



A CURE FOR GRAVITY

AN INTRO FROM THE BOOK BY

JOE JACKSON

Prologue - The Piss and Punchup Club

I'm sitting in a Transit van in Basingstoke, a battered once-blue Transit van full of drums and amplifiers, in a dirty white concrete car park under a dirty white sky, and I'm thinking: what am I doing here?

The rest of the band have gone for a walk, in search of civilisation, and I'm keeping an eye on things. Pretty soon I'm dozing, though it's too cold to sleep. It's the sort of useless grey Saturday when everyone should just stay in bed with a good book. A blank on the calendar. Christmas and New Year are gone, and 1975 is having trouble getting started.

I'm having some trouble getting started myself. Last night's gig was a late one and I have a lingering hangover. Not a pounding-head, churning-guts kind of hangover, but the kind where you feel sort of OK as long as you do everything slowly. I'm not sure I feel like doing a gig tonight. But if we must, I wish we could get on with it. This happens all the time: we're told to show up for a gig at, say, five o'clock, but the place is locked, silent, deserted. Eventually, around six or seven, a minion will appear, rattling a bunch of keys like some ghoulish gaoler. He will eye us suspiciously. He'll ask if we're the band, and one of us will say, No! We're just four long-haired youths who like to hang around in empty car parks for hours on end in a van full of drums and amps and guitar cases. Or something to that effect. Grudgingly, the minion will open up and we'll get to work.

In the meantime, I'm dozing and thinking. Of course I can't sleep. I was blessed and cursed with a hyperactive brain. I ask myself age-old and portentous questions: if a tree falls in the forest and no one is around, does it make a sound? Or: does music even exist, if no-one's listening? I reckon it does. We don't have to actually be listening to know that masterpieces of music are always there. It's like they're just sleeping, between the pages of a score, or in those black vinyl grooves, Sleeping Beauties waiting for the kiss of our attention.

I admit it: I have a philosophical bent. I wonder not only why I'm doing this, but why anyone has ever done it, and how. How did Beethoven manage to write that incredible Violin Concerto? I'm listening to more Bowie than Beethoven these days, but I'm thinking of taking up the violin again. It was my first instrument. If I can figure out a way to amplify it, I can use it in the band. There's a little pickup I've seen people use on acoustic guitars; it would go on the bridge of the violin...

I'm thinking I should listen to that concerto again, and then a big chunk of it comes flooding into my mind. It's in there! Like a record or a tape, it's actually imprinted on my brain. I can hear the part where the lyrical second theme of the first movement soars up an octave, gathering perfect little embellishments around it. Every time I hear that part, I feel tears pricking my eyelids. There's no other way the music could possibly go at that point, not one note you could add or subtract or change; and I start to wonder whether the composer really wrote it at all, or read it in the mind of God.

And here I am worrying about a gig in Basingstoke at something called the Pen and Parchment Club. How it got a name like that I can't imagine. But, who knows, it could be the best gig we've ever done. There's a musical equivalent of the Hair of the Dog. You can be less than excited about performing--dreading it, even--but once you get up there, with real live people in front of you, something happens. Suddenly it's for real, you have to deliver, and all your senses are sharpened. And sometimes the worst places can turn out to be the most fun, if you can get the audience on your side. Someone is tapping on the van window. I sit up with a start. A face with bushy black eyebrows is peering in.

"You the band?" asks the face.

"Are you the minion?"

"Wot?"

"Yeah, we're the band, of course we're the band, open up, will you?"

Keys rattle, and the rest of the band are sauntering across the car park. Once inside, the Pen and Parchment Club looks like a pretty typical 'Social Club': a place where, for an annual membership fee, working men and their wives and girlfriends can go and drink cheaper than they could in a pub. And, on certain nights, be entertained by a raffle, or a comedian, or a struggling pop group. In this case, a struggling pop group on the way to becoming a struggling rock band.

Either way, tonight we're going to have to struggle without the aid of a stage. What passes for a stage at the Pen and Parchment is a nine-inch high platform about 5 feet square.

We never know what we're going to find when we walk into a gig. The stage might consist of six rickety tables held together with electrical tape, or there might be no stage at all. So we have some staging of our own in the van: a pile of wooden boards with slots in them, which fit together ingeniously to form either one large or two smaller platforms. We stole them piece by piece from the Drama department of Fareham Technical College, where Dave, our drummer, works as a 'groundsman'--in other words, as gardener and general dogsbody. At first, we took just enough to make a drum riser. But the slotted-wooden-board habit got into our blood. We had to have more! Now we can make small stages bigger. Provided, that is, that the height differential between 'our' stage and 'theirs' isn't too great: on some nights people trip up in the middle of guitar solos and go crashing into my keyboards or knocking over cymbal stands. Where the platforms really pay off, though, is on those rare occasions when we get a big stage, a real, honest-to-God theatre stage, and we can create two tiers: the drums and keyboards towering over the front line. Like a real concert!

