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Satellite Dish Points to the Moon

Constantine Ballard

IT BEGAN IN HOBOKEN, NEW Jersey, the birthplace of Frank Sinatra and baseball. It was the gig where Jamie sang “I Feel Good” alongside a cardboard cutout of James Brown. Lots of drinking. So much so that our bar tab, with a little help from our friends, cut into half of our night’s pay.

Soon we’d be following the strange and adventurous trail of half-filled barrooms from Pittsburgh to Dayton; Charlottesville to Detroit. We were a young band on tour. The more “normal” life was left behind and naturally replaced by the feeling of sheer exuberance.

From Detroit, we continued south and played somewhere down in North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, and then through Dallas (where we found the grassy knoll at 2 AM).

Filled with the romantic foolishness and faith that musicians

in their early twenties naturally possess, bound for that mythical land called the Sunset Strip, we continued westward. It was June of ’92. Nirvana and Pearl Jam reigned supremely, and in a few weeks two earthquakes would hit California. One would measure 7.4 on the Richter scale.

Our war-torn Ford Econoline van of 250,000 miles surprisingly held up as we drove down an unknown dirt road off Highway 40. We were somewhere in Santa Fe, New Mexico, en route to the next gig in Phoenix, when our drummer Billy announced from behind the wheel that it was time for a fill-up.

The dusty old gas station was the kind you’d imagine seeing in the southwest desert, one that had been there for decades with two working pumps from the 1950s. We stepped out of the van excited about where we were and what we were doing: living out a

dream, hitting the road. Steve and I punched each other in the shoulder, and I said to him that it feels like we're just following the stars out here, and then we both laughed and sang the lyrics to a song we'd been working on: "We'll regret our past, that's for sure, someday when it's all over."

We also heard the six-string strum of acoustic guitars filtering majestically through the night from a gathering down the road. It reminded Steve of a riff that he had been developing.

"Hold on," he said and opened the backdoor of the van to pull out his acoustic guitar. "I have to play this for you. I can't tell if I made it up or if I'm re-writing 'Factory Girl.'" He played the riff, and it sounded a lot like the Stones tune, but I liked it.

While Marty, our trusty roadie and brilliant artist in his own right, looked over a map he unfolded on the hood of the van, Billy and Jamie talked with the gas station attendant.

Steve and I entered the store for cigarettes and were greeted by a jovial, middle-aged, African American man with a salt-and-pepper afro. He stood behind the cash register like a mountain at six feet, eleven inches and said hello to us with a deep, double-bass baritone voice, like Johnny Cash or JD Sumner. Happy and calm, like Buddha, he asks with a huge smile and a forefinger pointed straight at our van, "Young men, is that your monstrosity out there?"

There was a little radio on a corner shelf transmitting the ballgame from Los Angeles—Reds vs. Dodgers. The gas station owner enjoyed listening to Vin Scully call the games.

"Let me know if you need anything, I'm Amos. This is my store."

"Where are we?" I ask, half in a daze from the miles traveled, rubbing my shoulder.

"You're in the desert," he said with a laugh. "And just up the street are the most enchanted Aztec women you will ever meet." I then turned to Steve, who shared the inkling that something incredible was about to transpire.

We were strangers in a strange place. Steve turned to Amos and asked for a pack of Camels. Just as we were about to walk out the door and back to the van, Amos wished us well and said, "When you get to the meeting place, ask for Excalibur, she'll take care of you-all."

"Take care of us? What meeting place?" I asked before shutting the door.

"Shoot, you already know. You-all hear the crazy *canción* out there, don't ya? That's desert voodoo goin' on. It's a different kind than the voodoo you heard in boyhood from Luther Perkin's guitar and Marshall Grant's doghouse bass, back when you first discovered 'I Walk the Line.' He noticed my ragged Johnny Cash tour t-shirt from when I saw The Man in Black play at the Fox Theatre in Detroit in '88. That kind of voodoo," pointing at my t-shirt,

depicting a silhouetted Cash looking pensively down at his acoustic guitar and Earth, "that kind can change your life, what you're hearing out there is the secret to life. Dig?"

"The answer?" I quickly asked.

"Just follow the road to your destiny, boy."

Now I knew he was a conman, and I wasn't sure if he was trying to con us, but we all heard the crazy *canción*, and whatever it was, it struck a chord in my heart. I was convinced that there was something waiting to be discovered down the road, and all we had to do was follow the music. In the van, all five of us realized that this was a special moment in time and agreed that we had to check it out. The New Mexico desert seemed to be calling us.

