

We Don't Need a Guitar Man

by Jason W. Stuart

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The weirdest thing I ever saw in Culloden County was a big dinghy done up like a Viking sailboat spitting fire into the sky and floating out in the middle of Coalwater Lake. That was just a few years back, now, just after the hurricane. The next best to that happened a much longer time ago, back when I was still a girl in school and picking with an old rummy named Elijah Bilbo.

There weren't that many black people ever in Culloden County that I know of. It's all piney woods and hills and hollers and black dust and gravel and so there weren't no big plantations that had slaves. And I guess none ever felt the desire to move out here, not that anyone was rolling out the welcome mats. Except for 'Lij. He could eat the hell out of a blues guitar like nobody's business. He was tall like a light pole and just as skinny. Had a long skirt of white hair draping down from under a black hat all the time and, aside from that, always wore the same old dark brown pants with suspenders. Sometimes a shirt. Sometimes not.

Lij would sit outside the Coalwater City Hall and Old County Courthouse half the day picking his fingers 'til they chapped while folks tapped their feet and tossed nickels and dimes in his case. My mama always did complain they ought to do something about some black bum hanging out downtown and I wasn't sure how to explain to her that all the big lawyers and tie-wearers took their lunch most days outside just to listen to him pick. He was that good.

"Stacy Lee," she said to me after switching me red and purple. "I don't want you ever going anywhere near that old rum-drunk nigger hippy ever again, you hear me?"

It should be understood that any person that didn't have a regular kind of job and took an interest in music of any kind was usually declared to be a hippy. It was sort of a catch-all for anybody different. I say this to be clear. 'Lij was no hippy. And neither was I. In fact, he and I both hated hippies because their music was the shit out of a rotted bird's ass. You think Morrison would have been worth the price of a cup of sand without his guitarist? Come on.

Grace Slick wasn't bad, though.

It was really all thanks to Lij that I got clear of my bad crush on Roger Daughtry that might've skewed me for the rest of my life into skinnyleg jeans and green hair. I still think the man was fine as hell in his skin-tight flares and bare chest. Lij played me some John Lee Hooker and some Cash that I really liked. I went down to the record store that day and bought three .45's: Muddy Waters, Waylon Jennings and Chuck Berry. I switched out my one-stars for a pair of brown saddle-boots and told my daddy I required a decent guitar for my next birthday. Mama said absolutely under no circumstances whatsoever would any decent lady have any such thing and I could forget all about it and go immediately to put on a dress that minute. Daddy smiled and it turned out my birthday was the next afternoon.

That was a lot of times how it was with me and daddy. We got on like grits and gravy in a way Mama and I never could. And, I don't know why that was. But, she skulked about a lot every time I sat in the den with Daddy picking out a few notes, him trying to show me how to keep my fingers steady and wiggle 'em just right when need be. Daddy was no 'Lij, but he had some skills himself. I think Mama didn't like that either.

Daddy told me once that Mama had been just like me when she was the same age. "A firecracker, sure enough," he called her. I just couldn't see it. She wore Sunday-going-to-church dresses every chance she could get and had her hair all up in a bun constantly. And, she up and decided one day that TV wasn't nothing but a tool for the devil to spread lies about Jesus and this country, so she cut up the cord to plug it into the wall. I went straight to my room and hid my radio after that.

"I think your mama's not sure what to do with herself," Daddy said. "I don't think she ever planned on getting old. I guess none of us does."

I watched Daddy's face as he'd said it. I could see him back in school, with his cuffed over jeans like he must have worn and his slicked-back hair, white shirt and a jean jacket. Or maybe a leather one. He had a red mercury, I'd seen the pictures. The hottest car of any boy in school, he'd said. Fast as anything on the road, save the Killafella, he'd told me, though I hadn't got his meaning.

