

A JEFF'S EYE VIEW OF HAMELL ON T H A L

(Although admittedly I can tell already this'll be at least as much about me as about him...)

1978 IN MANY RESPECTS, THE MOST BORING YEAR OF MY ADULT LIFE. OTHER THAN 3 WEEKS DRAWING COMIX IN MAINE, MY FIRST YEAR OUT OF SCHOOL SINCE I WAS 4 WAS JUST SPENT BEING BROKE IN NYC.

6/6 AT LEAST THIS SAT. TUTORING GIG PAYS ENOUGH HOURLY SO THAT I CAN WORK TWO DAYS A WEEK AND COVER MY \$150 RENT PLUS EAT ALMOST EVERYDAY.

THIS NEW CLASS I'M STARTING TO TEACH TODAY IS DOWN HERE AROUND FULTON ST... THIS IS A CONFUSING PART OF TOWN...

MY GOD, WHERE THE HELL IS THIS PLACE? WHERE AM I? FUCK, I'M TOTALLY LATE NOW!!

Racing around in a panic, I finally found it.

The woman there who was in charge of overseeing the kids' extra-curricular programs gave me hell.

YOUNG MAN, YOU ARE HALF AN HOUR LATE!! THIS IS ABSOLUTELY UNACCEPTABLE! I'VE HAD TO CROWD ALL THESE KIDS INTO ONE ROOM AND THE OTHER TEACHER IS NOW IN SESSION WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP...

OH JEEZ, I AM SO SO SORRY!!! HONESTLY, THIS NEVER HAPPENS TO ME, I JUST LEFT THE TRAIN STATION WALKING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION...

Room 504

Next class, later that week

I CANNOT BELIEVE THIS. MY FIRST TRAIN TOOK FOREVER... I THOUGHT SWITCHING TO THE EXPRESS WOULD MAKE UP FOR IT BUT NOW THE EXPRESS JUST STOPPED RUNNING AND I'VE GOT TO WAIT FOR THE NEXT LOCAL ALL OVER...

I'M HITTING THE STREET. A BUS HAS GOT TO BE FASTER THAN THIS, EVEN THO I DON'T KNOW WHERE ONE IS AROUND HERE.

I MUST BE HAVING A NIGHTMARE. I'M GOING TO BE AN HOUR LATE.

Walking in to class an hour late, of course I got another hideous blow-beating from the lady in charge, as if I wasn't in enough of a tortured, guilty, stressed-out jumble.

THANK GOD THIS DAY IS OVER WITH... NEXT CLASS I BETTER SHOW UP AN HOUR EARLY AT LEAST.

The relatively dull, lonely winter of 97/98 I've written some songs.

Much to the surprise of everyone I know, including myself, I seem to have some material that I could actually think of performing at an open mic or something. So I started hanging out at the sidewalk cafe at the Monday night Antihosts. By mid-'98 I was one of the crew of regulars:



When Lach would play his latenight set to "The waitress, the walls and the weirdos," chances are, we were the weirdos those days.

You may be wondering... Wasn't this supposed to have something to do with Hamell on Trial? Well, I suppose the previous page was by way of prologue. At some point that fall I ran into Don Berger and Grey on the street, apparently in some form of shell shock...



WHAT ARE YOU GUYS UP TO? WE JUST SAW HAMELL ON TRIAL AT MANITOBA'S. FOOL!!! HE'S THE ILLEGIT! OH MY GOD, DUDE HE KICKS SO SICK!! HE'S AMAZING. WHO IS THIS GUY? HAMELL ON TRIAL; BASICALLY HE MAKES ALL OTHER PERFORMERS OBSOLETE.

As happened so often those days, Grey came to crash at my place to save the long train trek up to his place in Inwood in the middle of the night. On the way home he couldn't stop raving.



FOOL, NO!! HE'S ALL: DADADADADADA! HE'S THIS ILL BALD FOOL WHO KICKS OUT THESE SICK RANTS WHILE HE'S PLAYING ALL: DADADADADADADA!

