



# A Good Drummer Is Hard To Find

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Our drummer went born-again on us this morning. I wish I could say it came as a surprise, but that wouldn't be entirely honest. The signs had been there for a while: a new group of friends, the big secret about where he was hanging out Sunday mornings, a decided lack of gusto on the fill between the chorus and verse on "Big Black Jesus." On Ash Wednesday we'd even caught him with a smudge on his forehead; he tried to claim it was from putting a cigarette out there, but wasn't even able to look us in the eye as he said it.

The worst part is that we probably could have prevented the whole thing if we had just been a little more attentive. Jerry hadn't been doing too well since Jenna let him know—by email, that fucking bitch—that every decision he'd made in the past two years had been terrible, rivaled only by her decision to start dating him in the first place, and that the best solution for the situation was for her to stop lying to him about the Finance Major from Sturgis, Michigan she'd been fucking for the past six months.

Understandably, it hit him hard. We tried to say the right things—you'll find another girl, she was a slut anyway—but evidently it wasn't enough. One of the downsides of going to a religious college is that there are always some Christ-vultures lurking around, waiting for someone to get dumped so they can swoop in and convert all of that self-loathing into a profound lifestyle change when a couple weeks of heavy jerk-off sessions would have fixed things up no-problem. Still, despite all the writing on the wall, I never thought he would have ditched us the very morning of the 2005 Sacred Heart University Battle of the Bands. I thought the music meant more to him than that.

"I'm really sorry," Jerry said, "but I can't play the show tonight."

"You're fucking kidding me."

"See," he said, a pained little smile sneaking out, "that's the kind of thing I'm talking about."

"What?"

"The F-word," he said, his shoulders creeping up a bit with his discomfort. "Why do you have to say it so much? What does that have to do with music?"

I froze, incredulous. "You are kidding me, right?"

"Fine, if you aren't going to take this seriously..." he said, and moved off to my door. The handle was halfway to vertical by the time I was able to make it across the room to throw myself against the Getty Lee poster that marked the divide between future rock-god status and hitting the stage tonight with a metronome backing us up.

"Hey, hey, c'mon man, stop, I'm taking this seriously," I breathed, stiffening my back against the poster and hard wood beneath, hoping the spectre of Mr. Lee himself was providing some moral support in the argument I was about to make. "C'mon, just tell me what the problem is."

Jerry pulled back from the handle, but his posture still indicated he was leaning towards leaving. Sighing, he ran his hand through his hair, whose recent shearing from shoulder-length suddenly bespoke far more than a desire to move up to host at T.G.I. Friday's. "Look," he said, "I just don't know how I can be affiliated with anything that's so hostile towards my belief system."

"Hostile towards your belief system?" I scoffed. "Jerry, what the...what are you talking about? I don't see how laying down a killer backbeat is in any way hostile towards your belief system."

"Reggie," he said, "the band's name is The Great Apes of Satan."

“Well, yeah,” I stammered, “but that’s just...our way of...oh, come on Jerry, you can’t bail on us now—the competition’s tonight. Can’t you just play this one show?”

“No,” he said, and walked out.

It was now ten minutes to showtime, which meant ten minutes more of Domey driving me crazy just like he’d been doing for the past fucking hour. He was pacing now, wandering aimlessly around the little backstage area we’d been given, plinking out the opening notes to “Messiah Run Wild” over and over again, his guitar gripped tight like some sort of faux-cherry security blanket.

This wasn’t really our first show, but it might as well have been. The only other time we’d played in public was for some shitty house party on Marshall Ave., and that had only lasted two songs before Domey got into a fight with some guy who’d dropped a half-cup of Milwaukee’s Best onto his amp. The band broke up for a week after that, with me pissed at Domey for managing to screw up our unveiling, and him firing back that there wouldn’t even be a band if he hadn’t sold his entire set of 1987 Topps Future Stars to buy the amp in the first place, and Jerry probably using the whole fiasco to squeeze in some extra Adult Confirmation Classes or some such bullshit.

We’d probably still be broken up if I hadn’t spotted the ad in the Sacred Heart Chronicle about open spots in the Battle of the Bands. An insincere apology and the fifty-dollar grand prize lured Domey back in, and the combination of my enthusiasm and Domey’s thinly veiled menace had seemed to do the same for Jerry, at least until this afternoon’s display of ecumenical devotion.