I was twenty-one years old and unattached. All that mattered to me were the Stooges, the MC5, and playing bass guitar in the Gasolines.

The nameless dirt road that we were on led to a three-story condo made of stone. It somehow reminded me of the lone tree we discovered in Ringoes, New Jersey; it had the entire desert as its backyard and stood alone on the roadside. Billy parked in a filled lot, along with about twenty other cars. We stumbled out of the van like stragglers. We were ragged, tired—1,500 miles away from home—yet excited, and unabashedly, we walked up to the front door.

We entered the smoky loft. It was

packed with Gen Xers of all kinds. Soon we were greeted by a beautiful, twenty-year-old Aztec girl with straight, silky black hair, a slender frame, at one with the desert surrounding her.

A tall, lascivious sixty-year-old man with long gray hair and a gray beard in a Hawaiian shirt stood next to her, alongside a tall, lanky red-headed starlet named Ginger.

Ginger caught my eye immediately, as she caught everyone's eye in the room—this crossfire hurricane in a white V-neck t-shirt, faded blue jeans, and motorcycle boots. She had a kind of faraway glance that could cause your world to halt with the slightest flicker of her exaggerated eyelashes. She had a careless smile, the kind that gets men drunk and into fights, and she wasn't actually a star, but said she was in New Mexico for a photo shoot. She dreamed of being anywhere other than where she was from, which was Phoenix.

Excalibur greeted us in a way that allowed her to exist on a mystical plane separate from an entire civilization. This was a completely different world than the one we had lived in for our entire lives. Excalibur took a hit from a joint and then passed it along to us. She had high cheekbones and exuded a mystical kind of grace and confidence, as if she were a leader of an underground at war. If someone were to tell me that she hailed from the same island



as Wonder Women—the island of Themyscira, also known as Paradise Island, home of the Amazons—I would have believed it.

The old man next to her was a hobo traveling through the Southwest. His name was Hal, and he took the next hit off the joint. Red-headed Ginger stood curvaceous behind Hal and peaked over his shoulder at me like a child. Even behind the hobo's shoulder, Ginger's dreamy eyes were enough for any man to lose his mind over.

"Musicians?" confirmed Hal.

"Yeah, we are," I said. "I'm Gus and we're the Gasolines."

"You're crazy, that's what you are. You're ruining your life, but you don't know it yet," said Hal.

"The way I live? You're probably right, old man,"

Hal was roaming the countryside when Excalibur found him, brought him in, let him bathe, and gave him some clothes, including the Hawaiian shirt that belonged to an ex-lover.

Feeling a jolt from an extreme marijuana high, I began roaming the first floor as if a greater force was pulling our gang apart to mingle and hear the news of the land and fill our songbooks with vision.

On the first floor, I walked in on a conversation between a neatly cut and recently graduated Ph.D. from Harvard, who wanted to acquire additional hands-on research experience and accepted a "postdoc" position at Mayo Clinic in Phoenix. He was of Spanish descent, dark complexioned, confidant, and wearing a Boston Red Sox baseball cap.

His conversation was with a construction apprentice from Queens, a tough Italian kid, self-confident, graduated from Rutgers and ultimately decided against a career in law to be a part of a team that builds houses. His name was Stanley White, and he was wearing a New York Yankees cap. They were on a summer road trip with friends and, like everyone else there, were drawn to the strange condo.

"I like Clinton, but I hope he doesn't go crazy with the handouts," said Stanley.

"It's so funny to me," said Archie, the Ph.D. and Red Sox fan from Harvard, "it seems like most Americans, regardless of class, are so against doing anything that could help the middle-class and poor yet turn a blind eye to the massive tax cuts handed to the top one percent, most of whom have inherited their wealth."

"C'mon, we better go upstairs, I don't wanna miss Sonic Youth," said Stanley.

Steve, Jamie, and Excalibur moved

their conversation to a private room. They both wanted her.

Walking through the smoky loft, I lit a cigarette and stood alone in a corner. "Did he say that Sonic Youth was playing here?" I asked myself and wondered how and why a big noise rock outfit from New York City ended up playing here of all places. I stood in the corner for about twenty minutes and didn't move. I just watched my generation roam and search; it never ends. At that moment a familiar-looking dude with wild blonde hair approached me and asked if I had a cigarette. Without knowing who he was, I reached into my pocket and handed one over to the famous actor River Phoenix.

