

LIVE
AT THE
BRIXTON
ACADEMY

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WITH JS RAFAELI



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INTRO: THE GUY BEHIND THE GUY

The guy was cracking up.

It was all there: the fretful pacing, the darting eyes and flighty hands, the split-second switches between obsequious pleading and frustrated rage. All the telltale signs of a cocaine addict in need of a score.

Inspiral Carpets had just finished their soundcheck. The band were laughing and fooling around as the roadies cleared the stage for the support act. I was backstage with some of my own crew, ensuring everything was in its right place, and that the soundcheck changeovers were running smoothly.

That's when the guy decided to make his move.

'Umm ... hello mate ... uh-hh ... you're Simon, right? The venue owner?'

'Yeah, that's me. What can I do for you?' I asked, as if I didn't know.

He leaned in close, his voice dropping to that guttural, agitated hush that drug addicts mistake for discretion. 'Well ... it's just ... I was wondering ... could you, y'know ... sort us out?'

'Sort you out with what?' I asked, deliberately making my voice boom in faux naivety. At the very least, I could have some fun with this.

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The guy cringed in druggie paranoia, his eyes shooting around the room, as if at any moment black-clad spooks were going to burst in and punish him for trying to score a bit of gear.

‘I was just after ... y’know ... maybe, a couple grams of coke ... I just thought, ... y’know ... perhaps you could help me out?’ he whispered in desperation.

I looked the guy up and down. To me, he had just marked himself out as a chump. I liked to party as much as anyone; I ran a rock ‘n’ roll venue, after all. But the rule was never to mix business and pleasure. I didn’t even drink on the job; and I certainly never got high with other industry players while working a gig. It was unprofessional but, much more important, it left you vulnerable.

Still, you don’t get very far in the music business without the ability to spot an opportunity. The guy may have made a tacky move, but played correctly, I could turn this to my advantage. He would get his coke. But he’d have to wait until I had him exactly where I wanted him.

I gave him a wink. ‘Yeah, I think I can help you. I’ll call someone I know. It may take a little while, but I’ll sort you out.’

Those were the magic words. All those tiny muscles behind the guy’s eyes, which had been so rigidly tensed in grinding junkie anxiety, seemed to relax simultaneously. He broke into a broad smile, clasped my hand, and thanked me effusively.



I may have kept work and fun separate, but I wasn’t an idiot.

I knew exactly what went on. I knew how it functioned, and who made it happen. If you’ve got a problem with people getting their kicks however they do it, then rock ‘n’ roll probably isn’t the

job for you. I always made sure none of my own team got involved with dealing, but I knew who to talk to.

He liked to refer to himself as ‘The Doctor’. We just called him Doc. He was tall and wiry, with glasses, long straggly hair, and a nervous disposition. Doc was a constant fixture at the Academy, always wandering around in the same torn jeans and grubby military surplus jacket. He must have had an arrangement with someone to get backstage passes, on the understanding that he would find the bands, and their crews, whatever they needed to stay happy.

‘Listen Doc,’ I whispered, pulling him aside, ‘you see that guy?’ I pointed out our mark. Doc glanced over quickly; then turned back to me, nodding.

‘In a little while, you’re going to give that guy two grams of Charlie. It’s on me. But here’s the thing: you’re not to do anything at all, until I give you the signal. You got it?’

Doc nodded again. He understood I was up to something, even if he couldn’t figure out exactly what. He would do what I told him; he had to. His entire livelihood was based on my tolerating his presence in the venue. One word from me, and very quickly there would be some other geek supplying dope to bands at the Brixton Academy.

I glanced back over at the guy, still pacing anxiously in the corner. I hadn’t met him before, but I was aware of who he was. He was involved, at a fairly high level, with quite a few of the Manchester bands that had carved themselves a niche in the British charts of the past few years.

There was business to be done here. It was just a matter of timing.



I watched as the guy became progressively more and more impatient. Every few minutes his eyes would flick over to me and I would

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give him a nod, or a little wave, as if to say, No worries, mate, the gear's on its way.

All the while Doc stood at the opposite corner of the room, the product stashed safely in his pocket.

After about an hour the poor guy couldn't stand it any more and shuffled up to me. 'Sorry mate ... I just ... uhhh ... don't suppose there's any sign of your fella, is there?'

'Oh yeah,' I replied cheerily, pretending not to register the desperation in his voice. 'He says he's on his way. Shouldn't be too long.'

'Yeah ... uhhh ... great. Cheers.' He slouched away again in disappointment.

It was crucial I didn't let him get his stuff too soon. I had to let him get just frantic enough.

I let him stew for another hour. Doc did his part, never moving from his spot. We watched the dude's addict pangs get progressively worse. He was feeling it bad now: slumped in a chair, sweating and fidgeting so bad it looked like he was about to climb the walls.

Perfect.

He shot up in his seat as I walked over, his eyes tracking my every move.

'All right mate, the bloke's almost here,' I breezed.

His eyes lit up with joy.

'There's just one thing I wanted to talk to you about,' I continued.

The guy's face froze in terror. Was I about to say something to jeopardize his score?

'I've been thinking about getting Black Grape down for some gigs here. What do you say we do three nights at the Academy over the next few months?'

I had timed it perfectly. By this point, the guy would have agreed to anything. He nodded furiously and jabbered his assent.

