took lessons from Chris once a week: he taught me all the little tricks with the whammy bar and stuff, and I became a good little wanker.

I remember my first encounter with it. It embodied everything I could ever want in a girl (eventually). Sexy curves, solid body (screams a lot when you touch it). A Les Paul. I remember when my parents took me to see KISS when I was eight years old and I couldn’t wait to see what color Les Paul Ace Frehley was going to play. I had studied
the album covers, *Creem* magazine spreads, the posters in my room, and noticed how he only ever alternated between a cherry sunburst Custom model and a tobacco sunburst Standard model. Both seemed so expensive, so fragile . . . and so . . . *bitchin’*—the way it hung low on a strap and made anyone look rock and roll with it. Hell, even when my mom took me to a Toys for Tots radio station Christmas concert when I was eleven years old, and I saw such greats as Exile, Little River Band, Paul Davis, and Eddie Money play, even the guitars playing knobs that were backing these guys up all had Les Pauls. When I saw Mick Jones from the Clash playing one . . . well, that was all she wrote. I knew it was the coolest guitar in the world.

I would drive down to Atlanta to the local music stores, just to paw at all the amazing Les Pauls they had on display. Music store dudes hated me. I was *that* guy that came in and asked to play the sunburst Les Paul behind the glass, through the loudest amp, and play my funny metal squeals all day on it. But don’t worry, guitar-seller guy. I’m gonna own one of these one day. I am gonna have money from playing music and be famous and shit . . . “Sure you are, kid . . . sure you are.”

Ironically, to this day, I have strayed on and off Les Pauls for live show use, due to the luxury of choice throughout the years, but in the studio *it is the only guitar for rock*. My prized one to this day is a tobacco Standard that was given to me as a gift by my friend Alecia Moore (Pink) after a fire took all my guitars (and everything else . . . more on that later). It is a beauty and I will never part with it. I used it to write and record everything for the longest time after the fire. Les Paul, the man and the guitar . . . I salute you for carving out a little piece of my soul into your guitars for me. . .
By that time, I was already playing with all these bands around town. I got into a group full of guys that were all from the Atlanta suburbs, which seemed really cool to me because they weren’t just hicks from Cartersville. We were called Standing Room Only (SRO). Our bass player, Tommy, came up with the name; later in life, I heard he went on to drug rehab, divorced his wife, and then married his rehab counselor. The cool kid in the band was twenty-five years old: he was a mediocre guitar player and a marginal singer, but I thought he was hip. He knew this keyboard player, a total rocker chick from Atlanta named Laura. Laura was still in high school, three years older than me, and the person to whom I would lose my virginity. She was my first-ever real love—my first major rock crush. When she walked in the room with tight leopard-print jeans on, big crazy bleach-streaked, Aqua Net hair, and heavy eye makeup, I took one look at her and lost it. I was like, “Oh my God, I’ve found my very own Pat Benatar—my own Lita Ford.” No girls like this ever existed in Cartersville. Only on MTV . . .

We became serious lovers midway through sophomore year. Many years later, I’d write a song about Laura: “Lost my virginity to a girl in my band/She was three years older—she made me a man.” Before Laura, I hadn’t had much luck with the ladies. I was not a player back then; in fact, I got no play at all. Girls in my high school were not attracted to me: I wasn’t a jock or a redneck, so I was definitely not cool to them. So, to be fifteen years old and be able to take down a senior—a senior!—who wore leopard jeans and looked like Pat Benatar? Cameron Crowe couldn’t have scripted my loss of innocence any better.

The deed took place in our band’s practice room, which happened to be in my mom and dad’s antique store behind our house. I’ll never forget it: Dire Straits’ “Money for Nothing” was playing on my little radio when I had my first-ever orgasm inside of a woman. I was so damn nervous. I was worried I wasn’t doing it right. Just as my little
vessel was about to actually meet the mother ship, Laura looked up at me and said, “That’s the way you do it”—right in time with Mark Knopfler’s famous line from the song coming out of the radio. It was so sexy and awesome and awkward: I was scared to death, but it was the most incredible five-minute experience of my life. After that happened, it was on. Laura had unleashed a complete gushing river of sexual libido and physical ability in me that I never knew was humanly possible.

