



Tall Tales from the Editor

High point or hand-me-downs

Has anybody out there ever heard of Bean Blossom, Indiana? If so, you know it's a little bigger than Gnaw Bone, Indiana, but smaller than, say, French Lick, Indiana. At least that's the way they were years ago—like way back in the last century.

The first band I was ever in was the fabled Hand-me-Downs. The original lineup consisted of my older cousin Steve "The Cool One" Porter. Steve was our lead singer with moves that would be the envy of Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones.

Then there was Marty "Chickslayer" Wilson on drums. His nickname says it all. "Mothers, lock your daughters up" was the cry when he came to town. I need to add that when this band was first being put together, we couldn't find a drummer. Marty had been telling me for over a year that he was a drummer; he was always drumming with his hands, pencils, whatever, while we were in school or just hanging out. Problem was he didn't have a drum kit. He said when he moved from California to Indiana he had to sell them. What to do? Marty said if his father heard the band he was sure he'd spring for a drum kit. I said we don't have a drum set that you can use to play the six or seven songs that the band knew at that time. So a brilliant plan was hatched. We would record on his reel-to-reel a few songs by the instrumental band The Challengers, who did surfer-type music. Then we'd play it for his dad and tell him it was our band. We just hoped he didn't want to hear us live.

Although Marty's copy of The Challengers record was quite scratchy, we went ahead with our plan. Marty's dad wrote him a check to cover the cost of a blue sparkle set of Norma drums. Years later his dad said he knew we were full of it, but thought the scam was funny and obviously Marty wanted to be a drummer.

That's when Carl Allen and I found out that Marty had scammed us. On our first rehearsal, Marty was trying to fit his riding tom into his snare drum stand. We'd been had. Marty was still our drummer—no one else around had a set. He went from not really knowing how to set his drums up to placing third at the Indiana State Fair drum-off in less than a year.

Carl Allen and I met in study hall. He was two years older than me and we both wanted to be rock stars. That's how the band started. He was our shy lead guitarist, who would turn red when girls talked to him.

Rick Leeds was the wild one and

undependable. There's always one who is a no-show at band rehearsals. He was also our bass player. Rick and I held down backing vocals and I played rhythm guitar even though I had or have no natural rhythm.

We ventured south from Avon, Indiana, to Bean Blossom for a talent contest we'd entered. This was one of our early gigs. We had played maybe six or eight dances up to this point. This talent contest was held in a very large barn that had been converted to an entertainment center for everything from auctions to dances. It could seat several hundred people, plus the old hayloft had been converted to seating. The stage was mammoth, with stage and overhead lighting.

We were all a bit nervous when we saw that all of our competition were Porter Wagner, Hank Williams and Loretta Lynn look-alikes. You get the picture—hard-core country 1967, and we were a rockin' rock 'n' roll band that was way out of our element. No cowboy hats or yodeling here.

All day long different acts would play a three-song set, then be judged by a very scientific and quite large applause meter. The louder people hooted, hollered and clapped, the farther the needle moved on the applause meter.

There was an emcee who announced each act and, after you left the stage, told you where you placed on the old meter. The top five acts would play that night to decide the winner.

I don't remember, nor do any of my old (and they *are* old now) mates, where we were in the lineup.

When we walked out on the stage, my knees were knocking and I was sure I needed to run to the restroom and throw up or worse. "Oh, my god," I thought, "what are we doing here?" as I stood up there in my fluorescent sun-glowing yellow pants that I had talked my mother into dyeing for me. She said, "Honey, don't you think somebody might beat you up for wearing something like that?" The shirts we all wore would have been the envy of any church stained-glass window—only our shirts were bright, bright, brighter. With the stage lights shining on me, attendees needed shades not to be blinded. I was the perfect target for any bottle, rock, ball-peen hammer, or someone just wanting to sight in their varmint rifle.

I looked out at the quarter or so filled house only once. Steve's parents, my parents and our grandparents were the only familiar faces I saw. I never looked at the audience again.

We played "Money" by the Kingsmen, "Gloria," the Shadows of Night version, and "Little Latin Lupe Lu," another Kingsmen version.

When we finished our set, I couldn't believe there were no boos or "get a haircut" or obscene hollers—only a pleasant round of applause. That applause was good enough to place us fifth. We now had several hours to kill before the big battle that started at seven pm. Because the bands went on stage in order of where they placed, we would be last.

Marty was pacing around muttering nervously about how the drummer in the first-place Smitty and the Checks had two riding toms on his set, and he had only one. Marty just knew we would lose because Smitty's drummer would play better than him. "Why, oh why, didn't I get a set with two toms?" he'd moan.

In the meantime, Rick called me over

to meet one of the two local Bean Blossom girls he had met. Normally, this was Marty's role, but he was consumed with his drum dilemma.

Rick told the very blossomed girls that we had written "Little Latin Lupe Lu." What could I say? They thought we were stars as they led us up to the darkened seating area that was once a hayloft.