"What is this place?" I asked him.

"It's the holy land, man," he laughed and smiled like James Dean. The actor was wearing a gray, flannel, unbuttoned shirt and ripped jeans and looked more like someone who played in a Seattle band than one of the great actors of my generation.

"I just came here with my band. We're playing at the Whisky in a few days," I said.

"Alright, I'll be there. On my way back to LA."

No one asked for his autograph. No one really cared. Everyone just passing through.

I walked up the stairs to the second floor where the music was coming from. There was a counter with a turntable on it and two huge

stereo speakers on each end. The DJ was a teenaged hip kid spinning record-after record: Beck, Sly & the Family Stone, Led Zeppelin, the Rolling Stones, and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," followed by Dylan's "Like A Rolling Stone." When I heard this teenaged, holy madman in a black t-shirt and black jeans, of Native American descent drop the needle on AC/DC's "Rock and Roll Aint Noise Pollution," I fell back in love with vinyl that very moment and regretted selling my records a couple of years earlier to replace them with CDs.

As soon as Waylon Jennings's "Love of the Common People" ended, Sonic Youth, who were set up in the corner, started to play. From the introductory distorted guitar noise of "100%" off their recently released "Dirty" album to the guitar player Thurston Moore's streetwise, Iggy Pop-like vocal, with each note played, everywhere I turned, the room shook and vibrated with a kind of supreme energy that can move mountains, change lives and inspire the world. There we were in New Mexico at a strange, unbelievable Generation X pit stop in the desert with Sonic Youth rocking gloriously at full volume.

And then, through a cloud of distortion, the girl who peaked at me from over the hobo's shoulder sauntered my way.

The people you meet on tour, at this low level, are the faces and names

that will weave in and out of your consciousness for a lifetime. In your darkest middle-aged depression, they will return in thought, and with each returning memory, a smile will form. Ginger was the kind of girl you could spend a lifetime with, but only within a blink of an eye will she ever exist.

River Phoenix and his gang had been honing in on her, and yet, unbelievably, she had gravitated toward me. I could see the vultures had reappeared from the shadows of the first floor and were now circling. The race to the Holy Grail was on. It seemed like everyone wanted to get close to Ginger.

I stepped from my solitary corner to meet her in the middle of the room. We stood together wordlessly listening to Sonic Youth.

In between songs, she began asking about my life. We then walked up to the third floor and talked some more. We found a couple of chairs and sat down. She crossed her long legs and took drags from her cigarette. People began to sit around us, and then our conversation turned into a larger one with a young couple from Miami who were travelling the country after eloping in Vegas.

Her grace and beauty astounded me and drew everyone close to her. Ginger was eighteen years old and seemed to embody everything that was good about America and fit in perfectly with the phosphorescent

underworld of Aztec Indian girls and soul-weary, out-of-state boys, and the desert night. After a while I began to feel as though I had found something too incredible for words.

Then, in the darkness of that smoky room, without a word, she stood up and walked away. I watched her wade through the room of musicians and vagabonds like a goddess lost underground. After a few minutes, thinking that I would never see her again, she turned around and walked back to me. With every step my heart pounded faster. Volume increased to a distorted hum with Tom Waits on top singing "All stripped down, all stripped down." A line of sweat dropped down the side of my face. In front of me she stood. At the last moment I reached out to touch her arm. A feeling as though I had just jumped off the edge straight into the Grand Canyon entered. Contact was made with lips as sensuous as those of the Goddess of Love and Beauty herself—Ginger being the all-American personification of Venus in cloak and skin. She had returned with two joints. One for us and another for the couple from Miami.

"So, you're Gus, and you're here with your band," she said. "You run with Jamie. He was saying that you guys are headin' out West."

"Yeah, we have a Phoenix show in a couple of days, then we're in L.A. Last night we were in Dallas."

"I'm from Hollywood. That's where I was born and raised by my mom in a trailer park."

We sat down by ourselves in the dark corner of the loft and continued our conversation. It went on for hours. There in desolate New Mexico I fell in love with her. A combination of marijuana and incense lingered as lost Generation X mingled and roamed around the room, leaving beer cans in their place.