Eventually, Laura and I ditched Standing Room Only and started a new group with some friends of hers from her school; in keeping with our pattern of wildly unoriginal band names, we christened ourselves the Scene. We were really into pop, playing hits from the likes of Journey, Huey Lewis, the Babys, and Blondie; one of our signature numbers was “Voices Carry” by ’Til Tuesday, which Laura sang and played synthesizer on. The Scene would play shows wherever we could, from a home for the mentally disabled to a school for the deaf, which was an interesting gig. All the time, though, we had our eyes on a bigger prize: we wanted to be the house band at the Six Flags amusement park.

Six Flags was a crucial part of my musical upbringing, as well as the first place where I would experience the arbitrary, Crüel, exploitative nature of the music industry. For years throughout my childhood, my biggest thrill was getting to go to Six Flags every summer, but I didn’t go to ride the roller coasters: I went to see the house rock band. They always had an outdoor shed with a rock band playing covers, three sets a day, and I would just sit there, mesmerized, watching all three sets. These were real people, with real instruments, playing songs I knew from the radio, which blew my mind. We simply did not have anything like that in my little town.

By my junior year, after playing tons of crappy gigs, the Scene was ready to move up in the rock-and-roll food chain, and Six Flags was our Everest. After all, we’d become a really good cover band, but we
were still too young to play bars in Atlanta. We figured our best option was to try out for Six Flags; at that time, nothing sounded better than spending the summer getting paid to play “Hit Me with Your Best Shot” and “What I Like About You” in the great outdoors to a captive audience of maybe forty people. To that end, we rehearsed like mad for the “battle of the bands”-style tryouts, building up a

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**TOP 10 Essential Cover Songs**

(If you’re gonna make it in a cover band)

1. Anything on Led Zeppelin II
2. Back in Black - AC/DC
3. New Girl Now - Honeymoon Suite
4. Run to You - Bryan Adams
5. Bohemian Rhapsody - Queen (no sampling)
6. Fight for Your Right - Beasties
7. Tiny Dancer - Elton John
8. Girl You’ll Be a Woman Soon - Neil Diamond
9. Born to Run - Bruce Springsteen
10. Know all Beatles catalog
thirty-song repertoire of nonstop summer hits. Little did I know that, despite our best efforts, the odds were already stacked against us.

At this point, the band that had been the reigning kings of Six Flags was a group from Marietta, Georgia, called Rare Breed. Rare Breed was the premier local cover band of the day: the members were really good-looking young dudes, suburban rich kids that looked like they could have been in Huey Lewis and the News (them again), which admittedly isn’t saying much now. But at the time, they looked like a real band, with perfect flashy clothes and really good bi-level haircuts; half of the band members were brothers, which upped the cute factor even more (like, Hanson and Jonas Brothers–level cute). Rare Breed’s problem was that they were really bad; in fact, they were horrible. I never understood why they were so popular and got the Six Flags gig year after year. They did have a large female following, which I attributed to their looks, but that wasn’t enough to explain why they considered themselves massive rock stars. Rare Breed were truly delusional regarding their rock-star status (especially the bassist . . . I don’t remember his name). I remember seeing him at a concert for Stryper (a glammy, Christian metal band): he was out in the audience with his arms crossed, criticizing Stryper’s bassist, thinking he was better. I was like, “You guys are a fucking cover band. Stryper might make ridiculous Christian heavy metal, but at least they are a real band. I hope you get pelted in the head tonight by the New Testament.” Yes, Rare Breed were as lame as they were legendary in their own minds, and we were sure the Scene was good enough to snatch the Six Flags crown from them.

We were confident going into the auditions to determine if we would become the next Six Flags cover band. I was sure it was our time; after all, Rare Breed had already been the Six Flags house band for three years straight. “How can they keep getting this gig?” I wondered; surely they couldn’t keep beating the odds—especially as there were fifty other bands auditioning that year. But when we played,
dare I say it, we kicked their asses. The judges narrowed it down to just us and, you guessed it, Rare Breed. We were in. I knew it. We were going to do this, and I could not believe that we’d finally made it—that we’d come this far. Therefore, I was shocked when it was announced that, yet again, Rare Breed would be the Six Flags band all summer long. I found out later Rare Breed had had the whole thing set for years: allegedly, the brothers’ dad was one of the chairmen of Six Flags or something. That was the reason why this shitty band that was all looks/no hooks kept getting the cool gig, year after year. Welcome to your first taste of the music industry, Grasshopper. This scenario would repeat itself again, and again, and again, throughout my career.

