

HEY, MA, I'M A COUNTRY SINGER!!!

by Jim Goad

(...OR AT LEAST I WAS FOR FIVE WEEKS THIS SUMMER)



The author in Memphis with an Elvis impersonator named "Ruddmeyer." Photo by Chris Walker.

new material, including a nakedly honest interview I conducted with Hank Williams III. When I emailed Hank asking where to send his copy of the book, he mentioned that he'd heard I sing country music. So I dropped in a copy of my old trucker CD along with the book. Two months later, Hank asked me to tour with him as his opening act.

It was a daunting prospect—I had almost zero live-music experience, and I'd be required to sing forty minutes for nearly thirty shows in front of crowds ranging up to two thousand. But if one likes to think one has any balls at all, one just can't say "no" to such a challenge. Even if you blow it, at least you gave it a shot. Like Ben Affleck tells the retarded kid he kidnapped in *Gigli*, "you gotta step up."

For my backup band, I recruited Power of County, a Portland-based five-piece with whom I'd previously appeared live a grand total of one time—the night before I left Portland over two years ago. Most of the songs I selected for the tour dealt with, of course, "the road." The ones which weren't about trucking were about killing women and being white. For nearly two months of preparation, I sang

old trucker songs karaoke-style in the mirror at my tiny Atlanta apartment while they rehearsed to MP3s in Portland without a singer. It seemed as if at least half of the promoters misspelled their name as "CountRy." It became a running joke throughout the tour.

We were scheduled to play twenty-eight shows in thirty-five days. In a maroon Dodge Ram van they dubbed "Ron Burgundy," the Power of County boys motored two thousand-plus miles eastward to Memphis from Portland. Me and my girlfriend, who would serve as merch girl and guardian of my sanity throughout the tour, drove westward from Atlanta to Memphis. We practiced for two days and then took it all the way live. What follows are my hastily scribbled, oddly bitter reminiscences of each date:

MEMPHIS

En route from our home base in Atlanta, we blow a tire in Mississippi. The car's spare tire turns out to be the wrong size. I begin sweating frantically about our borrowed car, rural Mississippi cops, my two felony convictions, and the couple joints we had in the car. Being the relentlessly bitter and negative person I am, I immediately see all this as an omen for the tour. Luckily, a Good Samaritan gives us a lift and helps us get a new tire. It turns out that the lady's brother is also a country musician. We arrive in wiltingly humid, beat-to-shit Memphis and meet up with the band. Rehearsals go well. Our first solo performance rocks the socks off the two and a half dozen or so people who attend—and that's about fifty socks in all!

LITTLE ROCK

All seven of us pile into the Dodge Ram and tool westward through a cloud of humidity and thunderstorms. We meet up with Hank III during the sound check at the club, a pizza parlor with a performance space in back the size of a large garage. "There's gonna be a lotta HIGHS and a lotta LOWS," he cautions us in his gravelly, twangin' voice. The crowd receives us well. A drunk man offers me,

a highly tasty home-cooked meatloaf. A rocker-looking guy makes a homosexual pass at our drummer, upsetting him.

AUSTIN

If you think a city's worth is solely determined by how many bars it can cram into a single downtown area, then you'd think Austin's great. If you're like me and are endlessly appalled and repelled by drunks, their drinking, and their drunkenness, then you'd hate this pierced, tattooed, and goateed oven-baked alternative quesadilla as much as I did. Coming back through town on the way to Fort Worth a few days later, an Austin city cop gave me a speeding ticket. FUCK Austin.

HOUSTON

Take away everything that's interesting about LA, then add a skyscraper-sized wall of humidity, and you're left with Houston. We play our third solo gig in a row, and the boys are starting to hurt for cash. An apparently well-off reader of mine provides us with a lavish crash pad and so much cocaine, you could have made a sandwich with it.

CORPUS CHRISTI

We wake up late, make a wrong turn, and barrel down swampy Texas rural roads for six hours, nearly missing our gig. The air is so moist and thick, you can slice solid cubes of it with a butter knife. And in the morning, there are crickets. Millions of crickets. Crawling on everything. We flee from the Gulf of Mexico as if it threatened to swallow us whole.