Some people think that the fact that we’ve never played on stage before makes us some kind of amateurs. Jerry’s ex had said exactly that in the email, which we told him was one more reason he should be glad the bitch dumped him, because if she was delusional about that she was

sure to be crazy about a lot of other things. Still, there is something to be said for experience, and we didn’t have it. Practice is a part of it too, and proficiency, two things we could have probably used in greater quantities. Still, all of the Troy Stetina guidebooks and juke joint grindouts in the world can’t trump the grand equalizer of talent. You’re either born with it or you’re not, and we had it in spades.

Even with Charles backing us up.

Domey’d gone ballistic when I told him about Jerry. “I’ll kill him!” he’d shouted, slamming his fist into the E-Z Chord Instructional Aid he’d taped to the bulletin board above his bed. “I’ll fucking kill the guy! Who does he think he is, pulling this shit? Keith Moon? FUCK!” he screamed, and kicked over the trashcan that sat next to him, spilling its contents, mostly mangled beer cans and empty tins of Rooster chewing tobacco.

Domey’s room was an accumulation of messes: textbooks lay abandoned in corners they’d been hurled into, beer tabs and bottle-caps littered the floor like miniature shrapnel, and homework in various stages of completion sat ignored in the spots it had been stomped away from. At the beginning of the school year he’d shared the room with an unassuming Asian kid fresh back from a semester in Madrid; the guy had wisely scrounged around for other accommodations the first time Domey flipped his desk over after a particularly close loss in Madden Football.

“C’mon man, calm down...” I began.

“Calm down? Calm down? Are you fucking kidding me?” he growled, pacing up to me, his shoulders hunched with the tension tied up in them. “Jerry ditches us the very day of the fucking Battle of the Bands and you want me to calm down?”

“Yes,” I said, stepping back slightly for better position for any bull rush that might come to me. “I want you to calm down.”

His face flushed, he seemed to consider the charge once more before stepping back to the chord chart and delivering it another jab, this one more half-hearted than the first. Looking back to me, he bounced his hand off his leg a couple times before working his way up to the only question that made any sense to ask. "Well, what are we going to do?"

"What are we going to do?" I repeated. "We're going to find another drummer."

Drummers, as every college band insider knows, are rare. The number of young men aged eighteen to twenty-four who spend their free time mumbling hand-penned lyrics and jerking off with a cheap Fender knockoff easily ranges into the tens of millions, while the number who can pull off the pat-your-head, rub-your stomach affair that is drumming, much less those who own a kit to do it on, is reduced to a percent of a percent of that previous number. In any group of guys who think putting a band together might help them get laid, percussion is the limiting factor.

There weren't any drummers available on campus. Anyone who was any good was swooped down on the very day they set foot on school grounds by upperclassmen wise to the score, and all the rest were picked up soon afterwards by freshman who'd come to school packing the guitar gear they'd settled on instead of a car as a graduation present. We'd only landed Jerry through a quick overture after his previous group, The Dancing Nancies, broke up when the lead singer decided to forge forward into the hitherto unexplored (and for good reason) world of didgeridoo-rock fusion. Barring any similar taste implosions in the eight hours available before showtime, we weren't likely to find a drummer.

Still, we tried. We made the rounds, called the other dorm rock junkies we'd come into contact with, and even stopped by the student radio station, despite the fact that all they play is shitty indie rock by guys who wouldn't recognize a hook if it was hanging down at the end of their lopped off forearm. Towards the end of the afternoon we even got desperate enough to hang out at

the entrance of the band building, but I couldn't bring myself to talk to any of the miniature forty year-olds going in, and the one guy that Domey went up to had never heard of Metallica and played the French horn anyway.

It was hopeless. An hour before showtime we headed over to our favorite restaurant, Big King Sandwiches, to load up on Turkey and Swiss for one last push. As we walked out, now firmly gripped in the sweaty hand of desperation, we heard a familiar voice calling to us.

"Hey, you two got any money?"

We turned to its source and patted through our pockets for any change that would be better served in pursuit of grain alcohol. We came up with \$1.37. The man we handed it to was an old friend, name unknown, best known for his lack of scruples in purchasing alcohol for Sacred Heart freshman, for a ten percent cut. He was also recognized for his occasional attempts at sale of women's clothing (plus sizes), single shoes, and discarded erotica. He was a black man in his mid-thirties, whose unweathered face set him off as not permanently homeless, but whose ubiquitous wardrobe choice of camouflage jacket over camouflage jeans marked him down as lacking a regular income.

