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Tavern Rat

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Author Bio

David Kiefaber (senior) is shocked that he got published in the Mercury again; more so, in fact, than when he was published as a freshman. He is a former Gettysburgian Opinions columnist, as well as a Bullet editor/contributor and WZBT DJ. His plans for graduation include attempting to postpone it as long as possible, and failing that, convincing a childless, billionaire industrialist to take him on as an heir, thereby negating the threat of unemployment.

Tavern Rat

The Somewhere Else Tavern certainly provided an interesting sensory experience for bands just starting out (sadly, it didn't provide anything useful, like money). It was wedged between a coffee shop and a deli in a local shopping center, and produced a slurry of noise that could be heard from any point therein. It was indistinct from far away, but whenever I approached the open doors, it broke down into distinct elements; inside and outside.

The parking lot held clusters of high school kids whose conversations fell in and out of each other. Occasionally, individual voices were transient as kids moved from group to group, gossiping and arguing playfully. Cars pulled in and out of the lot and let their motors idle as people moved equipment or shot the shit with each other through open windows. The owner's dogs circled everything, growling at the commotion (despite its regularity), their chains dragging across the asphalt in rough, uneven scrapes. The owner himself, a forgetful, stoned hillbilly named Burley, sat out on the porch, calling to his dogs in that toothless, nasal voice of his, strained through what seemed like acres of unkempt beard (he's diabetic and has since lost a foot to infection).

The bar itself was a dense mixture of amplifier feedback, bored heckling, the clink of glass bottles, and the evening's bands, who were often less interesting than their surroundings. Walking on the unwashed floor produced painful tearing noises, and the thick, gritty summoning of phlegm from someone about to spit, usually after a cigarette, reminded me how it got that way.

And while we're on the subject of excreting bodily humors, it's hard to describe the Tavern without touching on the bathroom, which really deserves its own paragraph. Hell, it deserves its own memoir. But I don't have a large enough vocabulary to describe how awful it was, so I'll just mention that it hadn't been cleaned in decades and had built up enough layers of grime to insulate it from mid-level radiation. How people worked up the courage to masturbate and have sex in there (to which I bore witness on more than one occasion, since people I knew always seemed to walk in on it) is, and will forever be, a mystery.

I've played at the Somewhere Else Tavern five times, and have been kicked out twice, with two different bands. The first time was my first gig there, with the Creeps. And to be fair, we didn't so much get kicked out as given up on; we set up, played for 20 minutes, and had our equipment shut off by the sound guy, who couldn't bear listening to us anymore. Given the Tavern's forgiving standards regarding local bands, I look back on that as something of an accomplishment. I didn't at the time, though, and neither did the rest of the band, so we broke up soon afterward.

Down for the Count, my next band, got blacklisted after our third performance. Our first gig there was as a replacement for a band who cancelled,

and the second was an opening slot on one of the Tavern's Punkfest. Those Punkfests started at 7:00 (when we played) and went until 1 in the morning, with bands alternating between playing on the tiny stage and the floor to hasten transitions. Despite it still being daylight when we played, and despite our noticeable lack of local following, we got a respectable crowd. I'd like to think that we were good enough to attract it.

The infamous third show was at another Punkfest, and yet another 7:00 timeslot for us. When we got there (separately; Ryan and Evan got there around 6:55), we quickly realized that we had all dressed in black. I normally did that for shows, but we looked kind of stupid when we all did it. Plus, Ryan was wearing his Emo Sucks shirt, which was important because emo is an offshoot of punk rock that was/is quite popular in Greensboro. Which is to say, that's what all the other bands were playing.

Emo, short for emotional, began in the 80s as a reaction to the violent, stupid direction that hardcore punk had taken. Early emo artists wanted something meaningful and heartfelt, so they slowed down the tempo and allowed personal lyrics and unrestrained emotion, to the point of crying, to dominate the style. I don't care much for the execution, but the concept is worth something.

Unfortunately, the concept was buried by the technique, and emo became a style for young musicians who whined about girls dumping them. The music suffered too, becoming so choppy and syncopated that it was a chore to listen to. Instead of moving forward, as punk and even early emo had done, it was stuck idling in neutral.

Down for the Count was more of a classic punk band. We played fast and loud, with a political theme that matured over time and an anger that came from my lyrics. I've always preferred hearing people yell than hearing them cry, even moreso when I was younger. Angry music, no matter how causeless, is fueled by energy and proactivity, which I could respect. Emo was maudlin to the point of self-parody, and seemed like music for people who were giving up.

It didn't help that the guys in those bands were usually better looking than me and had more friends. I didn't understand what they had to complain about, and the sight of popular guys bitching about not getting laid (usually in the hopes of getting laid out of pity) reeked of dishonesty.

And really, part of my distaste for the scene was my own fault. I was still new to punk and, like every other neophyte, was convinced that I was the punkiest punk that ever punked. It was a pretty arrogant, self-serving attitude that I spent most of my adolescence attempting to justify, which, as it turns out, is impossible to do. I was as angry as everyone else my age, and seeing other people who hadn't "earned it" (i.e. people who weren't miserable) adopt the term reminded me of that, which I didn't like.