DUDE, HE SOUNDS LIKE YOU'RE JUST SPEEDING DOWN A DARK HIGHWAY... FOOL IS SO SICK DUDE! I'M ALL: NO! NOO!!

By the beginning of winter, Grey, Kessel and I were all working as telephone ticket-sellers for the Blue Man Group theater. Somehow I kept missing whenever Hamell played in town, but Grey and Kessel kept me thinking about him, as they rambled on and on about this mythical figure's supposedly indescribable and un-replicable style.



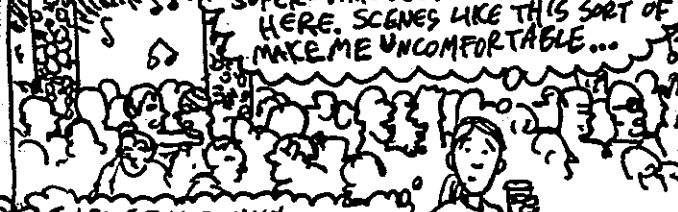
HERE, THIS IS LIKE A HAMELL LICK: RING! RING! NO, BUT DUDE IT'S MORE LIKE... BLUE MAN NEW YORK, MAY I HELP YOU?

Lach hooked me up with a primo gig: RATZU SLAMM'S BIG BOOK RELEASE BASH AT THE CHINA CLUB. IT'LL BE A VIP SCENE, LOTS OF INDUSTRY PEOPLE. HAMELL ON TRIAL IS HEADLINING.



I CAN GET YOU, ME, AND JOIE DBG ON THE BILL. WOW!

I had heard of the China Club; Jim (Mosaic Man) Pavels had been paid big money to decorate it with his mosaics. But these were different from his funky lamp post work downtown; the China Club was mad posh. For my part, I was psyched that David Pea was opening up! And since there was an open bar, I figured I'd find out what a "White Russian" was.



LACH IS SHMOOZING IN THAT ROPE-OFF SUPER-V.I.P. SECTION. HOWARD STERN IS HERE. SCENES LIKE THIS SORT OF MAKE ME UNCOMFORTABLE...

AT LEAST I'LL FINALLY SEE HAMELL.

My brother and my friend Shaka had come uptown to see me play. It was a very cold winter night; the bouncers at the door wouldn't let them in 'cuz they were under 21.



HANG-ON GUYS, I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO.

Even talking to Sloman himself got no results. What happened next differs depending on which part of my brain I consult.

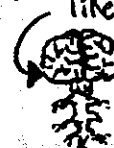
This part of my brain sez it went down like:

FUCK THESE BIG-HOO-HAS AND THEIR RICH BASTARD SCENE! I HAV'N'T NO PERFORMING MONEY WHO'S GONNA CELEBRATE SOME BIG SHOT'S BOOK WHILE HE WON'T EVEN LET MY LITTLE BROTHER COME IN FROM THE FREEZING COLD! DAVID PEEL AND JIM POWERS MIGHT SELL OUT THEIR LOWER EAST SIDE ROOTS FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT OF THIS UPTOWN YUMIE BULLSHIT CROWD, BUT NOT ME!

HONOR DEMANDS: I'M LEAVING!



While this part of my brain sez it was more like:



(this view formed in retrospect, mind you)

HOLY CRAP, THIS PLACE IS HUGE, AND IT'S TOTALLY PACKED WITH IMPORTANT, PROFESSIONAL, GROWN-UP PEOPLE WHO BARELY SEEMED TO EVEN NOTICE THAT DAVID PEEL WAS ROCKING OUT WITH A BAND ON STAGE. AND SOME NOBODY LIKE ME IS GONNA GO UP THERE NEXT AND SIT BY MYSELF ON STAGE AND TRY TO FINGERPICK SONGS TO THEM, WITH MY NON-EXISTENT VOCAL POWERS?? THIS THING WITH MY BROTHER IS A HIGHLY CONVENIENT EXCUSE TO BACK OUT.

BEING THE BIGGEST PUSST IN THE WORLD DEMANDS: I'M LEAVING!