Tonight, we can't come up with a configuration that works. So the drums will go on the existing 'stage', and I'm going to have to set up my keyboards on the floor, which I hate. I've done 'floor gigs' before. Usually, to add insult to injury, the band has to play in front of a huge stage which has already been commandeered by a power-crazed DJ. People stand behind me while I'm playing and make sneering comments and breathe down my neck and flick fag-ends onto the keyboards. But the Pen and Parchment isn't a dance club, and most of the floor space tonight is taken up by formica-topped tables and chairs. With a bit of luck, the punters will keep a more or less respectful distance.

I set up my keyboards: two electric pianos. The better of the two is a recently acquired Fender Rhodes, although it has a gammy leg and tilts at a slight angle. First I have to look inside it and check the tines, the metal bars which are struck by little hammers, like in a real piano, to produce the sound. These tines are temperamental. If they're not properly aligned, the hammer doesn't strike squarely, and instead of a pure tone you

get a sound like a teaspoon on a milk bottle. Tines also break a lot, and then you get no sound at all. I seem to spend hours like a mechanic with the lid off the bloody thing, cursing and kicking one of its good legs.

The Rhodes is behaving itself today, so on top of it goes a neatly folded, slightly rancid leopard skin blanket, and on top of that, an old, legless, Hohner Pianet. The Pianet has its own problems: several notes buzz and distort, but that's OK. I actually like the buzzes, and I've decided to let the instrument sink into a natural state of decrepitude.

Next we need beer crates. Mark, the guitarist, and I both have speaker cabinets which we can hear better when they're raised slightly off the ground. And we're in luck, because the bar which runs along one whole side of the club is opening up. I go over to ask for a couple of empty beer crates, and get the fright of my life. First, two colossal Alsatians jump up on the bar, barking and snarling. Then the barman turns around. Not only is he a tattooed monster straight out of Hell's Angels Central Casting, but he has no hands--just two shiny steel hooks.

And no, there are no empty beer crates.

So we finish setting up, and then we ask the man from the Committee (these places always have a Committee) where our dressing room is. This is said as a joke, really, and taken as one, too. The closest thing to a dressing room (says the man, who's a nice enough bloke) is behind that door out there in the lobby, the one marked GENTS. But if we like, we can take a slight short cut to the 'stage' through the bar, under the hatch at the end. We thank the man from the Committee for his help. we're a gigging band, we're professionals. We'll change in the van.

Now we have an hour or two to kill, so what do we do? We go to the pub. What else? Sometimes we buy a bag of chips, or some egg fried rice from a Chinese takeaway. Usually we nurse a couple of pints and some crisps for as long as we can. We don't like to drink too much before a show. It might make us sloppy, and cause lapses in the professionalism we're working so hard to cultivate these days. Besides, we can't afford it.

An hour later we're in the van, all trying to change at the same time, and I get fed up with being elbowed in the face. I decide to change in the club toilet after all, which is a bad move, since there are about three inches of water on the floor. I lock myself in a cubicle and somehow improvise a technique of changing while alternately balancing on one foot, cursing, and propping myself against the toilet seat. Finally, I emerge resplendent in a pair of burgundy flares, dark red platform shoes, a cheap off-white nylon shirt, and a gold lurex waistcoat with black star burst motifs.

Meanwhile, back in the van, Graham, the bassist, is getting into his lemon-yellow crimplene suit. Crimplene, it turns out, was not the ideal material for that friend of his mother's to make the suit from, since it's starting to stretch and lose its shape here and there. But it doesn't look too bad yet, especially when worn with a black shirt, red tie and aviator shades. Graham, dark-haired and currently bearded, looks like a particularly effeminate Mafia Whitman.

Dave, the drummer, is putting on his favourite black-and-white striped satin shirt and baggy pants cut off just below the knee, which he wears over black tights, with hi-top basketball boots.

Mark's outfits are always the most flamboyant. After all, he's the 'front man.' Tonight he's wearing gold lamé hipster flares, a floral-print blouse and a black chiffon scarf. Graham's sister isn't here tonight, but Mark's doing his own makeup now, just like she taught him: mascara, eyeliner, a little bit of rouge. Mark likes the whistles he gets when we walk on stage. You have to get a reaction, he says. Every night, I cross my fingers and hope it's the right kind.

We're taking a bit of a chance with our clothes, but we got fed up with the band uniform we started off with: matching black-and-silver patterned sweaters and black flares. Hideous, but we had to to make an effort. As we're constantly reminded by the small-time agents and club owners who book us, a gigging band has to be smart, in places like these! You can't just wear any scruffy old tat, like the bands in those big-time London rock clubs! So: smart is what we've tried to be. More recently, though, we've come under the heady influence of Glam-rock. Now the bookers can't quite decide whether we're 'smart' or not. So far, we seem to be getting away with it.

And finally... Showtime!

Time, once again, to disarm and charm that great beast called The Audience. Time to focus all our energy into making a connection, into making something happen. We can feel it, when we're winning them over, and it feels good. Everyone, band and audience, merging into one entity. And on a really good night--and this rarely happens, but we get glimpses of it--we're flying. It's as though music has the power to neutralise the force of gravity. we're like those lunatics you see on TV who jump out of planes and link arms in free-fall. They never look as though they're actually falling, but floating, as though time is standing still. And maybe those glimpses are what keep us going, like a drug fix taking us out of the clatter and grind of normal life.