Every day that year, after school I ran straight home, grabbed my Gibson and headed for downtown. Lij taught me all the basic chords and then a few combos. Pretty soon I could follow right along with him for a few songs. I bought the new Jerry Reed album and some Johnny Horton. Eddie Cochran was my favorite for almost a month. Then, I found Hank.

My god.

I couldn't understand how I could have ever missed this. It was a simple brilliance. Perfect. Each song was perfect. Lij had been playing the same songs everyday and I didn't realize it. I took *Honky Tonk Blues* and a few others and made 'em mine. I got where Lij let me pick out a few on my own towards closing time and I even got a few nickels. Fella dressed just like me except for his Stetson and Ray-Bans walked up one day as I strung out Lost Highway and I swear to you handed me a ten dollar bill. Ten whole dollars.

He said, "Y'ought to start in on the Juke Joints." Then he looked at Elijah. "You done good on this one, Lij. Done fine." Then he walked off. He was almost good-looking as Daughtry--but for that hat.

"He gave me ten dollars," I said to Lij.

"That song his name," Lij said. "He really likes it."

I never saw Mr. Highway again, though I knew of him well enough later on and suspect he had more than a heavy hand in all that trouble they wanted to slap on me, but it did make me think about what he said. I guess you could say he pushed me down the road I took. I heard a while back he'd died. I guess they all do.

Daddy worked for the Old Laketown Paper Mill just at the south end of the lake. Most everybody in town worked there that didn't practice law or sell insurance. This was all before we figured out we could make a killing setting up coffee bars and antique shops for the old hippies and moneyed up Yankees to come down and burn their cash on while they "got back to nature."

Nah, '81 was still severe poverty and despite there was one or two folks in town had some ready money, we never did. Daddy was always on Mama for not taking up her old job at the plant she had before she had me but she argued it wasn't proper for no married woman to have to work. She usually had the ladies down at the church to back her up on Sundays by calling Daddy out as often as he brought it up and once or twice otherwise just to keep him right-minded.

So, it was all in due course when they got all over my case come one Sunday I bothered to show up after being threatened with my guitar being confiscated, and Daddy, having bought me the thing, had already played his last betting chips for years to come. They said I had no business carrying on out in the street dressed like some agitator in cut up jeans and picking the devil's music. Seriously, even then some were still calling it the devil's music! And what I picked out was half as much country as it was anything else. I reckon they might've been mad the way I did Buck Owens sometimes. I can't help if the song calls for a little more speed.

It was when Hattie-Mae Gandy told me I ought to be using my talents on something pure like piano and only singing for the lord rather than some drugged out black-hippy that I lost composure and had to slap her in the face. Mama come running up and jerked me back from her while Daddy did the best he could to make apology and try to set things someplace close to right. Mama went to slapping me hard as she could all the way out the back door of the sanctuary and two deacons had to run pull her off me.

I was asked to leave the church.

But, like I started out to say, what really got me in trouble that time was the paper mill. See, the asses who ran the church also ran

the paper mill. Hattie-Mae's husband was one of the bigtime strawbosses up there and from as much as I was ever able to discern either she alone or worse yet, she and Mama both, had my daddy turned out of his job for his part in my so-called delinquency. I say Mama might have had a part in it because she was just always that mean. I finally got Daddy to turn her out a few years back, but that's beside the point of this.

Mama was all over him like he was some good-for-nothing hick. This was the way she done a lot and was how come she'd got him to work for the paper mill in the first place and even had him sell off the little piece of land he got from Grandpa after he died down the other side of Jasperville close to Lathan. Mama used the money to buy a Mustang convertible and then wrecked it and blamed that on Daddy, too. Like I said, she was mean to him.

"You better march yourself down there right now and get on your knees and get your job back. And I can tell you right now it won't help our case at all if it's widely known in town our little girl is whoring off with that bum hippy nigger."

"Mama he ain't a hippy and I ain't either. Do you even know what words mean?"

She slapped me for that one but I fired back.