My eyes remained transfixed. It was the great, mysterious, American night—the music excitingly loud—feeling like I had discovered life in the middle of nowhere. I wanted this night to never end: my youth of going!

I listened in utter amazement as she told me about her upcoming photo shoot for a fashion magazine and being on her way to New York City with her friends. She told me more about life with her hippy parents and the new life awaiting her in the East. She asked what I do. I sheepishly explained that I write poems and play bass guitar. From this, her eyes widened. She leaned forward with a fatal hush of despair and breathed, "You're a poet?" and then asked if I could read her one. To this I swiftly pulled out my blue poetry pad from the breast pocket of my short-sleeved, silver buttoned, western shirt and dramatically ripped out a page—this made her laugh. I then stepped up close to her the way children whisper sweet secrets in the orphan's ear.



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New Mexico being a hot dream to me now, I explained, “This is one I wrote yesterday at a gas station somewhere in Texas. We pulled in for a fill-up. I walked inside to use the rest room and this is what I saw. It’s called ‘Satellite Dish Points to the Moon.’”

Tiny arms wrapped around her mother
waist high and pouting
Their ancestral blonde hair
for centuries to adore
Mother and daughter leaning against
a seedy gas station wall waiting
their turn
as I look at the little angel rubbing
her eyes
sadden by winds that only children
have the heart to cry over
In awe I stare at the beauty
she is and will grow to be
As the winds that once made her cry
still bring a tender tear that
trickles down her cheek to land
on eternity
Hallowed eyed and bare I smile
For nothing can be said or decreed
Ambition means nothing to destiny
And I mean nothing to her
Or the wall of time
Scattered thought after
Scattered thought
The mind goes blank at times
So far away from home
Sitting on this curb of black tar
stoned reverie
Satellite dish points to the moon,
and where is she?

I folded my poem and stuffed it in my shirt pocket.

“Are you wondering where that little girl is that you saw at the gas station?” she asked. “How is she? How will her life turn out? Is she going to be okay? Will any of us be okay?”

Looking into her eyes, she placed her arm around my shoulder, soon to feel her hand touch the back of my neck and the heartbeat of the mountains that surrounded us, and we kiss.

“So, is this what brings you out here, all the way from Michigan?” she asked. Staring at me for a couple of seconds without a word, I didn’t know what to say. Just kind of studying my eyes, then finally whispered, “What is it that you’re looking for?”

When hit with this question I remain still, just responding dully with, “I really don’t know,” when F. Scott Fitzgerald would have responded heroically with subtle hints of the “green light” and the “orgastic future.” I cringe over my dull answer in time. All I could see, I knew not then what I felt, and now as I look out at life’s window and wonder as only one can when fate leaves you stranded in rooms of solitude. Where has time taken that little girl I saw in the Texas gas station?

We talked for an hour there in our own world amidst the commotion. I couldn’t help but smile when I saw Jamie and Steve sitting across the room while Billy retired downstairs to call his

girlfriend back home, and Marty sat in the opposite corner of the room staring blankly at the wall.

Ginger and I walked out on the third-floor balcony overlooking the desert. As the night roared on, the rooms grew a hellish red and no one wanted to leave.

Ginger and I held hands on the terrace, away from the gathering inside. Our moment of bliss was now, and then it was over as if an evil little bird had swooped down on our perfect moment to whisper in our ears that this was all merely a short moment in two lives.

In the end, I was heading west and she east; by odd luck our paths had crossed in New Mexico, and we would never see each other again. We watched a lone car drive through the highway night until vanishing into the dark night.

My heart hurt when she pushed herself out of my arms and walked back into the loft. I watched silently from the terrace as she made her way through the room, disappearing forever into the red shadows.

I was still twenty-one and felt invincible and stood for a solitary moment in awe of the beauty I had found in New Mexico. At this moment, Jamie walked up to me, looked up at the starry sky and lit a joint.

✱

When you're twenty-one, it's no big

deal. And driving across the country with your bandmates is exactly what you want to do, for each day is a new song, a new dream. You discover America when you're in it, traveling by automobile from state to state. For us, it was from gig to gig. With your songwriter's ear to the road, your finger on the pulse of what you believe is emblematic of all that is good and bad about America, every day is a new adventure.

Most of the people that you meet on tour you'll never see again in your life, but you'll always remember them. And the voices you hear will merge into new voices in the next city.