Well, one way or another, that's probably the last time I get invited to something like that for a while. But before all of that shite came up with my brother's arrival:

HEY, I RECOGNIZE THAT WOMAN SITTING OVER THERE... HOLY GOSH, IT'S THE LADY WHOM I LET DOWN WHEN I WAS LATE FOR THOSE S.A.T. CLASSES A FEW MONTHS AGO! WHAT WAS HER NAME... LINDA?

LINDA? MY NAME'S JEFF, I TAUGHT THAT CLASS...

OH YES, THE ARTIST. HELLO.

It was the closest I had come to seeing Hamell. I heard later from Joie DBG that seeing Hamell on Trial that night and talking to him had changed his life forever; I, however, was still totally in the dark.

WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?

I'M HERE WITH MY HUSBAND ED.

HE'S PERFORMING TONIGHT. HE'S "HAMELL ON TRIAL".

In the midst of a hideous songwriting slump, while at Blue Man one day, I wrote a song on the back of one of the slips of paper we used to write ticket-buyers' info on. It was about how I hadn't seen this legendary, unstoppable force I had heard so much about...

THEY SAY HIS WRIST IS MADE OF FIRE - HIS VOICE IS LIKE A NUKE - HE PLAYS SO DOPE HE MAKE A GUITAR AND RUN AND FIND ANOTHER HOBGET/HELL GRAB ON TO YOUR SOUL AND TEAR IT RIGHT OUT OF YOUR BODY/ YOU WATCH THE WAY HE DOES IT BUT YOU DON'T KNOW HOW HE DO IT/ HE'S HAMELL ON TRIAL. BUT YOU GET EXECUTED!

RING! RING! RING!

IS ANYONE ON PHONES?

?!?! THIS SEEMINGLY STRAIGHT-LACED, RESPONSIBLE, MOTHERLY, PUNCTUALITY-LOVING SCHOOL-MASTER LADY IS MARRIED TO A MAN WHO'S SUPPOSEDLY THE MOST DEMONIC, ILLEST, FRENZIED, CHAOTIC, UNCLE FOSTER-LOOKIN' ANTI-FOLK ACOUSTO-PUNK DEATHGOD ON THE PLANET

?!?!?! SPRING! Koo-Koo! Koo-Koo!



At some point after that, I found out Hamell had already been the subject of a song Lach wrote. One night at Sidewalk I met the man himself, sitting with his wife at the Fort.

HI, MY NAME'S JEFF! I'VE NEVER SEEN YOU PLAY, BUT I'VE HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT YOU! ACTUALLY, I WROTE A SONG ABOUT HOW I HAVEN'T SEEN YOU, SO NOW IF I SEE YOU I WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY THE SONG ANY MORE, BUT THAT'S OKAY 'CAUSE IT'S NOT A VERY GOOD SONG, BLAH BLAH YAK YAK etc etc

HUH.



Spring 1999: Even though I miss the beginning of the set, I see a Hamell show at last! I sat on the floor in front of the performance space in Manitoba's and my mind was blown.

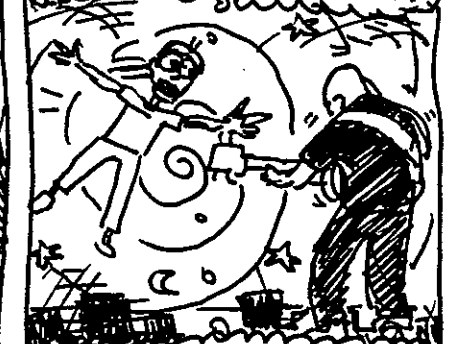
MY GOD, EVEN WITHOUT THE GUITAR TECHNIQUE HE'D STILL BE A GREAT SONGWRITER/STORYTELLER...