FORT WORTH

It's over 400 miles through pissed-off Texas heat to our next gig. The theater seems huge and the crowd loves us. Then it takes a LONG time for us to get paid. Then we spend a hair-raising hour-and-a-half ride as the shiner-bearing woman who's offering her home as a crash pad careens through the dull flatlands between Dallas and Fort Worth. As I finally lay down to sleep, I'm informed that our guitarist has been complaining about me. I bound of out bed and head outside to confront him IN MY UNDERWEAR. We eventually talk through our difficulties. The next day is spent in whip-sharp heat as we change the van's oil and front brakes, swatting greasily at Texas mosquitoes.

ALBUQUERQUE

A long time ago, God ate some tainted nachos and had diarrhea, resulting in the City of Albuquerque. Halfway through our third song in a small downtown club, I have the distinct feeling that I may pass out from shortness of breath, not realizing the mountain air would make it much harder to sing. I cut our set short a couple of songs and barely survive. The crowd is rough and ugly, leaving a battlefield of broken glass on the floor after the show. I accidentally drop my new Motorola Razr cell phone on the sidewalk outside the club, breaking it beyond repair. I was calling the person—Bill Nevins—who'd offered his place as a crash pad in exchange for a couple spots on the guest list. Minutes before the phone broke, I had called Bill and heard him pick up inside the club (I could hear Hank's band Assjack playing in the background) before he hung up on me. Mr. Bill Nevins, you got to see a free show and we had to waste money on another flea-bit hotel room. I fucking HATE Albuquerque, and I hate you too, Bill Nevins.

TEMPE, AZ

Ridiculous screaming desert hell-heat, but a huge crowd which gobbled up a lot of our merchandise made for one of the more pleasant shows so far. The magic mushrooms some of us ate before motoring through the blowtorch-windy Mojave Desert all night also seemed to lift the mood. During one mystical moment, a band member mistakenly thought we had called him a wolf. For the record, we did not call him a wolf. (continued on page 4)



ROLLIN' WITH THE POSSE IN OKLAHOMA CITY...

Standing, left to right: My girlfriend Shannon, steel guitarist Erik Clampitt, acoustic guitarist Matt Stark, Bloody Ol' Mule (an OK City musician not in our band), bassist Jay Johnson, guitarist D. Rives Curtright. Seated: Yours Truly. Kneeling: Drummer Andy Bacon.

my girl, and my mostly drunken band the floors of a local alternative weekly's office on which to sleep. Ten minutes after we settle into sleepy-bye time, a REAL office worker arrives and tells us all to scram. After some frantic late-night searching, we finally snag one hotel room for the eight members of our party. We clock about three hours of sleep before it's time to break camp.

TULSA

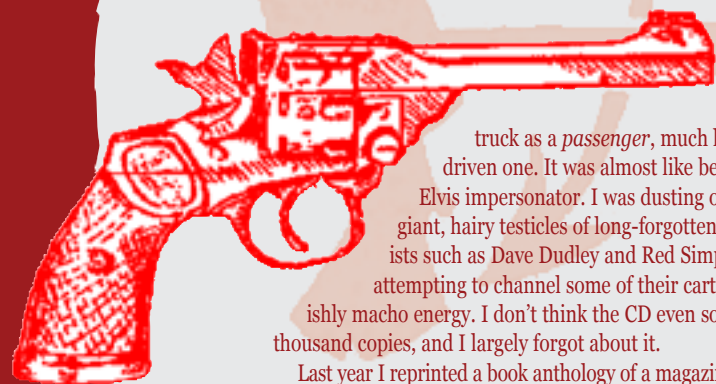
We play the massive, ancient, historic Cain's Ballroom—host to countless old C&W stars as well as where the Sex Pistols got beaten up during their first American tour—to a hootin', hollerin', ruffneck crowd of Ozark spillovers. We accept an offer from the owner of a local tattoo parlor to use his shop as a crash pad. Ten minutes after we settle in there, the shop's quantifiably retarded co-owner (his name is Jamie, and he apparently also goes by the super-gay graffiti handle "Jaspyr") arrives completely shitfaced and starts barking at me incoherently. He then disappears and grabs a skateboard with which to batter my precious head. The Georgia Peach and I escape under cover of night.