Losing the Six Flags gig broke up the band, but it also fueled me to really step up my game. When the Scene dissolved, Laura and I tried staying together for a bit; ultimately and sadly, I think I’d moved on from her, musically and romantically. I felt the pull of my hard-rockin’ roots: I didn’t want to play second fiddle to synthesizers and limit myself to a steady diet of Top 40 hits—my fingers couldn’t make the chords for “The Power of Love” by Huey Lewis one more time. No, I wanted to rock, and rock hard; I wanted to shred. I was steeped in metal, hair metal, glam, all of it, and there was no turning back. After Van Halen came AC/DC, then Judas Priest, then Iron Maiden—and, of course, Mötley Crüe. I was obsessed with the Crüe at that time, especially their Too Fast for Love album. Mötley Crüe was the ultimate sleazy, do-not-give-a-damn, excessively rowdy band—and, incredibly, they still kinda are. If only I had a time machine to go back and tell my teenage self that I would someday end up at a weird and dark Encino Hills mansion with Nikki Sixx while avoiding coked-out Playboy models and going on helicopter joyrides with Tommy Lee in between writing songs together . . . I still don’t believe it.
As hard rock became a bigger part of me, I started transforming into the shape of a rock guy. I grew my hair out, and by the time I’d turned sixteen, I’d become this phenomenal shredding guitar player. I was fanatical for all the freakish speed-demon virtuosos of technique. I was into Yngwie Malmsteen; still, of course, into Eddie Van Halen; I adored Steve Vai, even the stuff he did with Frank Zappa; Neil Schon from Journey; Santana, without a doubt. In particular, I was a junkie for this small subgenre of all the early shred-metal gurus—George Lynch of Dokken, Paul Gilbert of Racer X (and later Mr. Big), Chris Impellitteri, and a bunch of other guys with long Italian last names and big hair who could shred. You had to play insanely fast and technical or you wouldn’t even hold my attention. I had a real need for speed: I would even go to guitar clinics to learn how to play faster. I needed to get off, musically and otherwise.

I found I craved metal’s guitar-driven assault all the time, but also I loved that metal was dark, confrontationally anti-religion, and above all dirty—that it was about sex, not love. These were all things I wanted to explore. I was getting a little bored, living a double life. “Goddamn it, I need to go for it,” I kept telling myself, trying to build up the courage. I needed a new band that would be willing to not just go for the brass ring, but wear it as an earring and maybe hang a big pink feather off it, too.

Before I would fully embrace the metal god, however, I had to endure a very brief encounter with the Christian one. In the middle of my junior year, I did not know if I was on the right path with my love for Satan’s music, and my questioning was amplified via my peers who were Christians. Growing up in the Bible Belt, I was surrounded by Christianity: I even was forced to go to church on Sundays, which is something I still resent to this day. I will never force that on my kids—if they want to learn about religion, it’ll have to be due to their
own prerogative. Today I detest organized religion, but being young and impressionable, I went through a very brief post-adolescent phase of Christian rock in that moment. I had a Christian friend from school, who liked rock music; I didn’t have my license yet, so he’d drive us down to Atlanta to see Mylon LeFevre and Broken Heart play concerts at Mt. Paran Church. We’d see all these Christian versions of punk, metal, and rock bands. While passing around the bread offerings and drinking grape juice from a goblet, eventually I got asked to join a touring Christian hard-rock group called L.O.U.D., which stood for—get this—“love over universal destruction.” I was excited—rockin’ for God would be my ticket out.

I had two years at high school left, but I was sixteen—old enough to legally quit. I did not give a shit about school. By the time I was a sophomore, I really had no desire to go to class: I knew what I was going to do in my life—I was going to rock. I definitely wasn’t going to college, that’s for sure. I figured joining L.O.U.D. could be my ace in the hole with my churchgoing parents to allow me to quit early. I thought, “Well, I can quit school, but I’ll be on the road with a Christian band, so they’ll know at the very least that my morals won’t be all messed up.” The idea did not resonate well with my dad, however.