The places you visit will change over time as America runs its natural course of renewal. The decades will come and go; cities will be flattened and built back up. When everything in your world looks and feels so different, at least you know that the Statue of Liberty will remain tall on Bedloe's Island.

When the bottom falls out of your world, you can take solace in knowing that Wrigley Field remains a beacon of hope on Chicago's North Side. And when there is no majesty found in your sadness, and when each day becomes more painful than the last, the Grand Canyon, forever is your miracle in Arizona.

Ah, with youth on your side, you can be the poorest fool in the world and own everything. ✱

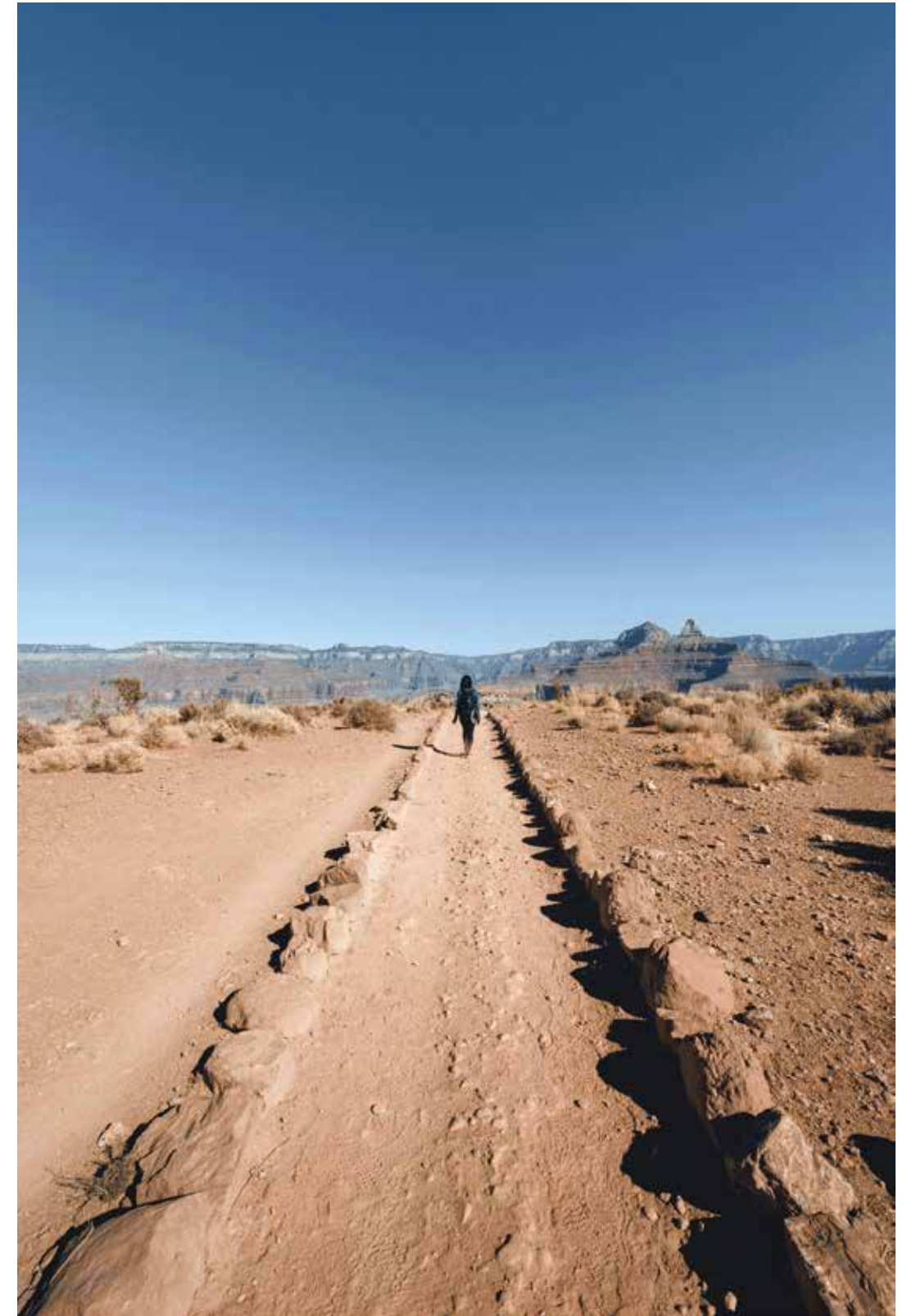


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