But it was the guitar technique that really knocked my brain for an absolute loop

I couldn't restrain from laughing out loud at what I was witnessing. In the face of losing my mind completely, it was the only response I could have; as if I were observing someone levitate, I simply COULD NOT BELIEVE what I was actually seeing

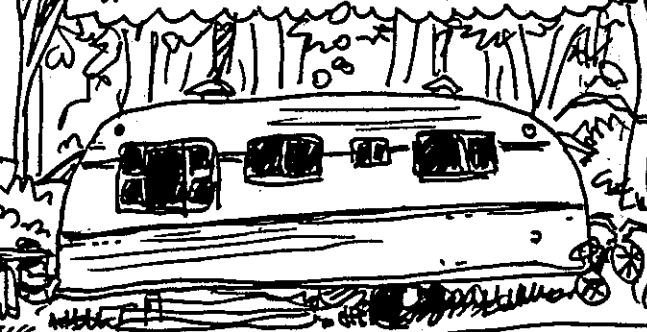
NO MAN HAS EVER MADE AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR SOUND LIKE THIS! IT'S LIKE A BUZZSAW MACHINEGUN! HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT I'M ACTUALLY WITNESSING THIS?



IT'S LIKE HE'S WHIPPING THE VERY AIR INTO A THUNDERSTORM WITH HIS BARE HANDS!

That summer I spent 3 solid months in a trailer in Maine. Before I left the city though, I bootlegged 2 shows with my new recorder/walkman: Mike Rechner at Sidewalk and Hamell on Trial at Manitoba's.

AMAZING... TWO PEOPLE PERFORMING SOLO ON AN ACOUSTIC GUITAR, EVEN WITHIN THE SAME GENRE, CAN EXPLORE SUCH COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TERRITORY. THERE'S A MAJOR APPLES + ORANGES DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SIDE A AND SIDE B OF THIS TAPE.



I THINK I'M GONNA BE SICKLE... NO ONE LAUGHS...

HOWEVER, IF MIKE RECHNER IS "APPLES," BARELY STAYING IN RHYTHM PLAYING THE SAME TWO OR THREE CHORDS HIS WHOLE SET, AND HAMELL IS "ORANGES," WITH HIS NITZSCHEAN ÜBER-LYRICIST/GUITARIST ATHLETICS, I'D HAVE TO SAY I'M AN "APPLES" KINDA GUY. I LOVE RECHNER WAY MORE; I THINK HE'S MY FAVORITE IN THE WHOLE SCENE.

A SPOT BY YOUR ANKLE... WHERE I MAY WHIFF YOUR CUFF...



I was later somewhat disillusioned when someone told me that Hamell is not actually getting that sound from a plain acoustic, but has it going through his P.A. with something called "overdrive" cranked up.

I'M NOT SURE WHAT THAT MEANS... STILL, HE'S BREATHTAKING.



Convinced multiple people to go see Hamell shows, including my Mom + Dad. Even my usually-skeptical Dad had to extol:

...AMAZING ORIGINAL TECHNIQUE...
A MONSTER GUITAR PLAYER!



(Needless to say, there's probably no way in hell I'd ever get him to sit through five minutes of Mike Rechner)

Being in Maine all summer and Europe all fall, I was left out of the phenomenon which seems to have occurred in my absence: No longer legendary, removed figures, Ed + Linda Hamell had apparently become sort of part of my old circle of songwriter friends; I started to feel like I was the only one out of my old crew who wasn't on a first name buddy basis with him. So when I bumped into Patsy Grace in a pizza shop in late spring and she said:

JEFF, DID YOU HEAR? HAMELL'S BACK HOME!!

I said something like:

SO WHAT?

DOESN'T HE GO OUT ON TOUR AND BACK LIKE ALL YEAR LONG?



For some brief pause of time Patsy easily thought me the most callous bastard on Earth, until the thought struck her:

YOU HAVEN'T HEARD, HAVE YOU!?! ED WAS IN A REAL BAD CAR ACCIDENT-

SOMEONE RAN HIM OFF THE ROAD IN PA GOING 100 MILES AN HOUR... THEY THOUGHT HE WAS DEAD AT FIRST... HE'S BEEN IN INTENSIVE CARE AT THE HOSPITAL OUT THERE, AND THEY JUST LET HIM HOME...