Butch Sr. possessed real leadership skill, especially for someone who had pulled himself up from nothing to some semblance of success: he’s a proud twenty-six-year employee of AT&T, and I used to love to visit him at work in Atlanta at the Southern Bell building in Little Five Points (the very same neighborhood that would become the hub of Atlanta’s music scene, and where I would reside as rocker, resident, and barfly for over a decade). However, as a kid, Big Butch was not much of a student, and I believe that shame hung over him: he didn’t want the same thing to happen to his kids. I remember finding his report cards from his childhood, hidden in his closet next to the guns and his secret stash of Playboy centerfolds from the ’50s and ’60s that I would love to look at. Dad’s report cards had no vowels in them: they
were straight consonants, all Cs, Ds, and Fs. And right when I was considering going on the road with L.O.U.D., we were going through a big generational disconnect centering on my own academic career (or lack thereof).

It all came to a head during a very emotional argument one day after I came home from school. At that point, my father was experiencing what I thought to be a midlife crisis. His mother had just passed away, so he had no parents anymore, and he was in a melancholic, often drunken-like state. I, meanwhile, was a little punk who thought he knew everything because he was playing nightclubs every night. That day, Dad sat me down and told me in no uncertain terms that he wanted me to graduate from high school. Even though he had never done well in school, he didn’t want me to end up as a quitter, and he certainly didn’t want me to end up uneducated, with no prospects. He asked me to at least finish high school, and if I did that, he would morally support me wholeheartedly in whatever I did. I remember it to this day because of the tears in his eyes: I never saw my dad cry that much. “I’ll never tell you you can’t do something,” he told me. “I’ll never stop you from doing anything. You can go play six nights a week, and do whatever you want, if you’ll just promise to graduate. Please, please, just don’t quit.” I saw how much it meant to him—his face just screamed, “Don’t fuck up”—so I agreed. Many years later, I would write a song about that conversation on “Song for the Metalheads,” a track that appeared on my 2008 album, Sycamore Meadows: “If it’s one thing my father said when he was younger/ to a kid with a mullet that looked like his son/ To want and to try is the difference why/ Some people will walk, and some run.”

I have a lot to be thankful to my dad for from that moment: not only did I finish high school, but he saved me from a career in Christian rock. I quickly returned to my dream of forming my ultimate metal band. My first metal group was started with a couple of stoner kids from Marietta: we called ourselves Nytemare. Yes, that’s right—N-Y-T-E-M-A-R-E. It
was my first experience with choosing heavy metal names: like choosing a porn name, it has to be just right. It’s no different than that scene in *Boogie Nights* when Dirk Diggler discovers his name while smoking pot in a hot tub with Jack Horner in an Encino backyard: “I want a name that just lights up when you hear it—where you can see it in lights.” While it is by no means an exact science, one can get started by, say, replacing any instance of the letter “i” with a “y.” Similarly, “z” can, and often should, be substituted for the letter “s”: Naughty Toyz, for example, just seems so much *heavier* than Naughty Toys. Try it sometime . . . This foolproof process turned William Bailey of Lafayette, Indiana, into Axl Rose of Guns N’ Roses; it has also worked wonders in modern hip-hop (which essentially is the same blueprint for hair metal of the ’80s). For Nytemare’s individual stage monikers, we simply adopted our first and last names from two different metalhead heroes. For my metal alias, I became “Robbin Frehley.” At the time, Robbin Crosby from Ratt was my favorite guitarist, and I liked Ace Frehley, too, so therefore “Robbin Frehley” was born, albeit for a short time (I can’t believe I am telling you this shit).

At first, we were like a gang: we’d go down to Six Flags covered in bandanas from head to toe, dangling earrings, smoking pot, cigarettes, or whatever we could get, and make fun of wimpy-ass bands like Rare Breed. Nytemare, alas, wouldn’t last long. Ken, the other guitar player, thought he was the dick and balls, but was really just a loudmouth, cocky, snotty little hesher dude from a white-trash neighborhood in Kennesaw, Georgia. At first, Ken seemed like a real bad boy to me, but it soon became clear he was just a shit talker and a terrible guitar player. I was a much better guitarist, so I was soon on my way to bigger, better, and heavier things.