OKLAHOMA CITY



OK City is a faceless stretch of plains that seems to have been constructed entirely of squares and rectangles. We plow through a thankless, Hankless solo gig at a tiny shithole called The Conservatory, rumored to have had their bathrooms singled out as the nation's worst in *Entertainment Weekly*. I reunite with my unofficial legal counsel, an Oklahoma lawyer named G. Lynn. Weirdo artist Adam Word offers us his floors, mattresses, and

A WRITER TAKES A WILD, WOOLLY, CROSS-COUNTRY HAYRIDE AS THE OPENING ACT FOR HANK WILLIAMS III



truck as a passenger, much less driven one. It was almost like being an Elvis impersonator. I was dusting off the giant, hairy testicles of long-forgotten artists such as Dave Dudley and Red Simpson, attempting to channel some of their cartoonishly macho energy. I don't think the CD even sold a thousand copies, and I largely forgot about it.

Last year I reprinted a book anthology of a magazine I used to publish called *ANSWER Me!* I tacked on some

COUNTRY SINGER

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SAN DIEGO

If you took a Saltine cracker and removed all the salt, then placed it amid perfect weather, that cracker would still have more personality than the city of San Diego. We play a sold-out gig at the House of Blues. The crowd makes whooping and hollering noises during our set, but the naturally blond contingent of passive-aggressive, scone-eating liberals only snaps up \$32 worth of merchandise from us all night. San Diego sucks not only sucks dick, it does a sloppy job sucking a small, boring dick.



LOS ANGELES

Over the past couple weeks I have become more confident in using my innate pelvic charisma to work a crowd, and the sweaty faux-billy minions at the Roxy in West Hollywood graciously lap up our 40-minute heapin' helpin' of musical biscuits 'n' gravy. The next morning, our van blows a tire as we ascend the notoriously treacherous "Grapevine" highway north of LA. During the three or four hours it took to resolve this crisis, the Peach and I frolic blissfully under the barely warm California sun. I develop a severe, skin-molting sunburn as a result.

SAN FRANCISCO

It never, ever, ever gets hot in this foggy, fag-friendly fiefdom, and the blustery mid-50s winds chill my sunburned Caucasian hide. It feels as if a summer cold is sprouting in my chest. Several invited friends show up for the show—everyone except the one who only hours before had promised his home as a crash pad. We wound up paying way too much for a hotel room in Berkeley. Otherwise, you know, it was San Francisco—a nice lesbian lady gave me the club's wireless password. Stuff like that.

GARBERVILLE, CA

Easily the weirdest gig of the tour so far—we play an outdoor concert on an open farm in the middle of forest-shrouded Humboldt County, CA, home of the best weed in the world. Pregnant white women with dreadlocks. Children wrestling. People playing the hacky-sack and doing their tribal white dances. Satan's Grandson gives us what seems like a hundred pills. Local farmers shove felonious amounts of local herbs in our hands. We take a break from the merch table to plow through the crowd and get close to the stage during Hank III's country set. As he and the band slither through "The Legend of D. Ray White," he seems like the greatest performer alive. I was really high, but that's what it seemed like.

PORTLAND

This was the most highly anticipated date of the tour—a homecoming for Power of County and a triumphantly arrogant fuck-you-I'm-still-alive-and-doing-better-than-you gesture on my part toward the rainy li'l town that went out of its way to make me miserable for nearly a dozen years. I expected some sort of trouble, but my numerous apprehensions about this show were all for naught—the crowd cheered us as if we were The Beatles, none of my psycho exes showed up to torment me, and I allegedly traded books for drugs with a member of a rival scooter club.



SEATTLE

By the time we roll into the city of the Space Needle and Free Needle Exchanges, my lobsterlike sunburn and the chilly West Coast temperatures have combined to give me a chest cold and a sore throat that reduced my voice to a series of rusty squeaks and wheezes. I am freaking out by late afternoon, and

during sound check I throw my pipin'-hot cup of Throat Coat herbal tea against a club wall in frustration. I inform Hank that I don't think I'll be able to sing. He takes me into a small room, plies me with a series of throat and cold medications, and delivers a country-singer pep talk: "Man, there were times I went out there with nothin', but I had to sing. There were times Johnny Cash went out there with nothin', but he did it, man." Inspired, I take his advice. I go out there with nothin'. Through fourteen songs, my voice sounds like screeching train brakes. The tiny club seems severely oversold and overheated. A moist chunk of drunken chubby white flesh extends from one wall of the venue to the other.

I'm soaked in sweat as if I just dove in a pool. I look down, and my fucking forearms are sweating. Sweat rolls down the back of my legs. I've never felt hotter and sicker in my life. I fear I might die. I don't. As a booby prize, the tour continues.

