

Slave to the Rhinestone

by Jonathan Williams

'It all begins with a song.' -Music City mantra

I left on a Tuesday. It was open mic at The Rhinestone and I didn't usually bother except that playing two or three songs was usually good for at least one pint of domestic draft care of the bartender. So I did my bit with a borrowed guitar and, after the last chord of my final song, a roar came from what must have been all ten people in the place. I looked up to find that the University of Tennessee football team had just made an interception.

I sat at the bar and collected the pro-bono pint while at the far end the other songwriters huddled together entering each other's numbers into cell phones. Blurred by the dust that covered it a Budweiser clock blinked '12:00' from its perch above the bar. The time hadn't changed since the first day I walked into the place.

The walls were covered in photographs hung edge to edge where no wall could be seen. Hundreds had been lost in the fire but still there were thousands of them. Some looked crisp and new. The clothes and hair styles no different than those parading past outside the room's only window that served as the barrel hole of the sawed-off shotgun room. Others were yellowing, dated only by the fashions of the day they were taken. Among the latter was a picture that, as many times as I'd been there, I'd never noticed. A picture of me. My face was full and my hair was thick. My smile was still straight. Next to me in the photo was a guy I hadn't thought on in a long, long time.

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We shared a cab one night from Where-I-Don't-Recall. He introduced himself as Jimmy Stamps and shook my hand with the confidence of a man who is Microsoft Windows certified. Reeking of vodka and Swisher Sweets he proceeded to expatiate on the virtues of X versus those of Y which gave me the Z's. On and on he went confusing silent apathy for diligent listening or, more likely, he didn't care either way.

Available online at *<<http://fictionaut.com/stories/jonathan-williams/slave-to-the-rhinestone--3>>*

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'What was your name?' he asked.

For the third time I told him. 'Robert Fick.'

'What do you do?'

'Nothing', I answered. Truth be told I was at the time suffering through a short-lived stint waiting tables which would soon end with my termination. As it turns out I make a lousy waiter. Between shifts, and sometimes during them, that's what I did. Nothing.

Jimmy sat in suspense. Through the window I watched the Nashville skyline glide by. The buildings were in a slow, smooth march across the night. Finally, I caved. 'What do you do?'

'I'm selling at Dell right now but I just got a cut!' He tried to conceal exhilaration behind Music City Cool. It didn't work. 'First one!'

'Cheers', I said.

'Yep. Gonna be on Garth Alan McBride's next CD. Track number 9!' [NOTE: NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED TO PROTECT THE GUILTY]

'I'll be sure to look for it,' I said to the window.

'Actually, I won't get a credit on the album. I took a lump sum instead. It'll read that Garth wrote it. But I wrote it!'

I turned back to him, 'So you have a song on a McBride record and you're not getting credit for it?' He was either a liar, an idiot or both. Royalties from a cut on a sure-to-sell album is a nugget in the pan of the carpetbagger.

'It's the only way they would take it,' Jimmy continued, 'They said a lot of writers do it. A sacrifice now for eventual fame and fortune they said and I deserve to be famous.' As he said this a tear of what must've been pure vodka slid down his face. 'It's called Angel.' Then, in a brackish but not altogether awful rasp, he began to sing a sob soaked rendition of what I suspected to be his beloved cut. It got worse as it went. Fortunately by this point the cab had pulled up to my all but empty in-efficiency apartment. I gave the driver a ten and bolted from the car almost before it stopped. I could

hear Jimmy belting out his tune as that poor, poor cabby drove away.

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Months later I ran into Jimmy, or rather he ran into me, at The Rhinestone. He was wearing a pink rabbit costume and stepped on his own feet before stepping onto mine. He placed the bunny head and paw-mittens on the bar and grabbed some bar napkins in a futile attempt to dry the beer I had previously been drinking from the blue jeans I was wearing. I tried to be pissed but, hell, its hard to get mad at a man in a bunny suit. Besides. He offered to buy a replacement beverage plus one sandwich of my choice. The ham on white tasted like cardboard but turned out to be a welcome relief from my regular diet which consisted almost exclusively of Shiner Bock and Sudafed.

As the bartender produced a disposable camera from behind the bar to document the occasion, Jimmy, unprovoked, set to explaining his garb. Apparently he'd needed to pick up a job in promotions for H&R Block a.k.a. sweating-by-the-road-at-a-shopping-center-holding-a-sign-all-day-in-the-Tennessee-heat. He admitted that he felt 'at home' in his rental suit. Reason being, he told me, that he was conceived while his parents wore animal costumes. ('Not masks and face paint but the kind mascots wear at football games and Disneyland. Like this one,' as he put it. Flaps, apparently, had been installed in the appropriate places.)

Then he told me everything. And I mean *everything*. Jimmy ordered us round after round of what amounted to a school of Red Snappers as he prattled on. Through billowing Swisher Sweet smoke he told me about the 'prick' who's 'out to get him' at Dell about the perfect food that is Funions his ex-wife who died in the cancer ward at Vanderbilt in May his affinity for and unfinished degree in Greek mythology the details concerning the condition of his ulcer speckled stomach and suggested no *insisted* that I absolutely have to listen to the lyrics of this Eagles song playing right now because it's about his life, man and on and on and on. I just sat leaning into the bar almost enjoying the show.

Then Jimmy did something I never thought would happen. He stopped talking. Except for a thumb and forefinger balling up a cellophane cigar wrapper into a BB he sat still as a stone. He was staring down the smokey barrel of the sawed-off shot-gun building and into the now swirling, standing-room-only crowd.

'Jimmy,' I said.

He continued staring. Now he was completely motionless.

'Jimmy,' I repeated trying to make contact.

He blinked himself to and lit a cigar. 'And here he is,' he informed his drink.

'Who's that?'