Accordingly, I found my next partners in rock via my continued pursuit of shreditude. My musical chops had actually received a steroid boost a few years earlier, when I was forced to switch guitar teachers. Chris, hearing the call of Jehovah, eventually stopped giving
Butch Walker lessons, so I started up with another guy in Rome, Georgia, which was thirty minutes away. At the time I couldn’t yet legally drive, and my mom wouldn’t be out of work yet, but my teacher, Jerry King, would come and pick me up after school, even though he taught something like fifty students a week. Jerry was so passionate and crazy: he was a former Bay Area hippie who’d gone to music school at Berkeley. I idolized him. Jerry taught me how to do everything—music theory, chords, jazz; he even taught me about the music business, giving me a book on how to make a living as a musician. He saw I was very serious about making it, especially for my age. I got so good, he basically retired me after three years of taking lessons from him. In the beginning, Jerry would put together jazz guitar ensembles with ten of his best students and a drummer: we’d go out and do these concerts, playing complicated chart arrangements and medleys of old ’70s Santana songs, the Allman Brothers—things that I didn’t know about until he introduced them to me. The elite from Jerry’s stable would put on shows at the Rome City Auditorium every year; then, for the second half of the concert, he would let any of us that had our own bands play twenty-minute sets. That was even more important to us—we would get to play a concert for all the kids in Rome! The Scene dominated Jerry’s Rome revues, along with another band called Oasis. No, not that Oasis: there were no feuding Gallagher brothers in ’80s-era rural Georgia. This Oasis was clearly the Scene’s only real competition in town, though, and its members shared my mojo for metal.

Oasis had Jimmy Shilestett on guitar and Doug “Slug” Mitchell on drums, and I became really close friends with them immediately. Like me, they loved Mötley Crüe, Ozzy, Priest—all that. I started hanging out with them more than I did with my girlfriend, or anybody else, really: I’d missed out on having a brother growing up, or any friends that were into the same things, so these guys were my connection. I ended up hanging out constantly with those guys in the parking lot at
the Krystal Burger, eating fast food and listening to metal cassettes in our mini-trucks all night long.

We really bonded, though, when we’d camp out for concert tickets at Turtle Records and Tapes. Back in the day before the Internet and online ticket scalpers, you had to camp out in line the night before to get good floor seats for concerts: tickets would go on sale at eight A.M., and if you were not already in line hours before, you knew you were going to get stuck in the nosebleeds. Camping out for tickets begat its own subculture, which was amazing—sort of like the documentary *Heavy Metal Parking Lot*, but instead of congregating at the actual concert, we’d hang and party in the ticket line in front of the record store. All the effort often proved worth it: I camped out for Mötley Crüe tickets during the *Shout at the Devil* era. They were opening for Ozzy on the Ultimate Sin Tour, and on their second song, Vince Neil kicked a security guy in the head and went to jail. That was the best concert ever to me.

Jimmy, Slug, and I would go to those concerts together and mingle with all our fellow metalheads at this record store called Strawberries in the Riverbend Mall; we’d just go to the back room, set up shop for hours, and get schooled on music. Not only was I mesmerized by the girl who worked behind the register, but Strawberries got all the best import records on vinyl: Raven, Celtic Frost, Venom, Possessed (whose guitar player would go on to be in Primus), Mercyful Fate, Tygers of Pan Tang (which is where John Sykes, formerly of Thin Lizzy and later of Whitesnake, ended up). I would never hook up with Suzie, the girl who worked the Strawberries register: while I adored her leopard-print trench coat and jet-black Joan Jett haircut, Suzie became more like my wise big sister. She was older, and all her conquests were in touring metal bands. I was mesmerized by Susie’s knowledge and her inner-circle status inside the local Rome metal scene. She really took me under her wing, so I trusted her judgment when she introduced me to Chuck.
Of course, I already knew who Chuck was—you couldn’t miss him: he would walk into Strawberries looking like a rock star, which he sort of, in his own local mind, was. Chuck and this guy Drew Martin played in a regionally popular heavy metal cover band: they were touring all the time, even outside of Georgia, and I was impressed that they had their own PA system and homemade light show. I thought they were big time, so I was stunned when they asked me to audition for them. One day Chuck came up to me and said, “We heard from Suzie that you’re a hotshot guitar player. You should come down and rehearse with us.” All the while I’m thinking, “Wow! This is it! My big chance, finally!” We jammed and decided to start a whole new band we called Badd Boyz. Bad, indeed: I would later find out this guy wasn’t who I thought he was. Lemme tell ya, it was a hell of a way to spend my high school years. I thought I was in heaven. I would think with amazement, “Wow—I am going to high school during the day, and I have this secret life at night!”