Anyway, the band brushed aside Ryan's questionable wardrobe, set up on the stage, and played. Had we realized how drunk the sound guy was, we

wouldn't have bothered. As it was, we sounded like we were playing from half a mile away through several sheets of tinfoil. To add to the chaos, Evan got electrocuted by his own amp (not badly, but enough to scare him), Ryan's guitars kept going out of tune, and the monitors were broken, so we couldn't actually hear ourselves. As a result, we played a lot faster and louder than usual, and I put a stick through my snare drum during the first song. I also bent my hi-hat, although I'm not altogether sure how that happened.

It's worth noting that we didn't have much of an audience for this little fiasco, but those who we'd somehow managed to gather weren't terribly responsive. On the plus side, they didn't seem to mind that we sounded like shit. At least, that's what I tell myself to sleep better at night. In fact, the crowd barely fluttered an eyelash at Ryan's garbled apology, which was something to the effect of "I shouldn't have worn this shirt (his Emo Sucks shirt), because tonight we sucked far worse than emo ever could." Harmless, no?

But scene gossip is a powerful thing, so kids who got there after our set, or who were milling around the parking lot while we played, heard that some hardcore band dressed in black sullied the good name of emo. And despite not being there for our set and seeing how harmless it was, they got pissed. Every other band that night disparaged those ruffians who "trashed the scene" during their set, and we got painted as hateful pricks by people who didn't even see us play. Of course, since we were still in the crowd, whenever someone mentioned us we put on big grins and waved. None of us saw the harm in being smart asses at that point.

A few months later, when I tried to get us on the lineup for another Punkfest, I was turned down. As it turned out, some kid named Brandon (drummer for one of the local bands) booked the shows and came to Burley for dates to run them at the Tavern. He obviously wasn't a big fan of us.

The most ironic part of the evening was that night being the only time Down for the Count got paid to play. My cut was \$14. Sadly, a lot of people expect young bands to play for free and neglect to mention that until said young bands ask for money. When I came back to the Tavern two years ago with the Fairgreen Trio, my jazz band, I made \$11. That didn't sting as much, because the Fairgreen Trio pulled \$250 at an art show a month previous. Sort of made me wonder why the hell I played punk rock for 6 years.

Despite only playing there a few times, and being kicked out twice, I was a regular Tavern Rat during my junior and senior years of high school. I knew some of the other regulars, who were all genuine misfits (in that they didn't like school or most of the people in it), and we had that in common, so we bonded. We only went inside on rare occasion, and spent most of our time in or around the parking lot, talking and picking on each other. I tend to give people nicknames, so I remember a few of those kids pretty well.

Dirty Wayne was a goofy, redheaded stoner who wore a lot of loud, Spiderman-themed clothing and loved Black Sabbath perhaps a little too much. He worked in a porno store, hence the name. Surprisingly, I never

tried to hit him up for discount porn. He was usually somewhere in the parking lot, yelling jovial insults at people loading equipment ("Hey cocksucker! You suck cock!" was a favorite of his) and smoking Newports, flanked by one of the many women he somehow attracted.

Derek needed no nickname. He was fucked up literally all the time, to the point where he was barely responsive. When someone lit the sleeve of his hoodie on fire as a joke, it took three of us to convince him that he needed to put it out. That may explain, in a roundabout way, why we liked him so much. He amused us.

Pagan Chris (so named because he was pagan) was a really nice guy who dressed like the Mad Hatter and bought people stuff all the time. He was with me when I convinced a fat, bearded born-again Christian who proselytized around the Tavern that Bernie the Goatfucker (an invention of my dad when he was accosted by a born-again seat mate on a flight to Europe) was my personal savior, and as such, I had no room in my heart for Jesus. Chris laughed so hard he nearly soiled himself, and that guy never bothered me again.

Honestly, I'd have been nicer had he not called me a promiscuous drug addict. As someone who was/is proudly drug free, I was insulted by his "drug addict" remark, and as someone who never got laid, I was doubly insulted by "promiscuous." Why rub it in?

So yeah, Chris and I shared some laughs. When he left to join the Air Force, I felt like I'd lost a good friend. I lost more when the police finally caught wind of all the drug dealing in the McDonald's across the street from the Tavern. Undercover cops scared most of the dealers and buyers away, including all my friends.

With the familiar Rats gone, I spent more time actually inside the Tavern instead of outside bumming around. I didn't go in much before because most of the bands there were high school kids copying the five most popular aggressive groups of the day. Marilyn Manson and Blink 182 were quite popular. With them came scores of kids who bought rebellion in the mall, or preppy kids who reminded me of the people I went to school with and hated. But it was still a place to go where I could sit and watch people and be left alone, and I also felt like I fit there and the others didn't. Since I usually felt the opposite way, having the upper hand was welcome, if only temporary.

And not all the bands were terrible. On good nights, I heard more than music from those on stage. I heard ambition in voices strained to the cracking point, heart in distorted guitars that somehow found crude-yet-recognizable melodies, effort in confident drums that didn't overstay their welcome or lose the beat. I heard fun, the inexplicable synthesis of music, lyrics, and presentation that, when heard, suggests pure joy on the part of its creators. When that happened, it made sense to be there.