Looking at me from under the shelf of his now hard unibrow he answered. 'Steve. Silverman.' Like someone bumping into a CD player Jimmy had skipped from easy James Taylor to anything by Slayer. Just like (I SNAP my fingers here) *that*.

My eyes followed his to a husky man sliding on a black trench coat. Slinking through the crowd Silverman was heading toward the door. To get there he would first have to walk by us.

'Silverman.' Jimmy growled.

'Hay-hay, Jimmy!', Silverman said, giving Jimmy a hearty handshake, 'how ya doin'?' Silverman put his other hand on Jimmy's shoulder smiling a smile held up by invisible clothes pins.

'*Not* too good.' Jimmy emphasized the 'not' in a way that mere italics can't do justice.

Silverman's smile slipped just a little. 'Well, best of luck to ya!' He took his hand from Jimmy's shoulder and took a step towards the door. Jimmy still had him by the other hand in a now static handshake. Silverman's manicured finger tips lay limp.

'Have you gotten any of my messages?' The color in Jimmy's cheeks had now spread to his eyeballs and was made all the more red against the pink fluff of the rodent suit.

Silverman looked at me for the first time, at the exit, then back at Jimmy. His eyes were those of a wolf who'd just realized that he had strayed too far from the pack. 'If I haven't got them yet I'm sure I will. Now y'all have a good-.'

'Can I ask...?' Jimmy was vodka-bent to seize an opportunity of some kind. 'Can I ask you a question?'

'Well sure Jimmy!' Silverman's eyes darted around the room. 'Just give me a call, I'm on my way out-'

'You told me that even though my name wouldn't be on that record I would get work for doing it. I'm not getting shit. No one believes I wrote that song.'

The invisible cloths pins popped off. The corners of Silverman's mouth drooped to a frown. All he said was, 'That's not a question.'

Then something happened that would be Exhibit 'A' in a trial concerning the existence of Fate. Earlier in the night some unknowing patron had fed a dollar bill to the juke box and selected Jimmy's OEdipal creation 'Angel' by Garth Alan McBride. It was now that the song played.

Jimmy made a fist with the hand not restraining Silverman. In it was a half smoked Swisher Sweet which broke on impact. It wasn't the only thing that broke and I'm not referring to Silverman whose face Jimmy's fist missed entirely. On the bar was an under-construction pyramid of freshly washed inverted pint glasses. This is what Jimmy hit. Glass exploded up and everywhere then fell down on everyone like a single shot of sheet rain. The lit end of the cigar went sailing like a comet behind the bar and into a twenty-gallon trash can to mingle with folded six-pack cartons, broken down boxes, etc. For a moment every person in that packed little bar was still and silent listening to Jimmy's 'Angel'.

Then: Chaos.

Hands came from nowhere grabbing Jimmy and me both. My feet never touched the sticky floor of that bar as they took us to the door and threw, and I mean *threw*, us out. Jimmy's decapitated rabbit head flew out after us. It hung in the air long enough for me to anticipate it bouncing off the asphalt but it just landed with a muffled thud, denting like a deflated basketball.

We had just pushed ourselves up off the sidewalk and were across the street when people began pouring out of the bar. They

were tripping and pushing each other in true riot form. No cab in sight, we opted for a brisk walk in the opposite direction. Before fleeing the scene, however, I got a quick peek inside the bar and of the cause of such panic. The full, twenty gallon trash can in which Jimmy's lit cigar had flown was now a geyser of fire spouting flames up the wall so that the ceiling was already black.

Then came a slow-mo slalom through squatters with guitars who littered the sidewalk while simultaneously dodging middle aged couples who'd been systematically branded with name tags and strapped to fanny packs. We weren't halfway to the next block when we passed a cop car and two fire trucks, sirens-a-screaming and lights-a-swirling, heading in the direction from which we came. Six-string emissions from open honky-tonk doors flowed into the street to clash with the muffled metronomic thump of hip-hop from black-windowed SUVs. Sifting through the cacophony my ear seized on an organ in mid-vamp that, in observance of the Doppler effect, soured as I passed. No matter where I managed to place the next step the Earth tried to roll out from under me. I was moving. I was going nowhere. I was a seal on a ball in this circus.

Before parting ways Jimmy stopped to piss behind a dumpster. (Flaps, apparently, had been installed in the appropriate places.) His rabbit costume was now filthy in a way that evoked road kill. Even from where we were I could see black smoke illuminated from below by the hollow glow of street lights. I imagined all of those people trapped in photographs on the wall of that bar peeling and bubbling and finally rising into oblivion. The bar's sign provided a flickering neon caption: *The Rhinestone, The Crown Jewel of Country Music.*

'Just as well,' Jimmy said shaking the evening off, 'I didn't have enough money to pay the tab anyway.'

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The next morning he was dead. The Tennessean reported that the security video at a Golden Gallon shows Jimmy break a window and climb in. After consuming two bags of Funions and slamming five Bud Ice he retires through a steel door marked 'EMPLOYEES

ONLY' where he does not come out. The morning cashier found him hanging from an orange extension cord draped over a pole in the storeroom. It was then the fame Jimmy sought found him. The entire time he is breaking and entering, consuming his final meal and then "ending it all" he is wearing a pink rabbit costume. The incident became known as the Rabbit Suit Suicide in the annals of urban lore.

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I had stared at the photo of me and Jimmy until it was indistinguishable among the crowd of thousands on the wall.

'Another?,' the bartender asked picking up the now empty glass. She was new.

For a moment I could see every one of those photographs at once. The people in them were looking at me. Watching. Waiting. I looked at the dusty Budweiser clock hung above the bar. '12:00' blinked on and on and-

'I'm done,' was my answer. It was a long walk to the Greyhound station and it was time I got started.

