

# The Weakened Worriers

By Bill Anschell

John awoke feeling unsettled. He'd had a troubled sleep, which usually meant he'd gone to bed upset. So he turned his thoughts to last night's gig—one of the musicians must have said something to him afterward. *No, wait! None of them said anything to him, that was it!* Nobody said, "Sounded great, man," or anything else nice like that, even though he'd made a point of saying it to each of them.

He must have sucked, yet again. Why did Theodore keep hiring him? He wasn't good-looking—on the short side, not fat but definitely soft, prematurely gray, and pallid—and he didn't read or solo very well. Still, for some reason he kept getting the calls. Maybe there just weren't any good sax players willing to play the gigs, and he was something inoffensive that Theodore settled for. That must be it.

He waited patiently for his wife to wake up. She was a singer, pretty good, a part-time pro with a music degree from a local college. One night, while hosting a vocal jam, she was struck by how skanky the microphone smelled. In her mind it immediately became a thriving petri dish for spatio-plosives, cultured by the bacteria of every singer before her. She dropped the mike, ran to the restroom, vomited in the sink, and didn't finish the gig.

Since then she would perform only acoustically, which ruled out all but one of her regular gigs, a New Year's Eve party where her sole job was to sing "Auld Lang Syne" in a millionaire's guest room. She was one of fifteen singers he situated throughout the house to make sure all his friends were serenaded exactly at midnight. That gig meant everything to her now; throughout the year John could see her staring at her watch and quietly practicing "Three, two, one. Should auld acquaintance be forgot. Three, two, one . . ."

Now John prodded her with his feet. "What?" she mumbled, rubbing her eyes, easing into consciousness.

"Just say it," he begged.

"Oh for Christ's sake," she snarled, suddenly fully awake. "Fine. Whatever. Honey, you played great last night. Okay? Now can I go back to sleep?"

*Ha!* he thought. *What does she know?*

He needed to practice; he always needed to practice. He would be playing tenor, soprano, and clarinet tonight, so he gave all three a good workout, equally distressed by his sound on each. Then, to clear his palate, he plopped down in his living room and spent a couple of hours listening to three of his idols—Trane, Bird, Prez. He was struck yet again by how much better than him they were. Trane was so much more powerful, Bird more fluent, Prez more tasteful. What adjective would people use to describe his own playing once he'd died? John was obsessed by his place in history, though his expectations were minimal. "Well-intentioned" seemed like the best he could hope for. But what was really so good about his intentions?

Before he knew it, it was time to shower, get dressed, and leave. He'd cut it dangerously close, and when he grabbed his tux shirt on the way out he realized he'd forgotten to wash it. He smelled the pits. *Nasty!* And that would be his starting point, ground zero, which over the course of the night could only get worse. He shook his head and half smiled: for once, he would actually be funky. He loaded his three horns into his car, kissed his wife goodbye—"Play the pretty notes" were her parting words, leaving him to wonder which notes those could possibly be—and headed out to his home for the evening, the Westin.

The gig promised to be a logistical nightmare. The star of the evening—like every bride at every wedding gig, ever—had declared it the most important night of her life, and the musicians would inevitably pay a price. For starters, they had to load into the ballroom three hours early so no guest would suffer the indignity of seeing them in transit. Approaching the hotel, John gave an involuntary shudder. Each venue had its own way of making the load-in miserable, but the Westin took top honors.

It started at the loading zone in the well-hidden back entrance, which Theodore insisted all the band members use. Although parking in the zone was prohibited, John had to leave his car there, blinkers flashing, while he ran his horns up to the Grand Ballroom. That created the ever-looming threat of getting towed while he navigated the hotel's interior maze. He'd gotten away with it every time so far, running back as soon as he'd stashed his horns in the ballroom, but it made him nervous. Now he threw his tenor over his shoulder, grabbed the soprano and clarinet, and quickly made his way to the back door.