JEEZ!!!
WHAT THE FUCK?!?!



Summer 2000 I'm in Maine all summer again, thus I've missed out on the summer Antifolk fest dedicated to Hamell on Trial and raising money to help with hospital bills and the income he's missing from not being able to ply his trade... My brother mailed me up a copy of 'The Meeting', Jon Berger's special edition of Antimatter's dedicated to Hamell. Although this is late for The Meeting, I just wanted to throw my 2 cents in and send all my well-wishing to a truly amazing and unique performer...



Get well soon, Ed... You've made a big impact on everyone who's seen or met you, and changed everyone's concept of what a singer/songwriter could be and do...



Berger's interview with you in The Meeting was great. I can't wait to hear your new material-

Now that you are loved and missed by all!!!

Jeff Lewis
8-2000

- Poetry Page -

MULTIPLE ORGASMS

ROCK PAPER SCISSORS

The games we play are painfully obvious to all who watch.
As we chase each other around the school grounds
each desperately trying to catch the other
we spend so much time
fooling around
toying with our feelings
revelling in pleasure
hurting each other for sport
we never quite realize
that this is not some childish contest
not some battle of wills or brawn or faith.
This is not a game.

Rock:

The blunt things we say, do, live
the harsh ways we turn our backs
and turn our cheeks
and turn away
do nothing to make us come away
with a blunter knowledge
of what we don't say.

Scissors:

You cut me to the quick with your wit
and my rapier tongue sets you bleeding
seething
pleading - all jokingly - to stop
before it goes too far.
It always goes too far.
We tear each other to shreds
for fun.

Paper:

And we never get past it.
We cannot escape the childish tracks
we've walked for years and years
and decades
and months.
We can't seem to get away from one
another, or stop fooling around,
tooling about
toying with each other for sport.
In our presence, we can't stop revelling in
pleasure at each others' pain.
So I hope I can explain
here,
why I can no longer come out to play.
(Jonny 'Spingarn' Berger)

TALK WITH JESUS

I talked with Jesus.
He told me I should stop eat-
ing meat and start loving my
neighbors - all of them; even
Mrs. Shapiro, down in 4D, the
one with the harelip.

I talked with Jesus, and he
said I should give to charity
and live with care, and car-
ing, and that I should break
up with Karen.

I talked with Jesus and he
asked for my ice cream
cone.

I talked with Jesus, and he
made me sign my checks
over to him, care of Myron
Middlebaum.

I talked to Jesus - Jesus
Christ, I hope it was him.
(Jon Berger)

He told me he could give multiple
orgasms
And I said, "In a row?"
He smiled his assent.
"To the same girl? Like, not a bunch
of chicks using a bunch of different
parts of your body?"
"Same girl," he said.
"Cuz, you know, I saw the Flash do
that once in this Tijuana Bible..."
"There's no tricks," he told me, "I
can really give multiple orgasms."
I did not believe him.
"Come on," I said, "Prove this thing
that you claim. Show me."
And he did.
And he was right.
Oh, GOD, he was right. He COULD
produce multiple orgasms.
Though, he last one, I faked.
(Jonathan Berger)

UGLY FEET

She has the ugly feet
the crippled feet
the crow's feet.

She has pigeon toes
- plump dumpy frumpy malformed
misshapen
cracking breaking snaking
god-forsaken toes.

Mottled skin, red and blue
fat calves, flat feet
broken nails of hideous mottled colors
bottled and bagged
sagging knuckles
- she has the ugly feet.

She has the ugly feet
but, like everything else about her
I love them.
(Jonathan Berger)

These poems, and many others, available from
Jonathan Berger on the following occasions:
Tuesday, October 17th -
Manhattan Theater Source
(as part of Funny... Sheesh!)
8:00 - Ten Dollars.

Wednesday, October 18th - Sidewalk Cafe
8:00 - FREE!

- a paid for advertisement by the people who brought you Jonathan Berger -