

# Stevie Wonder

*by* Robert Crisman

Like Prince said one time, parties aren't meant to last. Guys who don't get the message are guys who die by the inch.

Stevie Wonder partied his ass off down at the Green Felt Pool Hall in downtown Seattle. He partied a year and then the fun times were over.

The Felt was a hustlers' paradise just north of Pike Street on Fourth, right smack in the middle of town. It was the baddest joint on the Coast for awhile, an asskick back in the '60s, when people still thought the future looked good. Seattle never had anything like the Green Felt, and won't ever again as far as that goes.

You hoofed up the stairs and stepped through the door, and there you were--in the Starship Enterprise rec room, no shit. In front of you was a long, low, wide room, maybe 40' by 80', the walls white on white, with mirrors running the whole way around. Except for the front wall, all windows, looking out over Fourth. The rug was blood red where cigarette burns hadn't chewed brown patches.

There were 18 pool tables, tourney-size Brunswicks, nine in the front row, six in the back, and three in an alcove off to the left as you headed on back toward the can. The balcony there at the end of the alcove had action that sometimes made you forget about pool.

Eighteen pool tables, plus one each for snooker and billiards, both of these way in the back.

By late '66, the place was the number one hotspot for pool on the Coast, like I said. Top hustlers came in from all over to lay down their money. Some walked out Cadillac rich and some limped away in their socks. Some came and went like a fist when you open your hand and some found a home. Always, the money was flying. Fast Eddie Kelly, the national one-pocket king, came up from L.A. He gave the Felt's owner Doug Tom a ball and the break, and danced home with 25 grand.

Pool hustlers heaven! But, more than that, it was home to anyone looking to make a buck off the books. Burglars and boosters with

hot-shit-to-go had here-and-gone shops in the back. Pressed-and-dressed pimps took their rest and talked shop at all hours. Hos would parade their way through before dawn, to drop off the money and powder their noses. The candymen came with their baggies and treats. The hos were good business, like just about everyone else in the mix.

The place was all day and all night. Four am weekends, you'd have to wait an hour or two for a table. Maybe a third of the people bouncing around there had ever picked up a stick...

*Everyone* came. Rounders and squarejohns, and all the seekers and strays in the world. All colors made it: black, yellow, red, white, and brown. There were doctors and lawyers and Indian Chiefs. The mayor came through incognito one time, to collar his bagman before he got stupid with Candi, the six-foot-tall hooker, transgendered no less, who carried a strap-on and promised the bagman heaven and hell in one session.

There were also the usual junkies and tweakers, the twelve-year-old mutants from Kansas, and every runaway teenybop girlie that God ever made. And, natch, every hard dick their mamas had ever warned them about.

Bent cops and straight cops and priests on the prowl made the scene. Also, a short-eyes who worked at the Post Office days who'd come in to peek up the younger runaways' dresses.

You might see your grandma run rack after rack on Table 14 at three in the morning, then pick up the cash off the rail and jack up the bet. The vice cop she's hosing, down past case money, says fuck it and goes it on ass. She knocks the cluck in, then heads to the can to refresh. He slinks out the door...

It was a *dance*, man, no shit. *All* the folks there, the sharks and the marks, the pimps and the gimps, the hos and their dopemen, the burglars and bag men, the hippies and squares--high-fiving, back-slapping, jaw-jacking, juking, duking, sipping and tipping, doping and topping, and wheeling and dealing and *reeling!* The jukebox was Dyke & the Blazers, James Brown, Wilson Pickett, the Dells. Cannonball Adderley's kickass quintet. The Watts 103rd St. Rhythm

Band, man, all day and all night...

Come the wee hours, Wendell Hunter'd get down in the back by the box. He looked, danced, and sang like James Brown. Had the runaways doing a whiteface Supremes right behind him, miniskirts, beehives, and all.

*Partytime*, baby, that was the Felt. And Stevie was right in the mix. He shot a good stick, mostly nine-ball and one-pocket, the money games back then. He won steady as Eddie. Always had change in his pockets.

What he'd do is, he'd hook some yokel, rack his ass up to \$20 or \$50 a pop, whatever the traffic would bear, and then knock his ass in.

Stevie'd be *stroking*. Willie Mosconi, Cicero Murphy, Jesus, the Buddha, you name the player--when Stevie was on, he could shoot with his johnson and knock them *all* in.

That's not really true, but, what the hell, *sounded* good--and Stevie *did* shoot a good stick...

Anyway, he'd take a guy down for, say, \$300. Quick as a snake, bing, bam, boom, bam. Whole lots of guys. We all used to wonder, how does he do it? Other guys up there with six-inch-long teeth, they had to sneak up on tiptoe. For Stevie, the victims would float in like Mallards, signs on their backs saying Pluck Me.