"I guess not. I can ask Mrs. Johnson if she won't mind you sitting in on my senior English class, Mama. She's nice enough she'll--"

She slapped me again, of course, and then she started in on Daddy and I nailed her in the jaw with knuckles and she started back. I let her slap me a time or two but I was sick of her shitting all over Daddy.

"Get out of my house!" she barked at me like she never knew my name. "Get out of my house, both of you!"

I wanted to say something about it being Daddy's house seeing as he paid for it and maybe even adding that to say otherwise made her a Red Russian pinko slut which would be way worse than being a hippy, but I didn't. I grabbed my guitar and threw a bunch of clothes in its case and walked out the door with Daddy.

I can remember the ride with Daddy down Highway 11 that day clear as a bell. I remember the trees. See, it was surrounded on both sides then by those great big pines. This was still before the state came in and four-laned it and cut 'em back way off the road. No, that day they hung over us like giants and it was like driving through some older part of the world. I don't know why, but I thought of Robin Hood and those old kinds of stories. I'd seen some old Robin Hood movie on TV one time. And despite us having no money and no real place to go, I felt free for the first time in my life.

The feeling passed.

We landed in Collierville where Daddy took some work at the Hela Chemical Plant. That city was so ugly. We had to sleep in the pickup, me in the cab and Daddy in the bed, the first few nights 'til we found a little one room apartment by the plant. The whole place stunk at least as bad as the paper mill only now we were right next to it. The whole place was a horrid maze of rusted steel pipe and concrete. Nothing about it looked natural. It was like a warship had vomited its guts out all over the landscape. Smoke poisoned the sky day and night. I hated it.

Daddy got on as a regular on the night shift which meant he slept all day and I drove myself back and forth to school those last few months. Driving through the rest of Collierville, I never saw much of anything to help my opinion of the city. The whole place exploded with squalor. Houses downtown were built so close together you couldn't spit without hitting the next-door neighbors laundry hung out to dry. Rickety fences were falling down everywhere and half in the street so you had to swerve past to keep from having a nail in your tire. And kids I knew ought to be headed to their own schools wandered about here and there riding bikes and throwing cans at whatever they pleased. Everything all around seemed born out of pure hate and meanness.

I guess that was when I got the idea and started playing my own set of music, mostly outlaw kinds of songs, Willie Nelson and them. I was still so mad at Mama and the paper mill and the stink of the city and all of it, so that wound up being my standard location. I didn't

really know what I was doing or even what I was thinking. I was just so steamed, I couldn't wait to get out to the paper mill and sing loud as I could up into those bigshots' offices.

A fat bald son of a bitch--I think he was the one who fired my daddy--walked out halfway into my second song and demanded to know what I was doing. Well, I'd read through my civics book enough times I knew which rights I was supposed to have and quickly made him aware which those were and that he need not worry with me but about his work as I'd heard they tended to turn people out of a job here at the drop of a hat. He harrumphed a time or two at me and shot a few greasy looks at my chest and then directly walked back into the building. I could see somebody eyeballing me through a window off and on the rest of the afternoon and bet myself it was him again.

Lij was on me bad when he found out.

"They goan tear your ass, girl, you don't quit while you can," he said. I hated to know he wasn't with me on this. I could only imagine he damn well knew what he was talking about. "You don't remember them folks down here while back having that rally. You was too little. I lived down in the city, then. Down where you is now. It was bad times. They come down. Caused a mess of trouble. They run pretty wild playing they music and sleeping in the fields and the streets. Everywhere. Po-lice finally run the most of 'em out. But, all that got a bad taste in people's mouth for what you trying to do."

I only half knew what he was talking about. I knew there'd been trouble with hippies back in the sixties. I knew there had been some rally. It was around the time they shot the bomb and it was all jumbled together in my head. But as much sense as Lij made, I just couldn't let it go. I was eat up with mad at everything in the world at that time.