To this day, I still love Drew Martin. He was like a big brother as well, but very fatherly and stern. Brash and confident, he could sing David Lee Roth better than, well, David Lee Roth. Chuck, I don’t like him so much. I would ultimately find out what a shitty and horrible person he was, but not until after he’d been my mentor and best friend for a good long while. He was the guy who took me under his wing, showed me the ropes, and introduced me to all of the glorious demons—in particular, all the girls with STDs and drug habits. In Chuck and Drew, I had truly found my tribe. Chuck played bass and sang: he had a high voice, so he could sing a lot of crazy metal songs like “Mean Streak” by Y&T and all these covers that I always wanted to do. For our first rehearsal, I brought along Slug from Oasis to play drums (the original drummer left to play in a Holiday Inn circuit cover lounge band), and we had instant musical chemistry. The first song we played together was “Bark at the Moon” by Ozzy Osbourne, and Chuck and Drew just lost their minds at how good we were. Slug
was my age, but he was a shredder on drums, and me, I could play all the Jake E. Lee solos note for note. Once we started jamming, they were like, “Oh, you guys are more than hired.” Looking back, I think Chuck saw us as his meal ticket. He had the hair and the image and everything, but was a very average talent compared to Slug and me, and we were ten years younger and prettier to boot.

Badd Boyz rehearsals took place at the local Fraternal Order of Police lodge in Rome, Georgia. Now, how did a band full of deviant, underage-beer-drinking, chick-mongering slacker metal dudes practice at such a place—and free of charge, I might add, with twenty-four-hour access and our own key? The only expectation was that we had to be the backup band for Kenneth Kines, the local chief of police, every year at the annual policemen’s Christmas ball. Chief Kines fancied himself an expert Elvis impersonator, so he’d slick back his hair, dress up in rhinestones and boots, and we’d play covers of “Hound Dog” and “Heartbreak Hotel” all night. By the way, he called the band—I couldn’t make this up—“Kenneth Kines and the Fourskins.” Being in with the local police certainly held advantages for a young rock-and-roll dirtbag. I just remember many times driving around Rome after three A.M., a little buzzed and stoned after playing a show, and I’d see the blue lights of a police car coming up behind me. Instead of busting me, though, the cops would pull up next to my mini-truck, say, “Is that all you got, pussy?” and then hit the gas hard. We’d end up drag-racing down Highway 411.

It was a hell of a ride, my life at that moment. My parents, my teachers, my friends from school—they did not know about all this. I was breaking all the rules: we even had secret mattresses stashed down in the basement of the Fraternal Order of Police lodge, where I got turned into a man by the crazy girls who would hang out with us. Chuck knew all the really hot girls into hard rock. With their big
hair-spray hair and animal-print miniskirts, they resembled the red-neck-lite version of the chicks in Hollywood filling the Sunset Strip, like the ones that we’d see on MTV in Mötley Crüe videos. Soon enough, I’d be experiencing the real thing.

We started playing at this place we’ll call “Bo’s Chicken Shack,” which had no ceiling left after our first week gigging there: all this asbestos was hanging down because our homemade pyrotechnics had burned out the tiles (thank God we didn’t burn the club down like Great White did in Rhode Island in 2003). Bo’s was a dump, whose owner was a good, jovial man with a taste for the rock-and-roll party lifestyle. I knew that the band was earning money, but I was too young and stupid to pay much attention. My mind was elsewhere, anyway—I was usually in the corner, wasted on free drinks and getting dry-humped by a girl with the Kennesaw Claw for hair (Kennesaw being a popular Atlanta suburb full of these girls with upward-hair-sprayed, claw-like bangs) before having to go to high school three hours later.

This was my life, six nights a week. By our second summer with Badd Boyz as Bo’s house band, Slug and I had our own keys to the club, which was insane, because I was only sixteen years old and Slug was just a year older; it became the place to hang—our own private man-cave of sin. We could drive there any night after hours and get all the beer we wanted. We had a mattress under the drum riser, too, where we’d take girls after the bar closed (I know, gross . . . I’m sorry, Mom!).