What we figured was, Stevie? A nice, friendly guy. Unassuming, you know? Some guy comes in, he wants to kill time, might even want to get down. But he also doesn't want to get raped and he's heard the place is a shark pit. So he's looking around for the lions and tigers and bears, ready to break for the door at the first sudden move, and now here's this guy who looks like he works at the Texaco station or something, nice friendly guy, sort of low-key, hanging around killing time just like the mallard. They get to talking, you know, like, football or baseball or foxes or something and, next thing you know, maybe Stevie says, hey, or the other guy says, wanna play some? Stevie says, sure, make it light on yourself...

Three hours later, the guy's stumbling around in the rain. He's shirtless and wondering, what the hell happened? Stevie put him to

sleep is what happened.

Keep money in this world and you are a star and action keeps coming your way. Stevie was in with the players. They'd lounge and talk smack, then go blow some dope, hit the flicks 20 strong, and root for the Man With No Name. Then, out for thick steaks at Kansas City on Seventh and Pike. They'd tuck in and kick it some more, conversation now salted with philosophical yak yak, mostly on how the game goes, should be played, and all that.

Whatever the game, it all starts with *front*; you've got to look *good*: the players wore gators and sharp sharkskin suits, or leather jackets and ban-lons, pimped highboy shirts with the wrap-around cufflinks, and thick-and-thin socks in all weather. The *fly* bonaroos! Their hair, cut just so, looked like glass...

Sartorial arbiters? Pimps, the men who ruled ladies.

The players wanted at least to look like they ruled...

Except Stevie it seemed, who looked like he worked at the Texaco station... But Stevie stacked bank, he had game, and he strode with the In-Crowd. They'd blase down Pike St., cutting a swathe like the young kings they were.

Stevie's dick might go and get hard. He'd hook up with one of the runaway girlies, go freak in some no-tell, get back to the Felt for the action, his one real true love.

Party, man, party!

And then he went up to Alaska. The Summer Of Love, '67.

He worked on a boat and came back with \$12,000. He got into town and came right to the Felt. Knocked a guy in for some \$400. Took him two hours. Then Tommy McFarland gave him some acid, a Welcome Back Stevie that took him right over the moon. He didn't come down for the next 20 years.

Actually, it wasn't the acid. That was just sort of a booster to bump him up into the ozone. After that it was speed, Benzedrine, those little white criss-crosses, man. Two for a buck and better than jets at getting you up in the sky.

*Speed!* The hustlers' quick fix. The shit keeps you *wired*. Makes you think that you'll *never* get tired.

Stevie *lived* at the Felt now. Wouldn't go home to eat, sleep, or shit. And his game got *good-good*, like before--with one bigtime difference.

The way it would go, he'd knock a guy in and then wait for the next guy. Sucking those bennies. Two days, three days, month-and-a-half, didn't matter.

You know how it goes with the speed. You're cool, for awhile. But then, you come down and shit changes up. Then, doesn't matter, you can bang all the speed in the world. You stay on the table, you're toast.

Which is what happened. The next guy'd show up, Stevie's right there, but it's been like three days and he's not worth a fuck. Guy knocks him in like he's blind, which by this time he is.

Now he's flat broke. He's gotta go home, maybe crash, and pick up more money. Two or three days, he comes back. Same fucking music.

You think he'd have learned but, you know?

What it was really, I think, was, Stevie, he *had* to do that. Just like a dopefiend has to do dope. He had all this money he got off the boat and nothing, really, to *do*. No job, no old lady to take up his time and help spend his money. And so, he was out there and floating around.

Even then, though, you've got to do *something*. For him, it was wait for the next guy.

Week after week, through the whole goddamn fall and on into winter. Guys would come up to the Felt, they'd get in line now, counting the days: "Okay, lessee, he came in on Tuesday, it's Saturday, right? He's tore to the floor. Let's bend him over." Then they'd draw straws. Short straw broke luck.

It was *incredible*, man! And then, to top it, the Felt went tits up in the space of two weeks. Early November, the manager, Slim, went and fucked it all up with a two-dollar cover. A cover charge to get in a pool hall? Maybe in one of those places these days where the yuppies hang out; yuppies'll go for anything under the sun and moon if its trendy. But back then, when people still had some sense? *Fuck* no...

The Felt divebombed. All the squares drifted, then the players, and soon just the Felt rats were left. The rest went to Smokey's, or places out north.

So now it was just the same fucking cannibals, right? And Stevie of course. By this time he couldn't have found his way out the door. But, man, the action was *gone*. Even the guys who'd made a career of bending him over those past few months had split. And with them gone Stevie *really* went nuts.

This one time, he'd been there six days or something, loaded like dump trucks, itching and scratching and tearing his hair out and every five minutes he's back in the can, and when he comes out his eyes are like neon and--Jesus... Dude's like a fish on dry land, jaws working like, *yoink yoink yoink yoink* and--Stevie's a stone fucking *mess*.

He wanders on up to the desk. Checks the billiard balls out. He's gonna knock 'em around. Something to do til the next guy gets up there to take his last nickel--assuming the last guy hasn't already been up there and gone.