First he had to pass through the dumpsters, the Westin's best-kept and most feared secret, the yin to its spotless interior's yang. Inside were all the scraps from the hotel's pricey meals—rejects from the kitchen and discards from the pampered guests' plates—garnished with healthy dollops of grease and filth. The festering odor fell just short of biological weaponry. He breathed through his mouth as he squeezed between the dumpsters to access the ramp leading to the door, thankful he didn't have to maneuver a dolly like Bam-Bam and Pissface did. The ramp, as always, was littered with waste that hadn't quite reached its target, so he dodged his way through animal and vegetable detritus, slipping once and almost dropping his clarinet as he caught himself. At the top of the ramp he pried open the door, which led directly into the kitchen.

There the smells were decidedly more pleasant, but the floor was another story. It was coated with a deep layer of slime, sometimes sticky and other times slippery; Bam-Bam, the drummer, called it "the unknowable primordial goo." A narrow path led through carts laden with appetizers and desserts, the carts' wheels blocked to prevent them from sliding down the slight incline. John watched his feet leaving gooey footprints and felt as if he were adding his autograph to a ledger filled out by all those before him, an ancestral record of his oppressed brethren. He was grateful for the company, wondering if his predecessors might have shared some of his own musical flaws.

Suddenly he became aware of an accident in the making: Bam-Bam, floundering ahead of him, had lost his footing in the goo, causing him to lose his grip on the drum dolly. When he tried to grab it back he slipped again, in the process propelling it straight toward John. John had nowhere to go; the path was too narrow for him to sidestep the dolly, and he couldn't run from it without risking falling and hurting his horns.

Fate, for once, was on his side: he was saved when the dolly ducked sideways into an appetizer cart, sending spanakopita, Swedish meatballs, and cocktail shrimp flying in all directions. Unfortunately, several meatballs' flight paths converged on his tux shirt, quickly turning it into an abstract study in brown and white. Seeing no better option he pressed forward, squeezing past the dolly, crushing fallen food with each step, grateful for the additional traction.

He soon reached an alcove where he was able to set his horns on a chair, unbutton his shirt, and commence to sucking on all the brown spots. The gravy tasted promising, and he looked forward to making a more meaningful connection on the band's break. At the moment, though, he was more concerned with the stains; lighter in color now that he'd added his saliva to the mix, but still leaving his shirt speckled with light-brown greasy blotches. On the plus side, the gravy's smell partially covered up his own body odor, which had ramped up with the stress.

Bam-Bam joined him in the alcove, and after a quick apology, shifted into his preferred mode: name-dropping. "You think this was bad, man, you should have seen the time I was touring with the Grass Roots. I about took out half the band! There was this gourmet catered meal for us—we always ate, like, sirloin, lobster, pork medallions—and I knocked over the table. The food went all over everything! The guys are like, covered with this high-end food, and I swear they would have fired me if they didn't like my playing so much."

Bam-Bam loved to brag about what a great rock player he was, even though the marquee bands he'd toured with had been way past their prime and without their best original members. The only thing he really got out of those tours was significant hearing loss; now he pounded the drums brutally just to hear them. In his spare time he worked out relentlessly, a muscled, all-American fifty-five-year-old who had the stamina to play way too loud all night. He was so loud that the other musicians had started showing up earlier and earlier, vying to lay claim to the bandstand real estate farthest from his drums. He also rushed terribly, which at his volume made him an irresistible, corrupting force. The only time the other musicians appreciated Bam-Bam was at the end of the night when Theodore announced, "We've got just a couple of songs left"; they knew Bam-Bam would make the two tunes go speedily, bringing a night of misery to a faster conclusion.

Fortunately, Bam-Bam's drums had all stayed on the dolly and a few of them had even acquired a spattering of shrimp and meatballs, now fair game for the two musicians. They ate quickly and greedily, wiping their hands on their tux pants, then took the service elevator up and navigated their way to the ballroom together. John was crushed to find the other musicians already in place; unlike John and Bam-Bam they had seen Theodore's text moving the setup time a half hour earlier. Not only was John late, but he would be sitting on the vacant chair right next to the crash cymbal. And of course in his hurry he'd forgotten his earplugs.