We shook on the deal, and I turned and gave Doc the nod. The guy's eyes showed a momentary flicker of incomprehension, as some part of his brain registered that Doc had been standing in the same room as him the whole time. But he was so happy get his couple of grams that he either chose to ignore the thought or just didn't care. I, in turn, whipped £100 out of one of our bar tills, stuck an IOU in its place, and handed the cash to Doc. Not a bad evening's work.

And we did end up getting our three nights of Black Grape. They had just gone massive, riding high on the success of their first single, 'Reverend Black Grape'. A legion of ex-Happy Mondays fans descended on the Academy, following their madcap heroes, and we sold out all three nights. The shows themselves were storming, one of them even featuring a very random onstage cameo by Michael Hutchence of INXS. The combination of baggy Manchester psychedelia and slick, Australian cock rock took everyone by surprise, but somehow it seemed to work. And after the shows, there was a magnificent party backstage with Shaun Ryder, Bez, and the rest of the Black Grape crew, and I'm fairly sure Doc's services were in high demand once again.



But there is a melancholy coda to this story.

This was late 1995. By now I had already sold the Brixton Academy to a publicly limited company, but had agreed to stick around and keep running things for a year or so, to show them how the place worked.

A few weeks after the last of the Black Grape shows, I was going over some paperwork with one of the company accountants. Out of nowhere he pulled out the IOU for Doc's money that I had stuck in the cash till.

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‘And what is this?’ he enquired.

I smirked to myself on seeing that crumpled piece of paper again. I’d forgotten all about it.

‘Oh yeah,’ I sniggered. ‘That has to do with extra expenses involved in securing Black Grape.’

The accountant looked at me in blank incomprehension. ‘What do you mean, *extra expenses*?’ he asked.

Oh God. Was I really going to have to explain to the company accountant that I’d had to bribe some dope-head music-biz player with two grams of coke?

‘You know ... *extra expenses*.’ I winked. ‘As in *hospitality expenses*.’ Come on, he must get it now ... or at least have enough understanding to get from my tone that he shouldn’t ask questions he might not like the answers to.

‘I’m sorry, I don’t follow,’ the accountant continued brusquely. ‘I’m going to have to mark this down as something, or the numbers won’t add up.’

Over the course of those three Black Grape shows, we must have taken somewhere around £140,000 on the bar alone, plus the hall hire for the gigs themselves: not at all bad for a £100 investment. But here I was, being forced to quibble with this pencil-pusher over chump change.

I sighed. This seemed to be the way things were going. Since selling the Academy, I had found myself enduring more and more of these utter failures of communication. I was surrounded by suits. The businessmen who had taken over just didn’t seem to speak the same language as me, or any of the rock ‘n’ rollers that I had had so much fun dealing with over the past 15 years.

‘Mr Parkes, how do you wish to proceed over this matter?’ the accountant asked in his clipped, businesslike tone.

Jesus, I thought to myself, did he really just ask me that? Where

does this guy think he is?' This isn't some bloody insurance company. In the old days someone using that kind of dry management-speak would have been laughed out of the room.

I could see from his face there was going to be no breaking through. I had got to know this kind of brick wall all too well. I sighed to myself again, grabbed my chequebook from the table, and scribbled out a £100 cheque to the company. That's how things seemed to work in this brave new, corporate world. There was nothing else to do.

It wasn't the hundred quid that bothered me. I couldn't give a fuck about that. It was the idea that the people I now worked with, the people who now owned the Academy that I loved so much, wouldn't understand that in the rock 'n' roll biz, one might have to write an IOU for £100 in order to book gigs that would bring in several hundred thousand. It's just how the game worked. Or at least, it's how my game worked. But it seemed that my style of play wasn't suited to the realm of corporate lawyers and graphpaper-brained financiers. Apparently, there was a new game in town.

I had built the Academy from nothing with my blood, sweat and love. It had been a grand adventure: often terrifying, always exhilarating. I had survived through a combination of quick thinking, gritty determination, and blind luck. The one thing it had never been, though, was boring.

Not for the first time, I was forced to ask myself if the suits who seemed to be taking over not just my venue but the entire industry actually had any feeling for the swing, pulse, and danger of what the music business was. What was to become of my beloved Academy with *these* people in charge?

Oh rock 'n' roll, what have they done to you?

PART ONE

**LONDON
CALLING**

SCRAPPER

It was Mac, my father's bodyguard, who first warned me.

'Listen Simon, at some point tomorrow, some older boys are going to come after you. They'll be from the year above. Anyone older than that won't bother with young uns like you, and the kids in your year will be just as new and confused as you are.'

'But', he continued, 'the boys from the year above: they'll have something to prove. And they'll pick on you. It doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. It's just because you're different. That's how kids are.'

It was strange being told I was 'different'. I mean, obviously by this point I had realized there was a significant distinction between my two brothers and me: they each had two arms, and I only had one. But in our home, I had never been allowed to view myself as different. I didn't get any special privileges, I had to do all the same chores, and I was certainly never, ever, allowed to consider myself 'disabled'.

Some older kids are going to come after you. It's a tough thing for a ten-year-old to hear before his first day at a new prep school. But even at that age, I had learned that when Mac spoke, you listened. Mac had been around. He was a tough old nut and knew how things worked.

'So kiddo, here's what you do,' he went on. 'There will be three or four them, maybe five. One of them will be the leader. You identify who that is, and you put him on his arse. It doesn't matter