The one thing I remember the girl I was with saying was "Aren't you afraid you might get beat up wearing pants like that?" "Do you like them?" I asked. "Yeah, they're cool," she said. "Well then, that's all that matters."

Boy, oh, boy, I thought rock 'n' roll was turning out to be everything this six-foot four-inch, 130-pound beanpole had dreamt it would be. Oh, yeah.

A couple of hours later, we returned to our bandmates who were sitting down by the stage. They asked, "Where in heck did you guys go? We need to figure out what songs we're doing tonight."

That's when Rick showed off all the hickeys on his neck. We told them the girls we had met loved us and had used the pay phone out front to call all of their friends and told them to call more friends. The girls said we were the first rock-and-roll band to play there and they wanted everyone to come hear us.

When Smitty and the Checks hit the stage, the place was packed; even the love nest up in the hayloft was filling up.

When Smitty finished their set, Carl pointed out to Marty that their drummer didn't use any of his riding toms. "I know," he said, "that was his big mistake." Now Marty was relaxing a bit; I could tell that Chickslayer was back. In contrast, my stomach was getting very jumpy. "Just relax," I kept telling myself. "Don't throw up now."

After the third act had finished their set, the emcee announced, "Folks, we're all out of Pepsi and the 7-Up is going fast. My goodness, this may be our biggest crowd ever. Thank you."

When we were announced, the emcee said, "Folks, our final act of the night doesn't play country, but they sure can rock and roll. Let's hear it for the Hand-me-Downs."

As the crowd erupted with screams and hollers, Steve took his black suede boots with their two-inch heels and stomped out our four-count intro that sounded like it echoed through the barn louder than the screams. Steve sang, "The best things in life are free, but you can keep them for the birds and bees. Now give me money..." At that point the screams went through the stratosphere. Holy moly. Every hair on my body was standing on end and the goose bumps, oh, man.

Halfway through our last song Rick danced over to me and shouted. I said, "I can't hear you."

"We're going to be the Beatles."

At that moment, it felt like that—there were girls jumping and dancing at the edge of the stage.

"Time to announce the winner," said the emcee. "Not only are they the winners, but the applause meter is pegged all the way into the red and broken by the screams from all their fans." With that, he said that the winners are the Countdowns.

As quiet ensued, we all looked at each other and said, "Who are they?"

"I mean the Hand-me-Downs," the emcee said.

The place went nuts. We even had the adults standing and hollering.

We went back up on stage to receive the "grand prize," a seven-inch tarnished swimming trophy. I am not kidding. It had a person in a diving position on it with a shiny new brass plate for our name to be engraved on. Next we got to record the song "Money" live right there, which would be aired on the radio at a later time.

When Steve started singing for the

recording, we could not hear him because his microphone went straight into the reel-to-reel tape. Rick and I had to sing our parts into the same mic.

Marty couldn't hear anything and about three-quarters of the way through the song, he thought we'd come to the end and stopped. The four of us all looked at him at the same time as we kept playing and he came right back in with some fancy action on his single tom—he didn't need two of them.

That was the high point for that particular lineup of the Hand-me-Downs. There were many other great adventures for the band, but none like Bean Blossom, Indiana.

These days when I think of high points and hand-me-downs, it's in a different light.

I wonder if we as a great nation will ever get back to our highest points of glory or are we on the road to a nation of hand-me-downs. Month after month, year after year, the spin doctors tell us all indicators are pointing to a slight economic recovery, only to tell us the next month that they were baffled by yet another _____ (you fill in the blank).

Then there is the national debt. The other day I heard an interesting way to understand what a trillion dollars is: One million dollars a day for 3,000 years. And we're how many trillions of dollars in debt?

At all levels of government we are without leadership, and I see none on the horizon. How will we ever recapture those high points?

I believe we have to start at the local level, and buying local has never meant more than it does right now. If you haven't already, a good thing to do is move your money to a local credit union or local bank. Keep our money local with loans for local businesses as opposed to banking with Chase, Bank of America, Citigroup or any of those other Wall Street bandits that laugh at us with impunity. The same with credit cards—if you still use them: Get local credit cards.

You have to create something to make wealth like in our manufacturing heyday. That was a high point. Now 90 percent of our jobs are service-related, and minimum wage for most. Come get your hand-me-downs.

Here in the Applegate and Rogue valleys, we do have more choices than most to keep the few dollars we do have local. I encourage you to seek out local businesses and use them. That would be a high point.

As for the Occupy Wall Street folks, I think they've got it wrong. It should be "Occupy Washington, DC," where both political parties signed on to NAFTA and GATT treaties, and passed all the laws that let Wall Street rob the country blind.

We don't need a new system; we just need to do some very serious repairs. I think one million people—better yet ten million—occupying Washington, DC, would start those repairs pronto.



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NOTE: NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) and GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) are the catalysts of the trend to move US manufacturing overseas, which eliminates American jobs, and also eliminates import duties on overseas manufacturing shipped to the United States.

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