"Gentleman—I'm so honored you've deigned to join us!" Theodore was a pretentious bandleader who docked the pay of any musician foolish enough to call him Ted. He directed the band with a conductor's baton, whether they were playing their opening "light jazz" set or the dance music they hated. It was all for show; they didn't need a conductor and he didn't know how to conduct. Sometimes in the thrill of the moment he grabbed a percussion instrument and joined in the mayhem, striking the object arrhythmically and shaking his blubbery butt in a manner he thought sexy. He also fancied himself a lead singer—his schtick was to suddenly point the baton at himself, feign surprise, and start singing—but fortunately Bam-Bam's deafening drums usually swallowed up his tuneless voice. Theodore harbored the illusion that he wasn't old or ugly, and in a fight against both he dyed his hair the same red he was born with and wore tight clothes, figuring somehow that they flattered his figure. "Now get in your damn seat and pretend you give a shit, Rocco."

Theodore called all the musicians Rocco; they knew why, but he didn't know they knew. Rocco was the name of his dog.

John squeezed between his chair and music stand and sat down; each player had a podium-sized stand in front of him, prominently sporting the WW logo. WW stood for Weekend Warriors,

which was the centerpiece of Theodore's unconventional (in his mind *brilliant*) marketing ploy: he wanted clients to think they were getting a bargain by hiring amateur or semi-pro musicians, even though he offered only a minor discount. The net result was that only the most ignorant clients booked the band, and they came predisposed to disrespect the musicians. That disrespect was fully mutual and assured an antagonistic client-band dynamic through the night.

How was Theodore able to get competent musicians to step into such an unhealthy situation? Simple: He had a nose for players who were broken—has-beens who would never be again. Each of them—except for John and Bam-Bam—had once commanded respect from his peers before being brought down by one or more personal shortcomings. Now they were lucky to get called by anyone; Theodore leveraged this and the huge surplus of available players to overwork and underpay them. Still, they desperately needed the money and lived in fear of losing the gig. In recognition of their sorry condition they came up with their own name for the band: the Weakened Worriers. Among the Weakened Worriers there was occasional bonding in the face of adversity, but most of the time they were at Theodore's mercy.

What exactly were their shortcomings? John scanned the bandstand and refreshed his memory. Next to him, of course, was Bam-Bam, the terminal name-dropper and hearing-impaired basher. On John's other side was The Bull, a onetime lead trumpeter for one of the top touring big bands, brought down by his own overblown ego. The Bull was so named for his sheer enormity in both size and sound; he was a former offensive lineman who'd let himself go and now proved his athleticism by playing as loud and high as he could at all times. He had one great love—money—and it infuriated him that he wasn't making more than the others, whom he considered his inferiors. During breaks he would dreamily organize the bills in his wallet by denomination and showily study his stock portfolio—which the others assumed was fictitious—on his phone.

On the other side of Bam-Bam was the rest of the rhythm section: guitar, keyboards, and bass. The guitarist was Louie, a burly Italian guy who was an inveterate prankster and determined substance abuser. Those two traits had ultimately wrecked his career, but not before he'd become the stuff of legend. Most infamous was a wedding gig where the guest tables had been set with disposable cameras along with the silverware. The guests were asked to take shots, collectively capturing the wedding from a multitude of perspectives, then leave the cameras for the bride and groom to develop and cherish forever. Louie had pocketed a camera on one of his breaks, taken it into a toilet stall, and documented—in great detail and from highly creative angles—his own hairy ass. Then he had surreptitiously placed it back on the table it came from, leaving a very personalized tribute to the bride and groom. He was the band favorite, both for his fearless antics and for his generosity with homegrown weed on their breaks. John stayed clear of the weed—fearing it would make him play even worse—except when he was playing so badly that it could only make him play better. It never did.

On keyboards was Pissface, who had played a few too many solo piano gigs over his long and declining career. For the last twenty years he'd held down a background gig in a fancy hotel lobby where he had been subjected to a parade of indignities. He considered himself a sitting duck for insult and degradation, his hands and mind too musically engaged to come to his defense when he was provoked.

