

Stabber swings open the door with a new authority. 'Boys, get your asses in there and set up.' He fishes around in his greatcoat, comes up with an undamaged cigar and lights it triumphantly. 'So – this is the deal. Vomit Squad starts at eight pm, there'll be an hour's break, and the Monsters are on at ten. You'll get half the bar takings while you're on stage – OK?'

'Yeah, on the surface – but does anyone know we're playing?' Grant can't mask a hint of bitterness in his voice, and maybe he doesn't want to.

Stabber places both hands on his shoulders, tilts his head and regards him with an affectionate, hangdog gaze. 'Trust me with this, Grant – there's great word of mouth going round about this gig. A lot of people are going to be here tonight to see you guys.' As he takes his hands from Grant's shoulders he glances at his watch. 'Sorry, got a dinner appointment – but don't worry, I'll be back,' and he lumbers away.

'Hey!' Grant yells after him, and Stabber slows and looks over his shoulder. 'What about our soundcheck?'

'Sorry,' says Stabber again, backing away, 'Tony the owner won't have a bar of it. Says it'll disturb his clientele while they're eating dinner. You'll have to live with it...but don't worry, it could have been worse.'

I snort, and Grant grumbles – but not too much, cause this is part of the deal. We've done it before, we'll have to do it again: wing it – play by the seat of our pants. At least we can brag later on about how we ripped the joint apart without even a soundcheck!

I mull over all this as I walk through the Café Bart's door – then stop dead. It's not anything I can *see* at first, but my nose – the capillaries in my nose have contracted to the width of a fine hair. The air's so sharp and astringent, it provokes a Proustian flashback. *Vim!* I say out loud: I see my mum tipping a thick white powder from a cylinder the colour of coagulated blood across a stained bathroom floor, then scrubbing with a prolonged, rasping, circular action. I'm a child again, watching 'Astroboy,' and longing to have rockets in the soles of my feet, to be a machine, a robot – to be immortal. I take a few sharp breaths and puff some air up into my nostrils to disperse the vision, and looking around I come down quickly anyway; if there's one overriding smell in the Cafe, it's the odour of a rotting vision, the 60's vision of some glowing cyber-future which now survives only in antiquated cartoons. Everything in here is so mirrored and metallic! Machines for living machines, Third Reich meets Narcissus.

'It might have been fine for Bauhaus, but why oh why for our house?' I say and Smoke laughs. It's more stupid than funny, but a pressure valve has been released. The first gig in Europe is finally going to happen, and all the preparation's about to pay dividends.

Grant surveys the abbreviated, L-shaped interior with concern: it's small but hell, we're unknown in Europe and can't expect big venues. The bar's on the end of the shorter arm, the stage at the end of the longer, with the mixing desk in-between. At no point is the café any wider than a couple of four-seater tables, save for the join in the 'L'; for the rest, the tables are flush with the two walls, a narrow path between them. The stage itself is backed by a semi-circle of segmented mirrors, which we soon realise will concentrate the sound like a laser 'death ray' into the middle of the front tables. Grant and Dog start setting up the mixing desk, and Grant shakes his head; 'Just when you most need a soundcheck ...well, we'll have to boost the mids and lows, and really flatten the high frequencies – otherwise, with all the mirrors and metal, this place is going to be feedback heaven.'

'Mmmm, feedback heaven,' says Dog, almost licking his lips. Grant stares at him, and Dog looks quickly back. 'Grant, it's cool, it's a joke, we'll work with it, don't worry, it'll be great.'

Grant sighs, says *que sera sera* and saunters over to the bar to order a drink, and I think well why not? Something to steady the nerves. Tony the owner is a short, balding man with a bristling moustache and eyes of a disconcerting intensity, thankfully unable to focus on the person he's serving, fixing instead on a point somewhere above the drinker's right shoulder. Grant notices a small poster above the bar advertising a strippers' night. 'Tell me,' he asks, 'do you have many bands playing here?'

