

The Day The Music Died

by sean m. poole

I heard an old Stevie Ray Vaughn tune this morning. It triggered a flash back. It's funny how just a few notes of a song can slam me right into a memory. A total and complete immersion. Sights. Sounds. Smells. The people. The place. The weather. What I was wearing. How I felt.

It began with an early morning phone call from my ex - herself a hopeless groupie.

"Turn on the radio baby, you won't believe it".

I slowly emerge from my junk and alcohol induced, cocaine fueled coma to stagger across the room and turn on the stereo.

I'm unconscious before she stops blubbering her JFK, John Lennon, Challenger disaster, this is one of those times everyone will always remember where they were spiel...

Now, a lifetime later, I realize she had been right. If nothing else her phone call saw to that. She was really only one of many ex-wives, lovers, girlfriends, who felt that they had claims on yours truly only to have their fragile hopes dashed against the rocks of my stormy reality.

If she knew she'd been able to have a long lasting impact on me in any way, even one as trivial as remembering that it was from her that I'd heard of a beloved musician's tragic death, she would count it as a victory, having long ago abandoned any hope of influencing me in the slightest.

I lived daily in a lifestyle which so defined the nighttime world of high volume, meat market dance clubs, filled with hot bodies, hard drugs and harder sex, that I felt myself a professional in a world full of amateurs, posers and wannabes. I relished the role. I played it to the hilt.

Arriving at the club the evening of the day that Stevie Ray Vaughn fell out of the sky I find Lucy the bartender has already begun her mourning process. She's been into the DJ booth, lowering all the big video screens and cranking up a bootleg concert video

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with Stevie Ray, BB, Dr. John and more, all onstage at the same time, a killer tape! The volume is high, the tearful sounds of Albert Collins and Stevie Ray jamming on "The Sky is cryin'" fill the nearly empty bar.

Lucy's been crying, but she brings my gin & tonic as I enter the booth and lower the volume. "Sorry its so loud baby", as she hands me the drink," but I've been bummed out since I heard it on the radio this morning!"

I sip the drink deeply, first of the day. "Yeah, a real shocker. We used to see him for a \$5.00 cover charge Fridays at Fitzgerald's!"

As I say this I think of the wake up call. Feels like Deja Vu.

"I remember," Lucy says dabbing at her eyes. A few customers enter and she goes back behind the bar.

A little after 9pm, with a full dance floor grooving to the tunes, I ease into a 12 minute mix of some forgettable Top 40 dance-hall classic and head to the men's room to fix myself.

Geezing I think briefly of Stevie Ray. The contrast between falling out of the sky to meet death as opposed to falling on the floor of a public toilet with a needle in your arm.

I'm still toying with that thought and its myriad implications minutes later back in the booth as I slam into a hot funky reggae number rotating my dance-floor crowd from fast-dancers to smooth-romancers. A seamless segue that puts new faces at the bar and new bodies under the lights.

I shoot a glance in her direction and catch Lucy's eye. She winks and a moment later our newest waitress, a tall skinny thing who is favored by the staff pool to last less than a month, is hovering at the door to the booth with a pair of fresh drinks, unwilling to enter or unsure of the protocol of doing so.

I smile through the glass, nod then turn to mix the next tune. When I turn back and drop the cans around my neck she's standing there checking out the records and CDs, dazzled by the velvety darkness and flashing lights, the high-tech atmosphere of my musical domain. I pick up a glass and toasting her I drain it.

"I've cocktailed before you know? But never in a place with a DJ booth! How cool! It's not even loud in here!"

I smile and light a smoke.

" I don't have the speakers on."

I slide the pot up to 7 vibrating the glass walls of my bubble and deafening this poor girl who doesn't know what to think. I kill the monitor.

" I don't usually listen once I've done the mix. I use the cans for that. They get really loud. Thanks for the drink, Jenny."

Slipping the headphones up over my ears I turn back to the board. I look down on the dance-floor from about 8 feet above. The window directly in front of me as I stand at the board rolls up and down like the tailgate in an old station wagon. The motor that drives it is from a '64 Plymouth. The club was designed by the owners' nephew who's gone on to be a big time Hollywood set designer.

Welcome to Twiggirita's Dancehall and Fine Dining Club. Built by and named after Maria Conchita O'Connell. She'd been infamous in her heyday as a high-fashion model.

The Latina Twigg, the newspapers had called her. Despite the Celtic sound of her last name, it's been at least 3 generations since any of the O'Connell clan has come over to old Mexico from the ould sod.

"Much more brown than green in me baby!"

She says that often.

Maria Conchita O'Connell lives with Rio Fernandez. Perhaps they are married. But she is not Mrs. Fernandez. She is Ms O'Connell, or Señora. It is a good idea to never call her Mrs. Fernandez.

Lucy saw her tear up a big redneck cop one evening who made that mistake. He groveled before she was done with him!

Twiggirita's is a real mom and pop joint. Slick and classy. Run by a couple of old pros who know the club biz inside and out. The hottest dance bar on this side of town with a hip crowd of regulars and a nightly atmosphere of "The Big Party!" There's always plenty of fresh meat. It's the kind of place that attracts the beautiful people

and the ones who desperately want to be. Power brokers, high rollers, fast talkers, easy marks, hard drinkers, chain smokers, skirt chasers, man eaters, locals and out of towners! Twiggy's has them all!

On this particular night, the night Stevie Ray died, we've got mostly our regular crowd and about 200 Independent Music Store conventioners.

They're supposed to be partying in one of the private banquet rooms, but the DJ service hired by some nameless music store maven in the town of east Bumfuck is lame and unequipped to properly cater to the eclectic musical tastes of these conventioners.

They're in the music business, you know! Well the music store business at any rate, and they know a lot more about what they want to hear than the 20 year old head banger who's trying out mobile DJ work as an easy summer gig.

I'm informed of this by the first wave of refugees from the banquet hall. They all feel the need to visit the booth and comment on the superb bootlegged video I'm playing. I've mixed into a genuine tear-jerking duet of "I'd rather go Blind" by Dr. John and Etta James. Keeping all of my slow dancing couples and adding a dozen more while even the most jaded regulars dance to the soulful performance on the screens.

Mobile DJ service kids are no match for a crusty old bar jock. Especially when the bar jock has the very best toys that Ms. O'Connell's money can buy.

"I'm too young to remember Buddy Holly, Richie Valenzuela and the Big Bopper. But Stevie Ray was my guitar hero! I've been depressed and sad all day since I heard the news. Would you play 'American Pie' by Don McLean?" asks a conventioner.

Up on the screens Etta and the Dr. are wrapping it up. I mix into 'American Pie' over the applause. I let the video track into the next number - Stevie Ray Vaughn jamming with his idols — Albert King, BB King and Albert Collins as Don McLean sings his anthem of the loss of innocence.

"I can't remember if I cried when I read about his widowed bride but something touched me deep inside... The day the music died..."

Eight minutes and thirty seconds later there's not a dry eye in the house, the dance floor has come to a halt. Couples continue to hold each other but they are intently watching the silent images of Stevie Ray up on the screens. I can see mouths moving. Many of them are singing along with Don McLean.

"Bye bye Miss American Pie. Drove my Chevy to the levy but the levy was dry. Them good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye. Singing this'll be the day that I die..."

That's when I realize I am going to remember this day for a long, long time.