The final straw came just a few weeks ago when an attractive woman, after listening intently to several of his songs, discreetly set a folded piece of paper at the far end of the piano on her way out. As he finished his set he considered the possibilities: a tip (most likely), her phone number (admittedly a pipe dream), or maybe a song request for the next time she heard him (better than nothing). He eagerly opened it and was greeted with a well-chewed wad of gum swimming in phlegm; she had used the paper as a tissue and the piano as a garbage receptacle.

Pissface's nickname came from his fixation with his own secretions, and that figured prominently the night he'd been gifted the snotty gum. On his next set, while keeping a groove going with his left hand, he used his right to drink a glass of wine, then unzip his fly and urinate in the empty wineglass with tremendous precision. When he ended the song, he zipped himself up and put the glass—by all appearances a fine untouched pour of white—at the far end of the piano, savoring the moment when one of the guests tried to take a sip. It never actually reached the guest's lips—Pissface had eaten asparagus for lunch that day—but the tale became a source of tremendous pride.

On bass was Art, the band septuagenarian, who had lived on fumes since he was fifty. He was a wisp of a man, a small skeleton plus flesh, and that flesh was disturbingly translucent. No one could figure out where he got the strength to dominate an instrument that outsized and nearly outweighed him, but ordinary limitations seldom applied to Art.

He'd never owned a tux, but got away with wearing a white T-shirt with a taped-on bow tie, a dark-navy blazer, and black tennis shoes; this earned him the other musicians' undying admiration. Of all the players in the band he had ascended the furthest—touring with some of the best living jazz artists—then fallen precipitously following a brief psychotic episode. He was now kept sane by heavy medication, the launching point for his ongoing quest to expand his mind; stepping into the parking lot with Louie during band breaks helped too. In addition to consuming a steady diet of medicinal and recreational drugs, he practiced meditation, Buddhism, and several more cultish New Age philosophies. In a band full of egos he was actually the most talented by far, though he couldn't care less about such earthly concerns.

The greatest band mystery was why Theodore—who cared less about the music than about appearances, punctuality, and subservience—kept hiring Art. For his part, John was grateful musicianship wasn't normally important to Theodore; if it were, John knew he would have been fired long ago. He also knew that to be on the same bandstand as Art, even playing such mediocre music in embarrassing settings, was something of a miracle.

The band quickly sound-checked, then Theodore broke their hearts: “Since we're all here, we may as well tighten up on some of these charts.”

“We'd better get paid for this,” muttered The Bull, stroking his wallet for reassurance, but they all knew there wasn't a chance in hell. So they ran through some charts they could play perfectly well and others they'd never play well at all, pointedly staring at their watches and phones whenever they thought Theodore might be looking.

The rehearsal didn't end until guests began to enter, an hour before the gig itself would begin. John ran to the elevator, took it down to the kitchen, and ran out to his car . . . or where he'd left it. It was nowhere to be found, his no-tow streak finally broken. He spent almost the entire hour tracking it down, phoning all the towing companies until he'd located it a few miles away. He begged the company to let him pick it up after 11:00, when the gig ended, but they wouldn't budge—they closed at 10:00 and he'd have to get it tomorrow. He wondered who he could get to drive him home after the gig. None of the choices were appealing, but he settled on Bam-Bam, who owed him a favor after the dolly incident.

Now it was just five minutes before showtime, so he ran back in, slipping over rotting food on the ramp and skating his way through the kitchen slime. Unburdened by his horns, he was far steadier on his feet. Mid-slime he was even able to snag a piece of chocolate cake from a dessert cart, minor compensation for what was already becoming a night from hell. His fingers were covered in chocolate frosting, so he wiped them on his tux shirt since it was already covered by brown stains anyway.

“So happy you could join us, Rocco,” Theodore said as John slid into his seat. He pointed his baton accusingly and continued, “Don’t mind us, we just have a fucking gig to play.” And with that Theodore counted off the first tune in their “light jazz” set. The set proceeded as it always did: The musicians, all of whom—except Bam-Bam—considered themselves jazz artists, were briefly excited to play music they cared about and approached it with something bordering on passion. Then Bam-Bam entered, loud as ever, relentlessly rushing, and their hearts sank. Sadly, they shifted to self-preservation mode, each fighting to solo first, before the tempo became unplayably fast. The Bull, ever the alpha dog, usually won; regardless of the winner Bam-Bam pounded and rushed away, oblivious to the drama and his starring role in it.

