

## Searching for Glory at the Syncopated Cellar

Summoning the passion born from 65 years of hard living, Jimmy brought the song—and our first set—to a dramatic close. The audience burst into wild applause, but I could manage only a feeble smile. "Route 66" had never really pulled my heartstrings; instead of succumbing to its images of light Cowboy romanticism, I'd always pictured a hot asphalt wasteland splattered with decaying armadillo roadkill. But it was the byway of choice for overzealous lounge singers looking to prove they could infuse heavy emotion into the purely mundane. Jimmy had just done exactly that; tragically, the audience's reaction assured him a bigger role in our next set.

Jimmy's triumph came on the heels of three songs belted out by the club's former waitress, Bobbie, who'd just returned from two years in jail on drug-related charges. As soon as she sounded her last note, she bolted from the club, knowing the worst was yet to come. Jimmy was offended; I was jealous.

Though the room hardly called for it, Jimmy was dressed to the nines, trying to revive a career that had peaked fifteen years ago at the Holiday Inn Tiki Lounge. Every morning he sang in the shower, closed his eyes, and saw an adoring public. Too old for American Idol and too young to warrant a last dying wish, he'd gradually worked his way down to the Syncopated Cellar, where our sorry fates were now entwined. As leader of the backing rhythm section—in name, at least, we were the Bill Anschell Trio—I was an accessory to his criminal lack of self-awareness.

On the positive side, he was eager to please. When I asked if he would mind plugging my new CD at the end of the next set, he was delighted to oblige. "Be glad to, man," he said through a gold-capped smile. "Hey, I really dug that tune we just did."

CLANG! A bell sounded loudly in my head, ringing in the 1,000th time I'd had to confront this particular moral dilemma. Do I lie and say I enjoyed it, too? Or do I ruin his evening by raining negativity from my personal jazz cloud of doom? "Likewise," I say charitably, then go have my second beer.

"Over here, man!" It was Louie, drummer and central figure in this musical circus. He was sitting on a barstool clutching a glass of scotch, gesturing with his free hand. Over the past year, he'd undergone an astonishing physical transformation, swapping about forty pounds of fat from his stomach for ten pounds of muscle in his arms. Only his scraggly beard and Western attire were unaffected. Well into his forties, he was at last looking like the tough guy he longed to be....

*Continued on [Benched](#), now available in paperback and Kindle on Amazon.*