The next day two boys from school, Jerry Campbell and Mickey Cameron, who I imagined both had a hard-on for me followed me out to the paper mill and watched me pick. Baldy watched the whole time again, breathing hard into his window.

My routine was fairly simple. I'd start off with my outlaw songs. Then, I'd go into a short set of my old favorites. I'd swing back to Willie and Waylon on the tail-end just before time to head home and fix Daddy something to eat before his shift.

Every day I had one or two more stragglers, mostly boys from school or some other layabout who apparently had not much else to do in the afternoon. Pretty soon I had a decent little crowd going, even a few women. Most girls at school didn't get along well with me for a whole gang of reasons you can easily imagine. I'd once kicked Bethany Ann Cole, the pretty girl, in the teeth when she called me a dirty hippy. She'd not been quite as pretty since then and any other like her was generally concerned I'd do 'em the same favor.

Anyway, that was all that had led up to what happened. See, I'd been doing my little routine over a week and it was Friday afternoon and I had a good little crowd going and, since Daddy had the night off, I didn't have to quit so early and went on into the evening. That was when it started to get interesting.

Instead of trickling off, the crowd actually started growing bit by bit. I guess word had spread around the area pretty good because I didn't recognize all the faces. Whistle blew at the mill and a fat batch of mill hands stuck around after to hear me play. The tie-wearers at the mill didn't care for that a whole lot. And they sure didn't care for what happened next.

Johnny Thompson, that black-haired guitar picker from down in Liberty that even had his own record out, he showed up in a pickup full of sound gear, him and some drummer-boy named Duke. Johnny parked right up behind me and started fiddling with his dials and wiring this to that and then plugged in his own axe motioning me to hop up on his tailgate with him. Well, I didn't have any good reason not to and I'd heard he was near as good as Lij which was not a lie.

They led me straight into a hard rendition of *Folsom Prison* and I knew I liked those boys right away. We wore that song out. That was when we saw folks running to their vehicles and squawking on their CB radios. We had something going on.

People started pouring in from all over. Word spread quick and everybody I knew from school showed up and more from down in Liberty and Lathan. I think half the people in the county were there that night. There wasn't no ball game anywhere, I guess. I didn't know what to do but just keep playing.

I thought of Daddy most of that night. I wished to hell and God he'd been there. I guess it was really all about him. I'd so long held it against him, him not standing up like a man against Mama, and the church, and the mill, and all the shits that make everything shitty. But, I knew then why he took the things the way he took them. I saw it and it made me hate that much harder. If he had to bend down on account of me, I'd stand twice as high in light of it. I bent them guitar strings hard as they would go that night. Every note was a slap to Mama's face and a shot fired at the churchhouse.

I guess we played every song the three of us knew that night. Johnny knew a whole gang that I hadn't got to yet, but I picked up the rhythm most of the time pretty quick and could hum right along. Other folks started jumping in every time they knew a piece or two of whatever song. A few here and there chimed in, pulling harps out of their pockets, and one old lady whipped out with a fiddle and sawed it down. I took a short break and was offered a barbecue sandwich. Folks were out in the crowd grilling and pulling pork, and two old boys in a pickup had a pot of crawfish boiling. They'd settled in for the duration, it seemed. I honestly couldn't believe what was happening.

It was around eight, I think, when the less-than-finest rolled in. Blue lights flashing and sirens screaming to drown us out. Johnny wailed on through like nothing was wrong. Well, me, you know, I was young and I got scared. I didn't care for cops much then and I don't today. They whipped out with their bullhorns and went to barking at everyone to go home but none did. One of them hustled over to our truck to jerk our chords. It was Jack Samuelson and his oldest son that blocked him and that put gas to the fire.

I didn't see the big rig come up.