"Thank you much," he said cheerfully upon pocketing our contribution, and began a slow walk towards the end of the block. As he turned, Domey stepped quickly to my ear and hissed a sharp whisper into it.

"Maybe we should ask him?" he said.

"What?" I asked, stunned.

"You know," Domey said, "maybe he knows how to play the drums. Homeless guys are always banging on those plastic buckets, right?"

"Shut up Domey," I said. "You're gonna piss him off."

"C'mon, let's ask him," Domey repeated, a little louder this time.

The man turned. "Ask me what?" he replied, in a deep, but not uncurious voice.

"Oh nothing," I tried to say, but Domey interrupted me.

"You know how to play the drums?" he asked.

The man stepped back towards us, cocking his head off to the left as he did so, regarding us warily. "What you want to know that for?"

"We need a drummer." Domey replied.

I elaborated reluctantly. "Our band is playing in the school's Battle of the Bands tonight, but our drummer bailed on us this afternoon, and we haven't found anyone to take his place."

The man eyed us still, with the practiced eye of someone used to people fucking with him. "Why'd your drummer leave?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "He found Jesus."

"We'd pay you for it," Domey interrupted.

"Hmm," the man smiled, "I might just be able to help you. The name's Charles."

Charles claimed to have spent four years on the snare back in Booker T. High in the late eighties, and was able to slap enough of a rhythm on the wall of Big Kings with his bare hands to allow our need to overcome our common sense. He had settled on twenty-dollars for the evening, although he also made us agree that if we liked what we heard we'd consider keeping him on for the future. It seemed like a snow job, but the clock had ticked down to zero, and he was better than nothing.

Of course, there will still some kinks that had to be worked out.

"Man, this is some shit!" Charles shouted after we hurried through one of our songs backstage for him to get a feel for it.

"What?" I asked.

"This music," he said. "It's terrible. Don't you guys know some Prince or something?"

Domey's face flashed murder. I stepped in front of him, mindful how hard it had been to find this drummer. We probably weren't going to be able to get another one before showtime if Domey killed him. "The music's good," I said, "you just got to get used to it. It's probably just different than what you're used to."

"Yeah. That's cause it's bad. I listen to good music."

Domey stepped around me and pointed a callused finger at Charles' face. "Hey man, we aren't paying you to be a fucking music critic. We're paying you to play the drums, so why don't you just do it."

Charles bit his lower lip, then deliberately set his sticks on the kit in front of him. "Don't you point your finger at me."

Domey wiggled the finger twice. "Don't you say the music's terrible."

Charles stood up. "I'll walk out right now. I don't need this—pointing fingers at me!"

"Charles, don't walk out," I said. "We need you." I turned to Domey and gave him a look to cut it out.

"Need me to be pointing fingers at! Well, two can play at that game," he said, and pointed a long, thin finger right at Domey. "How do you like it?"

"Oh, c'mon," I pleaded.

"He shouldn't say the band's terrible," Domey shouted.

“He shouldn’t be pointing fingers at me,” Charles replied.

“Domey, stop pointing at him,” I ordered.

“Tell him to stop talking shit about the band,” Domey answered.

“Charles, if Domey stops pointing at you, will you stop talking about the band?”

“I can do that,” Charles agreed.

“All right.” I gave Domey another look, and he reluctantly lowered his finger. Charles let his finger shake for one more second before dropping it and heading back to the kit.

“Thank you,” I said, exhaling. “Let’s give it one more try, from the top.”

“I still think we should be playing some Prince,” Charles mumbled, and set into a scattered backbeat.

When we finally took the stage I wasn’t nervous, only sure that something was beginning that I’d waited for to begin for a very long time.

The crowd got a little quiet when we walked out, two white boys and one black man, the latter of which at least seemed to have an excuse for the holes in his clothing. One of the men on the judges’ panel started to stand up a bit when Charles took his seat at the communal drum kit, but must’ve thought again of how his protest would come off and retook his seat.

My bass is in my hands, and Domey’s hunched over his guitar like he’s been practicing just the look of it for years, which isn’t too far from the truth, and before my heart can beat again Charles has kicked it off with a four stab countoff on the main snare. Then the noise starts, it rushes forth, and the crowd steps back and talks and some even listen all at the same time, and Domey’s out of tune on half his strings, and Charles’ sticks are

dancing on both sides of the beat, and none of it phases me, all bullshit aside, because my part’s coming up soon, finally, when I sing, when I scream, when I mint my own trophy.