Stevie goes to the table, starts screwing around. By himself. You ever play billiards? All by yourself? It's like watching the rain peel paint off a house.

Stevie stayed on that table *for 24 hours and change!*

I was up there, alright? I went out, came back in, then went home, ate some dinner, and then went to bed. Next morning I got out of bed, took a dump, showered, ate breakfast. Went downtown, bought a suit. Got married, divorced, got a new suit, and shacked up again. Bought a dog, the fucking dog died of old age. I went back to the Felt--*and Stevie was still on that table.*

His mouth's crusted over with white shit, there's holes in his cheeks where he gnawed them to ribbons and, Jesus, I could not *believe* it!

He went back to the can to power his millionth dime bag or whatever. He didn't come out. An hour or so later, what gives? His heart blew up maybe? He flew through the ceiling? Me and Freddy went back there--and there he was, in front of the mirror, asleep like

a baby, stone cold dead to the world.

Goddamndest thing you ever saw in your *life*. Stevie's standing straight up, his eyes are shut tight, he's snoring like chainsaws, and his hair's all messed up like the wind's blowing six ways at once.

Slim comes in and starts laughing. Tells us don't wake him. He goes, gets some chalk, comes back and turns Stevie around--and writes FOOL on his forehead in big, old block letters. Then he frogwalks him out of the bathroom. Stevie's still in a coma.

Slim shakes him awake. "They took off with your hat, man! Two dopefiends! Young white dudes! *Gimps*, man, they ain't got no *teeth*! They're just out the door, man, go *get* 'em!"

Stevie's like, *huh?* Feeling around on the top of his head. He ain't got no *hat*! His fucking *hat's* gone! The pricks took his *hat*!

*What* fucking hat? Stevie never had a hat in his *life*! He goes tearing on out, to find those two toothless cocksuckers who snatched up his hat. Straight out to the street. Fourth and Pike, smack-dab in the middle of downtown Seattle, Saturday, high fucking noon.

*Millions* of people out shopping, all the grandmas and teenybops, etc.--and here is this *wild* man suddenly out on the sidewalk, hopping around like 600 monkeys, with nasty white shit all caked on his lips, shock treatment hair, eyes like he came from a psych ward on some other planet--FOOL on his forehead big as a billboard...

We're at the window there watching. Slim's falling *out*. It's like the *circus* hit town. We hear screams. Then the sirens...

We didn't see Stevie again for three weeks.

And then he came back. He'd run through his money. Twelve thousand dollars in three fucking months--long money back then--and nothing to show but the holes he'd chewed in his cheeks.

Also--bad timing--he'd started in banging the smack. That shit costs *bank*, and his was all gone.

The couple of times I saw him there now, he was all on his lips and begging for change. He didn't have too much to say. A couple of times I duked him some bills, and I knew he was hitting the other guys up, and they'd slip him the odd ten or twenty. They hadn't picked up on it yet, his monkey and all, and it's hard to see how but,

well, Stevie had always *had* money, you know, and maybe they figure, he's down on his luck for a minute...

Then he got Mackey for \$500. Right after that he was gone.

Into thin air. And then, months and months, and the Felt finally closed. The cover charge killed it. After that all the guys went up to Smokey's. The place was a dump, but after the Felt there wasn't another place you could go that wasn't way out in the dingles.

A couple more months, then one night, there's Stevie, strung like a dog. He didn't go back by the tables, just sat at the counter sucking down coffee, his lips on his shoes. He was jungled up at this flop down the street, him and the rest of the skag dogs who hung in that neck of the woods. He was dealing the 20s so he could stay halfway to well.

One look, you knew he didn't have long.

Then one night Mackey came in and he saw him. Didn't say word one. Just snatched Stevie up and dragged him back in the alley. He took all Stevie's shit and then kicked him into a coma. *Real* ugly, man. Mackey could hurt you. Stevie was all in a heap. You'd've thought Mackey'd killed him.

I got Stevie up and helped him back up to his room. I couldn't just leave him, you know? Then I went back into Smokey's and called for an aid car and they came and got him. He never came back into Smokey's again.

Twenty years later I saw him. Out at this Denny's in Renton. He weighed about 300 pounds. I couldn't believe it. I said, how you doing? I always liked him, you know? Turns out he's staying with his folks. He got off the smack and into the Methadone line. The Methadone blimped him. He wasn't out there dopesick and stealing at least...

We talked for a minute. It was all this and that, and, pretty quick, there wasn't a whole lot to say. His rap was shrugs mostly. He had this sort of a shit-eating grin, he was dressed off the dork rack at Thriftko or something and, after awhile, I said, hey, Stevie, I'll see you. It was good running into you, man. Keep keeping on. And all that. I felt kind of bad.



I don't know, man... Shit happens, you know? Who would've thought? Dude used to be one of the fellas. Young Kings and all that... And now, man, goddamn. He's been flatlined these past 20 years. Fifty years old, at home with his folks, and he looks like he's just going to flatline his way to the graveyard.

Partytime, man. Talk about *over*.