BOISE

The band lineup changes for the tour's remainder: After Seattle, Matt (acoustic guitar) and Erik (steel guitar) drop off and are replaced by a journeyman guitarist named Justin. He seems a little too wholesome to be real, but we now have more space in the van. Justin's first taste of this particular tour involves a 500-mile trek from Seattle, only to have the club's fire alarm go off during our first song. The entire club, including us, is forced to evacuate. Our set is cut short by about eight songs, which is OK with me since my voice still sounds like shit. A fat, hairy person calling himself Josh Bradley offers us a place to sleep, only to renege when he realizes we actually want to sleep instead of accompanying his lumpy ass to more

bars in order to augment his already substantial alcoholic intoxication.

DENVER

To get to Denver from Boise, you cross through eight hundred and thirty miles of Mormons. Lots of flies, too, at least in summertime. Asshole flies, too—the kind that don't leave you alone. After popping half of a Xanax bar, I am finally able to sleep in the van—on the dirty floor close to the warm engine as we crawl over cold Utah mountains in the middle of the night. I am still comatose as we stop at a Colorado gas station, and when the drummer grabs my ankle to force my leg back into the van so he can close the side doors, I believe I threaten to kick him in the head. I am now profoundly sorry for this indiscretion. But don't go wrenchin' a sleeping man's ankle. You risk getting kicked in the head.

LINCOLN, NE

Nebraska seems to exist only to make the other 49 states feel better about themselves. After only three hours of sleep on a hardwood Denver floor, we shoveled through another five hundred blazing miles of burnt wheat and corn to play a joint called Knickerbockers, second only to El Corazon in Seattle for its overheated/suffocation factor. Tornado-like weather conditions brew outside the club. We blessedly find two cheap hotel rooms near the Lincoln airport—one for the band, one for me and the Peach. I fuck the shit out of her. Our moods improve.

SPRINGFIELD, MO

We eat breakfast in Nebraska. Nowhere in this great nation—not in the Deep South, nor Texas, nor the craggy Northwestern badlands—did we get as many suspicious looks as we did from the highly unpleasant denizens of the Cornhusker State. It's the only place on the entire tour where people stopped in their tracks and stared at me disapprovingly when I'd use the word "fuck." We drive another three-hundred-plus miles through yet more corn heading toward Springfield, MO, a small urban shitstain smeared amid the beautiful Ozarks. As we plunge southward into Missouri, I smell and feel and taste the sweet,

beautiful humidity that tells me I'm getting closer to home.

KANSAS CITY

OK, yeah, I like the humidity, but it's still so fucking hot, I feel like throwing up. The sun seems as if it's aimed at me through a magnifying glass. KC is OK by me, though—it's much as I remember it from twenty years ago—big, surprisingly sophisticated, and filled with fountains. It's one of the few places we've been on



tour where I'd actually consider living. For once, I'm going to take a deep breath and not bitch about a place. A rabid reader of mine from across the river in Kansas City, KS, offers us his home as a crash pad, infuriating his fiancée. Without their knowledge and without asking them, I use some of their toothpaste.

CEDAR RAPIDS, IA

It's so dismally hot and muggy, I feel as if I'm walking around inside a Jacuzzi fully clothed. The setup is nearly as weird as in Garberville—we do a late-afternoon show outdoors in the parking-lot area of a saloon near a landfill, surrounded by quiet Midwestern houses. This town, quite obviously, has been forgotten. The crowd, apparently composed mostly of bikers, meth heads, and meth-head bikers, may be the roughest of the entire tour. Yet in personal comments at the show, as well as in subsequent weblog entries, Iowa concertgoers both male and female referred to me as "scary." One die-hard stage-diver apparently snapped his neck during Hank III's show, then allegedly pleaded with attending paramedics to at least turn him around so he could continue watching the set. So who's scary?

MINNEAPOLIS

Well, bless my soul and deep-fry my sweet-potato chips in lard, but we be playin' at the club where Prince played in Purple Rain! I happen to think Prince is an overrated interracial woodland elf and that Minneapolis is an annoyingly "progressive" whitebread town—a frozen Portland—but our show was well-received by the city's snooty Nordic types and our stay was made more pleasant at a friend's upscale, castle-like digs. He even gave us a big bag of free homemade soap to take along with us! I believe I chose a bar of "Lavender Rain."