We were starting to draw larger audiences so well that every time we played, we could pack out Bo’s. We were the only reason that place stayed open: it was always dead on the nights we didn’t play. Then it would be packed to the gills—every person in Rome, Georgia, would be there, out of their minds on cocaine, meth, and alcohol. Badd Boyz were playing three sets a night, and I was making great money for a teenager—it sure beat working at Kentucky Fried Chicken.
By now, I was beginning to suspect that something was wrong, but Chuck managed the band’s finances, which gradually became an issue between us. Realizing something was deeply fishy with Badd Boyz, Slug and I secretly decided to move on. We started talking quietly to Slug’s former bandmates in Oasis about creating a new super group. We were already friends, and whenever we saw each other, we were like, “Yeah, man, we should get together and jam sometime!” The plan was to covertly unite the best of the best from Rome’s music scene to create the greatest metal cover band ever (?). Indeed, this band would prove to be my ticket to the famed Sunset Strip and its bacchanalian orgy of metallic pleasure. Little did I know we’d be the hometown heroes for a long time after we signed the proverbial Big Major-Label Record Deal.

Under everyone’s noses, we formed this new super group, which we named Byte the Bullet. Chuck smelled a rat, so he cut ranks and disappeared. Before he skipped town, though, he took all the money from a couple weeks’ worth of Badd Boyz shows and stole all of the band’s equipment. We had a school bus that we converted into a tour bus, which the band owned collectively, bought with our gig money; that left with him, along with everything in it. We owned everything in our little empire of a traveling road show: we had a professional truss light show, full PA system, all the amps and guitars I used—and Chuck just took off with all of it. He was never to be seen or heard from again. I wanted to kill him, yes of course; I was so pissed, I cried like a seventeen-year-old. Right then and there, I realized that the music business will fuck with you no matter what: that those guys who were your friends, bandmates, gang members, fellow musketeers, whatever—they can and often will screw you at the drop of a guitar pick. After that, I made sure I was always the leader; I always took matters into my own hands and did every deal, settling up everything myself from that point forward. In that way, Chuck was great for me: he gave me my independence.
After suffering this loss, I was determined to succeed with Byte the Bullet. First, however, we had to undergo a purification ritual, shed our former identities, and take on new metal names—well, most of us. “Butch Walker” and the name of Byte’s bassist, Jayce Fincher, were deemed sufficiently tough-sounding; Slug, however, became “Mitch McLee,” while Jimmy became “Jesse Harte.” Jesse was the rhythm guitar player in Oasis, but then I discovered that he had a crazy-pitched voice—an undiscovered high-range metal squeal that even he didn’t know existed. Plus, he was really cute, in good shape, with a baby-faced Leif Garrett look and bleached-blond hair. I was like, “Oh, this is perfect! You are my guy. You are my Vince Neil.” I did not want to be Vince Neil; I wanted to be a serious shredder like Jake E. Lee. So Jesse dropped the guitar and became the front man from that day forward, and that is when we became Byte the Bullet. That name just sounded “rock.” Of course, we had to misspell it. There was no other option—blond lead singer plus misspelled band name was the only way forward, give or take an umlaut over the vowels. I know we had umlauts somewhere, but I cannot remember where I put them. Has anybody seen my umlauts?