Bam-Bam’s terrible playing set off a chain reaction. The Bull ended a solo halfway through, glaring at Pissface: he didn’t like Pissface’s chords. Pissface, in turn, shot daggers at Louie, knowing that *his* chords were the real culprit. Louie stared accusingly at John, trying to figure out what to blame him for. John looked back at him apologetically, knowing it was surely his fault. Theodore angrily punched holes in the air with his baton in a futile attempt to restore order. Art played on; he was untouchable.

The songs rushed but time slowed, an hour set feeling like a very long evening. Musical misbehavior commenced: The Bull gratuitously quoted “A Love Supreme” during “It Had to Be You”; Bam-Bam broke a drumstick while primally pounding the tubs, Fred Flintstone style, on “Sing, Sing, Sing”; and Pissface made a show of jumping up and down and baring his teeth—a middle-aged heavy metal face—while holding innocuous organ chords on “Fly Me to the Moon.” John struggled with his clarinet’s throat tones.

Then Theodore, as always, called a couple of extra tunes, a gratis show of generosity toward the client that cost him nothing but the band’s goodwill. As soon as he announced the break, four of the musicians hurried toward Louie, then quickly disappeared with him. Pissface, more inclined toward booze, approached the bar in the ballroom’s corner but was denied by the bartender: “Sorry, client’s orders.” He held himself in check and angrily rushed to his car, parked a block away in a discount lot.

While the others were outside, John hid in a bathroom stall, mentally replaying all the mistakes he’d made in the first set. There was no greater badge of shame than to be the only sober player; John hoped that by staying out of sight he could convince the others he’d been doing drugs on his own. When he heard them return he stumbled into the ballroom, attempting to sell intoxication of an unspecified variety.

An elderly woman approached The Bull, who had migrated to the buffet area. “You look so nice,” she said. “Do you do this professionally?”

“Not yet,” he said. “But you want to know what my favorite hobby is? I love shaving, showering, putting on a tux, driving through gridlocked traffic to a fancy hotel, leaving my car in the loading zone and hoping it won’t be towed while I race through slime and scum to get to the ballroom three hours early, playing music I don’t like with musicians who aren’t nearly as good as me while some clown waves his baton at us, then meeting exciting people like you and having scintillating conversations like this one.”

He smiled at her and she smiled back, saying, “And I enjoy talking with you, too, young man. Thank you so very much.”

Art and Bam-Bam, standing nearby, were stunned. The Bull was generally monosyllabic and rarely spoke in complete sentences; for him, this was shockingly close to poetry.

John was then approached by a middle-aged man, who complimented his playing. “Really?” John asked. “Even my solo on ‘The Girl from Ipanema’? The bridge, you know, is just kind of hard, for me anyway, plus my throat tones . . .” The man insisted that John had sounded great. *No way*, John thought. *There’s gotta be something wrong with this guy. He must be weird. Please don’t turn out to be weird, sir. Please, please be normal.* They talked a little more; the man was weird.

Louie grabbed Art and Bam-Bam and pointed to a young woman standing nearby talking to her friends. An open handbag was slung over her shoulder with her phone clearly visible. “What would you give me to pinch that phone, run in the bathroom, take some close-ups of my privates, then put the phone back in her bag?”

“An encore of your greatest hit, with a new intro and ending just for us,” Art observed wispily. “That’s beautiful.” He pulled open his pockets to show no wallet, much less any actual cash. No surprise there.

“Thirty bucks,” said Bam-Bam.

Louie was insulted. “Thirty? A hundred or forget it!”

So Bam-Bam and Art quickly took up a collection, discreetly pulling other band members aside, whispering and verifying. They hurried back to Louie. “One hundred fifty dollars!” said Bam-Bam.

“Deal!” said Louie.