The first of our three 45-minute sets is uneventful, but this is normal. People are still trickling in. Most of them seem to be middle-aged bruisers with long sideburns who won't leave until they've had at least eight pints. Their puddingfed wives are dressed, if not to kill, then at least to inflict grievous bodily harm, in shiny metallic stuff and earrings like Christmas-tree ornaments. Then there are old folks who drink bottles of Stout and stare at us blankly through thick spectacles. God only knows what they're thinking. And at the other end of the scale, sullen greasy-haired youths, a year or two under-age, who'll be either our biggest fans or our worst tormentors.

Most nights, early on, we're ignored, which is good. A bad gig is where they unplug your amps in the middle of a song and throw them out into the car park, and you can forget about getting paid. Hopefully, as the evening rolls on, we'll get scattered applause, a few shouts of 'bollocks' and 'get off', some drunk howling like a wolf at the back, and a few people dancing. And that'll be a good gig.

But tonight the drinking seems more reckless than usual, and the drunks are not happy drunks. They're oi-what-are-you-lookin'-at drunks, shut-up-when-you're-talkin'-to-me drunks, drunks in imminent danger of getting Out of Order. Even the laughter has an aggressive edge. The barman with the hooks has taken on a sweaty, psychotic look, and the Alsatians are barking. By the time we're halfway through our second set, we're getting nervous. There's something in the air here that we've come across before. We can almost smell it. It's hard to define, exactly, but it sure isn't peace and love.

Right in front of me a quartet of rough girls is getting seriously plastered on vodka and lime and vodka and blackcurrant and vodka and vodka. And one of them thinks it's very funny to come over now and again,

make faces at me, and bang on one of my keyboards, to sow-like squeals of delight from her pals. By the third set, the ladies have been joined by a couple of guys who've drunk enough to make the ladies look good, and something's got to give. The point of no return comes when we hit the Scottish Medley.

And what is the Scottish Medley? Our third set is meant to be rabble-raising good fun, and on a good night, it is. It includes songs by Elvis and the Beatles that everyone knows, a 50's rock'n'roll medley, and a lot of jokey, clowning stuff, including me slipping behind a curtain and re-emerging (to wild applause and hoots of laughter) as Angus McSporrán, wearing a long false ginger beard and a kilt (actually a tartan skirt which used to belong to my mother). We start with 'Donald, Where's Yer Troosers?' I play a couple of jigs on an accordion, and we end with a rousing chorus of 'Auld Lang Syne'.

This is too much for the Vodka Girls. They have to know what's under the kilt. The one who's been banging my keyboards all night bounces up and starts tugging at it, revealing the rolled-up burgundy flares underneath, and I've had enough. I shove her away; she throws a vodka and orange over me; I throw a pint of bitter over her; and whooosh! the Pen and Parchment Club erupts. A bruiser who wants to defend the honour of the ladies starts a fight with a guy who says they're just a bunch of slags and they were asking for it. Another guy wants to fight him, and another tears off his shirt, revealing rippling muscles, just wanting to fight anyone. Chairs start flying and we escape under the bar hatch and out to the car park just as the dogs are set loose.

We lock ourselves in the van. We could be here for some time. At some point we'll have to go back in, pack up our equipment--or what's left of it--and try to get some money out of these bastards. Meanwhile, we watch the carnage. We hear glass shattering and women shrieking, and then sirens as three police cars arrive. A couple of bruised and bleeding drunks stagger outside. One has had the collar torn from his shirt. The other props himself against the wall and throws up, almost, but not quite, missing his shoes.

"You started this!" says Graham.

"Me?!" I say, incredulous. I didn't start anything! Suddenly I feel like throwing up, too. All I ever wanted to do was to play the piano. All I ever wanted was to make beautiful music, like Beethoven, like Charlie Parker, like the Beatles, performer and audience merging into one entity...

"Another gig bites the dust," says Mark, and we all groan. That's what our previous drummer Steve Hollins, the one we sacked, used to say after every bloody show.

"The Pen and Parchment Club," says Dave. "What sort of stupid fucking name is that for a club, anyway?"

"Piss and Punchup Club, more like," says Mark.

Then we just sit in silence. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Who did start this, anyway?

Here goes the hyperactive brain again. Who started music? Surely it was always there. In the Beginning was the Note. A deep, deep note it must have been, at least six octaves below middle C. Higher harmonics slowly came into being, until a vast chord of stars and planets hummed throughout the universe. Primitive creatures crawled out of swamps to listen, and pretty soon (we're talking in Cosmic Time here) they were

walking on two legs and howling Cro-Magnon arias at the moon. And over that ever-present Note, a Greek plucked the strings of a lyre, a China man bashed a cymbal, and so it goes across the ages, as musical empires rise and fall: Byzantium, Vienna, New Orleans... Basingstoke.

I open my eyes. I'm sitting in a Transit van in Basingstoke, and I'm thinking: how the hell did I get mixed up in all this?