Getting started was tough, as Chuck had split with all my gear. We decided we didn’t need fancy lights or a PA system; we would dazzle people with our musicianship alone. Once I got a used Ibanez guitar on layaway at the music store that I worked at, it was on. At first, however, we had trouble getting gigs, because Chuck burned so many people in the music scene. But soon enough we took over as the reigning kings of Bo’s Chicken Shack, which was funny, as we were all still way too young to even get in there. But we didn’t fit in with our age group, either. I would get up to go to high school half-asleep after playing a gig the night before, eyeliner still running down my face. Seeing me, the cheerleaders would always say, “Oh, how is your little band doing? That is so cute! You play in a little band. Maybe you can play our prom this year or something!” They
would be so condescending, thinking their lives were so goddamn amazing and exciting, while mine was so pathetic and trivial; I was like, “You have no idea what I did last night.” My parents reiterated that as long as I maintained a C average and graduated, then I could do whatever I wanted; if I received any failing grades on my report cards, however, then I was done. I made sure I got a B average just to prove that I could do it, but I was ready to get out of there as quickly as I could. I had a few close calls, though. In my senior year, I’d signed up for Diversified Co-op Training, where, if you weren’t going to take college prep, you would get class credit instead for working a job. Best of all, doing DCT, I got to leave school at lunchtime. My DCT teacher, Mr. Pinkard, was an asshole, though. He loved to fail people, obsessively checking up on students with surprise visits where they worked, because there was nothing he loved more than busting your balls. Alas, there was no way I could tell him, “I’m working in Atlanta playing clubs six nights a week”; that would never fly. Instead, I taught guitar lessons at the local music store, Strings and Things. The store was a real revelation for me. The last time there was a music store in Cartersville, it was run by a drunk who gave me two guitar lessons (both out of the aforementioned Mel Bay book), after which I quit due to being bored out of my skull. Strings and Things was more progressive. When I found out they were looking for a guitar teacher (thank you, Chris Fowler, for calling me and tipping me off on this), I immediately called the store and the guy invited me down to “try out” for the position. Keep in mind that, in Cartersville, I would have the random yokel come in and pawn off a vintage guitar for a Bible hymn book and in the same breath get told, “Look at you with your long hair—I bet you play the Devil’s music.” I would swiftly reply, “Is the Jesus painting above your bed the one with short hair?” After that, they would quickly leave and probably cry and masturbate on the way home. The owner of Strings and Things, Ashley Schubert, would
become one of my best friends, and also my dad’s best friend and drinking buddy. Ashley was the coolest: we’d have beers every day, and he cut me a lot of slack. I’d teach guitar lessons three days a week, then cut out early and drive to Atlanta to play clubs with my band until two in the morning. If I needed to skip out and get some sleep, he would cover for me whenever Mr. Pinkard would come by to check on me. “Butch is in the back room teaching—you can’t interrupt his lesson,” Ashley would tell him, when actually I’d be home in bed, hungover. Without Ashley covering my back, I would’ve never graduated high school and gotten to pursue my holy grail of rock liberation. I think, in a way, he was good for my relationship with my father. We became closer due to the shared respect that we had for Ashley. My dad and Ashley started coming to my shows together: they were theoretically “checking in on me,” but also just having a beer and a laugh at what I was doing and getting away with. When Big Butch and Ashley were there, I remember the club “regulars,” shady characters in their own right, would come to me and ask, “Hey, are them guys nars?”

By this time, I had become a legend in my own mind. Byte the Bullet got a pretty good local following, and pretty soon we got too big for our spandex pants—definitely too big for Rome, Georgia. We constantly debated whether we were going to stay in town or try our luck somewhere else. It was probably time to leave—all the boyfriends of the girls we were screwing wanted to kill us: “Please put down that pocketknife, sir, and I kindly won’t touch Kimberly Jo again.”

That was reason enough to get out of there—that, and I wanted to show up my old bass player, Chuck. I’m a Scorpio to the fullest: I love revenge. I do not forgive at all. And I knew, paraphrasing the cliché, that success was the best “fuck you” I could give him. I wanted to prove to Chuck that he was the loser in this equation; in fact, I wanted to smear that fact in his fat face. I wanted so badly to succeed without him. And against all odds, later that year, 1990, we did. (Often I won-
der about Chuck nowadays—if he is dead or in jail, or maybe working a factory job with seven kids. I don’t know: he never came out of the woodwork like so many others, so I will never know. I actually hope he is okay . . .)

I was seventeen years old. I’d graduated high school, just like I’d promised my parents I would. I wasn’t going to college, I knew that: I was going to the finishing school of rock and roll—Los Angeles. If you were a hair metal band, that’s where you had to be. Our mission was to become the biggest band on the Sunset Strip and get signed to a huge, major-label record deal. Within a year, unbelievably, we would accomplish these goals, and so many more I hadn’t even thought of. Rock-and-roll mega-stardom would finally be within my grasp . . . And just as quickly would slip out of it. As the band prepared our move to L.A., I pledged I was going to make it in the music industry without getting screwed. By now, I’d been done over and ripped off so often, I knew I would never let it happen again.

Of course it did.