I'd been playing hard as I could go and there's a lot of things that night I didn't see. But, when the chains pulled tight on those two police cars, we all perked our ears up. Even Johnny woke from his trance to see what was what. I could see the truck just barely and from the flashing blue lights it was hard to make out what color it really might have been, but it looked red to me and I told the judge as much. And the man on the back, he was laughing like he might have been a cackling demon. I don't guess I've ever seen anyone so happy to wreak havoc. And that's what they sure did.

As I said, we heard the chains pulled tight. The cackler in the denim shirt had run up while everyone was distracted and hooked them up under the cars. That big rig took off up the road going reasonably fast dragging the cars bouncing and spraying sparks all over everywhere and making a sound like screaming evil. We saw them tear off and light up the night as they rode up toward the river, which was apparently where they dumped the cars. That, I learned later, after I was arrested.

They pinned the whole business on me. It was that fat bald son of a bitch that did it, I know. He fired Daddy and then had me arrested for disturbing the peace, inciting violence, and other un-American activities. I don't know what those were, exactly. It's sort of funny, now, looking back, and I like to tell it now and then. But, at the time, I was seventeen and scared for my life. I liked to walk tall and talk big then, but I wasn't in a hurry to get to prison no matter the rep I'd come out with.

But none of that was what was genuinely amazing. No, the reason I say it was the strangest thing that ever happened is because it was the time I met Mr. Bob Ray Anderson. He was judge before my case and he wore a mask of seriousness that like to worried me to death that first day in the courtroom. Daddy sat right there with me and just shook from fear of what they'd do. Culloden County had never had the reputation of fair governance. Just take old Walter Lathan they tried to hang and turned out innocent. And we sure didn't have any money and I had the most shit lawyer there

could be. Hell, I reckon I knew more from my textbooks than he seemed to.

The courtroom smelled a lot like mold and it was hot as you could imagine; they didn't have any air conditioning then. I sweated through my shirt and wondered if he wasn't dying under his robe but he weathered the heat like it was nothing. He looked down at me from his bench with deep, black eyes and I just knew he was going to call me a commie and sentence me to life.

"Counselor!" he boomed from his bench. The prosecuting attorney--Baldy Fatterson sneering from behind him--stood up to acknowledge the judge. "What the hell is this? Do you honestly mean to tell me you've put a schoolgirl in front of me for, if I can get this just right now, inciting violence, endangering police officers, and un-American activities? Do you even know what that means?"

"Well, your honor--"

"I didn't give you the floor yet, Counselor. I am not finished. I look at this report here, Counselor, and all I can see is a girl playing her guitar in the street, which according to my understanding of the Constitution is her God-given right. You've heard of the Constitution, I guess."

"Sir, if you'll just--"

"I haven't yielded the floor, Counselor. Now as to the disturbing of the peace, it also appears here that a mighty fine-sized passel of people were there foot-tapping with her. That don't sound like they were terrible disturbed. I live not far from there and was sitting by reading my books and I don't recall being terrible disturbed until those dern fools went squawling by with their sirens. If anybody's incited the violence it was your unruly officers. Not fit to wear the uniform, I'll not doubt. That business with the cars hauled off and dumped in the river was unfortunate as we'll now have to replace them but I hardly see as how that is this girl's fault whatsoever. This case is dismissed. Miss MacKintosh, you're free to go, but next time why not let the word out sooner so folks can get used to the idee there'll be music played? I don't mind a picking now and then, myself," he said smiling.

“Adjourned!” he called with a stamp of the hammer and was gone again.

Just like that.

I guess Daddy and I both stood there five full minutes not sure what to do. By the time I snapped out of it we were the only ones in the room and it still smelled like mold but it also smelled good. Something decent had just happened in the world and it had happened right there. People sometimes ask me how come I stay around home as much as I do--when I could be off in New York or California or someplace and I guess I could if I wanted to. And you could say it's because of a whole pile of reasons but I always think back to that day, standing alone in that courtroom and actually being able to believe in something for five minutes.

Of course, I was Waylon Jennings the whole rest of the school year.