Now all the musicians kept a clandestine eye on Louie as he launched into the takeaway. “So clean,” Art sighed admiringly as Louie pocketed the phone and disappeared into the men’s room. “Such impeccable technique, so effortless,” added Bam-Bam. The rest of the musicians similarly swooned. A couple of minutes later, Louie emerged, winked at them, and went to replace the phone in the woman’s handbag. Unfortunately, right at that moment she turned toward him—bad luck!—and saw him reaching toward her bag, her phone in his palm. She grabbed it from him. “Thief!” she yelled. “Big, fat, old douchebag! Asshole!”

“Harsh,” murmured Art, who appeared shaken. But maybe he was just old and and tired and high.

“How is it we forgot to videotape this?” The Bull asked. A wave of sadness passed over all of them, the lost opportunity promising to haunt them for weeks to come.

The band would get no entrées, and they weren’t even allowed to hit the appetizer buffet until all the guests had passed through. That gave them little time to eat anything before the next set began; once again Theodore had sold them out to the event planner. As the line thinned, all musicians’ eyes were trained on the buffet, and they hovered near their planned points of attack.

Suddenly, a tussle broke out. Pissface had come back from his car energized and lawless, going straight to the front of the line, drunkenly explaining that he was a musician in the band and needed to eat right away before being called back onstage. Unfortunately, the person he cut directly in front of was the bride, who was now yelling at him. Louie rushed to his defense. “We’re so sorry, ma’am,” he said, in his most conciliatory tone. “But it could have been so much worse—I mean, imagine if this were the most important day of your life and not just a very ordinary wedding.”

Could Louie keep it up? They'd never find out because Theodore had come running full speed from across the room. He'd seen Pissface cut in line, and also the bride's reaction. He angrily grabbed Pissface by the arm and steered him to a nearby open room. The other musicians followed, smelling blood. Their phones were held high—they were determined not to miss capturing this as they'd missed Louie's disaster.

Theodore sat Pissface in a chair and yelled down at him. "We don't EVER cut in front of guests, at the buffet or anywhere else! And we sure as hell don't cut in front of the bride! Did you know I don't get the second half of our payment until the party's over, you dumbshit? Did you consider that I count on the clients telling Larry they loved us, and that's how I get us more work?" Larry was the booking agent who sent them most of their gigs, a corrupt, condescending, self-satisfied former drummer. He liked to tell musicians that he knew more about their craft than they did, and treasured his power over them. "What's Larry going to say about this?" Theodore continued. "Why would he *ever* hire us again? Well? Say something, Rocco!"

Pissface shifted uncomfortably in the chair, searching for a snappy comeback or at least a decent line of self-defense. Being drunk didn't help; no words came. "Say something, Rocco, dammit! Talk to me! Speak!"

Pissface looked at Theodore sadly. "Um . . . woof? Arf! Arf!"

Theodore was taken aback, eyes widening. "Good boy," he finally said, petting Pissface on the head.

Meanwhile, back at the buffet, several obese guests still lingered, grazing bovinely. John had skipped the Pissface drama, preferring to stay within direct view of the food, much of which he'd already seen in his earlier brush with death. The Swedish meatballs, spanakopita, and cocktail shrimp were now augmented by greasy egg rolls, an unappealing fruit tray, cubes of cheese, and lots of bread and crackers. Budget band, budget catering. Still, his stomach gurgled and he felt slightly faint with hunger.

Predictably, just as the last guest left the buffet, Theodore summoned the musicians back to the bandstand. John, normally too steeped in self-doubt to rebel, gathered himself. Then in one fluid motion he whirled around, scooped up a handful of cheese cubes, and tried to toss them into his tux jacket pocket, held agape by his free hand. Unfortunately, his throwing arm's sleeve took a detour through the egg roll sauce, and when he quickly jerked the arm away most of the cheese cubes landed on the floor. Trying to avoid them, he stumbled badly. Two stuck to the bottom of his shoe, probably cheddar. Walking unevenly to the bandstand, nursing on his shirt and tux, he made a three-course meal of the new egg roll sauce, the recent cake frosting, and the old meatball gravy. Theodore finally noticed John's stained shirt and shook his head in disgust. "How many times I gotta tell you, Rocco: you wear fucking white, you eat fucking white."