CHICAGO

We barrel over 420 miles through searing-hot, boring-as-fuck Illinois to arrive at a large club tucked into a shopping center a good hour outside of downtown Chicago. We eat dinner at a White Castle across the parking lot. Illicit substances are insufflated with some friends. My legs get wobbly and I feel like throwing up. It doesn't help that the friend's crash pad is perched atop six rickety flights of stairs. I retain my stomach's contents, even after we eat more White Castles after midnight...and for breakfast.

STURGEON BAY, WI

We play a solo gig for maybe thirty people at a tiny roadhouse tucked deep in the woods on this gorgeous, remote Wisconsin peninsula, yet we take in our biggest one-night cash haul of the entire tour, as well as free hotel rooms and full breakfast (with repeat helpings of cherry juice) in the morning. The fine, upscale white folks of this rural fishing community seem to dig what we're doing, even if we're not even sure exactly what that is. My finely toned abdomen bursts with excitement at the knowledge that there are only three shows left. There is light at the end of this long, dirty tunnel. There is light, my friends—there is light.

MADISON, WI

Madison is the Austin of the North—a self-congratulatory "progressive" oasis amid a reputedly backward, cow-chip-tossing state. It is also as overpriced and boring as

Austin. We were going to crash at the clubhouse of some local bikers until we saw them run a move on somebody in the crowd accused of harassing one of their friends.

ST. LOUIS

The club—Pop's—is actually situated in Sauget, IL, across the Mississippi River from St. Louis but within view of the Gateway Arch. Pop's serves liquor 24 hours a day. It's directly south of East St. Louis, IL, long thought to be the worst ghetto in the USA. For 360 degrees around the club, you see nothing but smokestacks and strip joints and high-tension wires. To my discriminating mind, it's the most beautiful panorama of the whole trip. Merely standing outside this club may give me cancer, but this tour of duty is nearly over.

INDIANAPOLIS

I smile like a gay chipmunk the whole way from St. Louis to Indy. We have the crowd eating from our hands—we're pros at this point. I thank Hank, and he thanks us. We climb aboard the van one last time and joyfully retire to our pair of blood-spattered motel rooms. The next afternoon the band drops us off at the Greyhound station. We pick up our car in Memphis, take a one-day Jacuzzi-room vacation in Nashville, and then head back home to Atlanta.

MY FRIENDS ALL SAID WE WERE GOOD,

but what do you expect them to say? Other reviews were mixed. Still, we never got booed once throughout the tour, which is something of a miracle for an opening band. Either we were really good, or the crowds were really fucking polite. We plowed through the hottest parts of the country during the hottest part of the year with scant money and no air conditioning, and we pulled it off without killing each other. That's close to a miracle, my friend.

Days seemed to blow by without a minute's worth of rest. A typical day seemed to involve two hours of sleep on a stranger's floor, five hundred miles of driving, a three-hour sound check, forty minutes of performing, four hours of selling merch, and then three hours of scrambling to find a place to crash before it all started again in the morning. We crammed together in that van as if we were illegal immigrants, and I believe I sweated away ten pounds of salt during the tour. I grew weary of eating food from gasoline stations and after a while was constipated to the point where I felt like I was walking around with a car battery inside me.

I love to travel, but "the road" kinda blows. It tests a man's last nerve. There are great, flat stretches of this grand, expansive nation which are entirely unremarkable and interchangeable. You don't see much beyond the Interstates and the three blocks surrounding each club.

The tour ended only days ago, but I still feel road-lagged and scrambled. Two nights ago, I fell asleep in bed while chewing on a piece of bread. I'm still so tired, I feel as if someone has sucked away most of my spinal fluid with a straw.

But even though I'm a whiny wannabe Heeb who'd find a way to complain while walking on a rainbow leading to heaven, I'm not complaining. We had a better financial deal than most opening bands at a similar level, and Hank III gave me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Besides, the drugs were mostly free and the applause was nice, too.

Unlike Hank Williams III, music is not in my blood, but I will always enjoy confusing people. I am no longer a country singer, but for a time...for a brief time that seemed like an eternity...I was. And with one foot on the monitor, pointing at people in the crowd, for one fleeting moment in a very important way—even though it was all in my head—I WAS driving a semi truck. I felt it, I swear.