It was time for the brutal dance set. The band would play continuously—and badly, and loudly—for two and a half hours, with occasional breathers given to the musicians on a rotating basis. They would cover all the biggest dance hits, Theodore playing the audience like a giant instrument. Now a disco song to get them moving, now a ballad to get the shyer dancers on the floor, now an R&B medley to keep them from leaving. The musicians felt like accomplices to criminal bad taste and co-conspirators in musical murder. The news was mixed for John: he no longer loathed his playing; instead he loathed himself.

But he could barely engage in proper self-contempt because his right ear was inches from Bam-Bam's cymbal and Bam-Bam had taken sole responsibility for giving the dancers the punishing

beat they wanted. All the other musicians had put in earplugs; only John and Bam-Bam were unprotected from the sheer violence of the music, and Bam-Bam didn't have much hearing left to lose. John's right ear started to crackle, Bam-Bam's crashes contorting it in all the wrong ways.

Even as he suffered, John found solace in the knowledge that his mediocre reading and subpar improvising were now practically inaudible. But the brutal volume had apparently triggered his fight-or-flight reflex; the emanation from his armpits now rivaled that of the dumpsters below. "Dude," yelled The Bull, punching John's shoulder, "I'm dying over here. How about I trade you my earplugs for some nose plugs? You smell like moldering shit in a bouillon factory." John quickly sniffed his pits and confirmed The Bull's assessment. He pulled his arms tight to his sides, which changed the horn's angle in his mouth, much for the worse. The Bull watched with amusement. "Stink or squeak," he shouted. "On behalf of the band, I vote for squeak."

There were no surprises on the dance floor, where herd stupidity ruled the night. Primal dancing, hoots and hollers, wardrobe malfunctions and impromptu conga lines were punctuated by occasional drunken missteps that created waves of near falls. That was business as usual; the only difference was that tonight the volume seemed to have scaled new heights, the hapless musicians woefully calculating just how much of their hearing they were sacrificing for music they hated. Pissface had brought a flask from his car and continued to indulge mightily; the potheads, unable to smoke indoors, were less fortunate.

Only one musician was feeling good—Bam-Bam knew this was his moment to shine. And although the others resented him for blistering their ears, they were also grateful he did the heavy lifting. That freed them to play utter nonsense, knowing the dancers didn't care about anything except Bam-Bam's blasting pulse. Pissface took it to the extreme, playing clusters of dissonant chords, pushing buttons to call up sampled banjos, accordions, and bagpipes. His face shone bright with glee; the more he drank, the shinier he shone. The dancers were oblivious to his sonic anarchy just as they were oblivious to the way each song accelerated, Bam-Bam personally driving them from grooving midtempo to frantic hyperspeed, over and over again.

Then, something that had never happened before: Bam-Bam himself put in earplugs! Now he would have to play even louder just to hear himself at the same level. The rest of the guys were soon taking out and reinserting their earplugs, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. John, still unprotected, was in physical pain. Then he remembered a cocktail napkin he'd used to line his pocket for the cheese cubes; he tore off two pieces, rolled them into balls, and stuffed them into his ears. But the volume was still intolerable, so he jammed the napkin balls further in until suddenly something gave and they were inside his head. He shook his skull and felt them rattling around.

Out on the dance floor, the reactions to Bam-Bam's ramp-up were more visceral. Driven by his punishing pulse, the dancers shook, leapt, and screamed as if possessed. Then, out of the blue, came the moment none would forget for years to come: The father of the bride, morbidly obese, went down. The sea of dancers parted, forming a circle around him, shell-shocked, disbelieving. The band fizzled out, though Bam-Bam, lost in the physicality of his job and unable to hear anyone but himself, continued to pound away until he happened to glance out on the floor. So embarrassing! To salvage his dignity he played his flashiest lick, twirled his sticks, then quickly muted his cymbals, all while maintaining an appropriately mournful expression.

A nurse who was part of the wedding party tried to administer CPR, but there was no saving the man. Stunned silence took hold, the room quickly emptied, and Theodore reluctantly told the band to pack up and go home.

Bam-Bam seemed devastated, knowing it may have been his playing that ultimately cost a human life. The Bull was agitated, walking in a tight circle, clutching himself, and muttering “They’d better not cut our fucking pay.” John had other things on his mind, and rushed to take a position by the door. As each musician filed past, he assumed a eulogistic tone, saying with great solemnity, “Such a terrible tragedy, for a human life to end this way. And for it to ruin the most important day of his daughter’s life . . .” His voice shook with emotion. “But you sure sounded great, man.” He then waited expectantly; surely at a moment like this, when they were all leveled by tragedy, they could say something nice!

But he was met only with stunned silence, frivolous compliments being the last thing on their minds. He hung his head and put his horns away, then asked Bam-Bam for a ride home. “WHAT?” yelled Bam-Bam. John pointed at Bam-Bam’s ears, showing him that he needed to take out his earplugs, then asked him again. “WHAT?” Even without his earplugs, Bam-Bam could hear nothing but his cymbals, ringing furiously. John acted out the question in gestures, playing real-life charades. Bam-Bam nodded reluctantly.

Once Bam-Bam had loaded up his dolly, John put his horns on top and helped guide it through the labyrinthian corridors. Down in the kitchen, navigation had gotten easier—most of the food carts had been moved out of the way—though the tide of unknowable primordial goo had clearly risen. Their dress shoes made sucking sounds with each step and were soaking wet, as were the bottoms of their tux pants. When they got to the loading dock Bam-Bam went to fetch his van, leaving John to wait with the instruments by the festering dumpsters. He didn’t mind—he could barely smell them over his own funk.

The two were quiet for most of the drive to John’s house, Bam-Bam briefly interrupting the silence with a story about a groupie who had overdosed when he was playing with the Grass Roots, or was it when he was playing with Styx? Maybe that time they played a famous French amphitheater in front of forty thousand people? John acted duly impressed, then reflected on the evening, and on his career. He’d played with a dancing potato chip, with a faith healer, with a hand fart artist, in a clown costume, in a dog cone, in a grocery store checkout lane, in a car dealership, in a psychiatric ward, even in a funeral home, but he’d never before been the actual soundtrack to a death. It all seemed surreal, and he was surprised by several tears sliding down his cheeks.

When Bam-Bam pulled into John’s driveway, John gathered his horns and sadly thanked him. Just before closing the door John suddenly pulled himself together and said, “Oh, and by the way, you sounded really good tonight, Bam-Bam.” He assumed the perfect posture of a dog waiting for a treat, staring unblinkingly into Bam-Bam’s eyes. He even tried telepathy: *C’mon, man, throw a bone to a fellow Rocco!*

But Bam-Bam would do no such thing; he shook his head and quietly said, “Good night, John.”

Thirty minutes later, lying in bed, John kept replaying the horrible moment that had brought the evening to a close. He’d been looking out on the dance floor, had seen the man clutch his chest and awkwardly crumble. Come to think of it, he’d been soloing at the time. Suddenly, he was struck by a terrifying thought. He gently shook his wife awake: “Sweetheart?” “Ugh,” she groaned. “Time is it?”

“Just a little after midnight.”

“I’m sleeping, John. I’ll say it in the morning like I always do.” She crinkled her nose. “But my god, what have you been rolling around in?” She was about to turn away, but he grew insistent.

“No, this time it’s different. I mean, not different like I played well. I didn’t, and the bridge of ‘Girl from Ipanema,’ it’s just . . . I don’t know. But that’s not it. Everything was just loud like always, it seemed like, and then Bam-Bam put in earplugs and started playing even louder. Everyone had earplugs except me, and I had to solo on, it was, maybe, ‘Y.M.C.A.’? (sigh) I hate that song. But I’m soloing, playing as loud as I can just to hear myself.” He began to gently sob as he continued. “And as I’m blasting out these shitty lines a fat old man dancing right in front of me went down. Father of the bride, a heart attack, and he died in front of all of us. I just . . . I mean . . . could it have been something I played?”

She listened patiently and gently touched her hand to his face. “Honey, I’m sure you played great, because you’re a great player. And you’re certainly no murderer.” She rolled away from him, sound asleep the second her eyes closed.

He shook his head, napkin balls rattling. *Ha!* he thought. *What does she know?*

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