Tony snorts as he pulls the beer, 'It looks as if ve haf zem *now*.' Without meeting our eyes, he bashes the keys on the shining till, slams the beer down and turns away. I raise an eyebrow but Grant shrugs his shoulders, fatalistic. We leave some money on the bar and walk quietly back to the mixing desk.

It's a tick away from eight o'clock. Grant looks around grimly, rubbing his right hand back and forth over his stubble. 'So where the fuck are the hordes of people Stabber promised us?' Our audience is the same now as when we lugged in: a white-haired old lady in a floral dress who's only ceased an infuriating babble to cadge a beer from Smoke; and a heavy-lidded thirty-year-old nodding off over tar-like coffee. As I look over at him, he finally falls asleep, one arm supporting his head, the other stretched across the metal table.

'Chill out, man,' says Dog, hopping from side to side, 'it's just like the Sick Moon. The audience is in the pub next door, drinking cheaper beer. As soon as we start playing,

they'll come in.'

Grant looks at his watch and whistles. 'Well, you'd better start then – I'll set your levels, and do my best to protect you from the screaming hordes.'

Dog skips over to Smoke, taps him on the shoulder and leaps up to the stage like a basketballer in a winning team. He's so keyed up about playing that he's already half-dancing; like Smoke, it probably makes no difference whether the audience numbers two or two thousand. 'Vomit Squad' was a name he'd come up with shortly after his arrival in Amsterdam. He'd brought a backing tape of his best songs from Australia, had his own weird little devices to amplify, and had persuaded Smoke to supply some live keyboards. Grant had agreed to mix Vomit Squad in exchange for Dog mixing the Monsters, an arrangement that suited Grant well. It meant that he had total control over Dog's backing-tape and vocal, so there was very little – in an audio sense – that could go wrong.

No one I know has been able to tell me how or when Dog got his name. Of course he had that studded leather collar, and claimed that his mammy put it on him when he was a toddler, to make an example of him for biting other kids. He sneers at the fashion world, reckoning it's only just catching up with him. I can't remember if I'd seen the collar when I first noticed him, but for nearly a year he'd religiously attended every one of our gigs. One night he waited back and handed a demo-tape of his music to Smoke, in a bid to support us at one of the regular Sick Moon gigs. It was no worse than a lot of tapes we were given, so we let him have a go. The first gig he was centre stage with tapes, programs, various gizmos and his echoed, reverbed, screeching voice. A shy, longhaired man hovered around the back of the stage, but seemed necessary only so that Dog could claim that he was 'in a band'. The guy went missing next time – 'artistic differences' said Dog – and was replaced by a leather-clad B&D mistress with oddly sweet features. What a team they made! The way she scowled at Dog as she dragged him, bound and snarling on all fours out onto the stage, you could see it was love. The assertion would have elicited a throaty laugh from Dog, who ran through women the way he ran through songs: writing them in a frenzy, then discarding all – regardless of quality – that lasted more than a couple of months.

The first time I spoke more than a couple of words to Dog was at the Trade Union club in Surry Hills around 1988. Trying to be complimentary, I compared his looks with one of my heroes, the young Brian Eno.

'Eno! He's the bald fucker who invented *ambient* music, isn't he?' shrieked Dog.

'Well...err...'

'That's it!' and in one movement he'd leapt up to the broad sill where we'd propped our drinks, and grabbed hold of the hinged window. 'I may as well top myself right now, because there's no way I'm going through life looking like Eno.' With that, he took one foot from the third floor sill, and swung out over the Surry Hills traffic. Someone screamed and the drinkers turned towards the crazy man, hovering over Foveaux St. Through the fully open window came the roar of the traffic toppling over the steep slope, like metal barrels over Niagara Falls. The honeymoon was well and truly over. I stuttered and quickly swallowed my words, recanting the Eno connection. After a few terrible seconds, Dog, still smiling, shifted his weight and swung back to the ledge with the ease of a sailboard rider.

The tape starts and Grant pushes the levels up as high as he dares; but Dog starts yelling *c'mon, c'mon* over the opening drum machine intro, imploring with his fingers for more volume. Grant chuckles – half to himself, half to me, 'The fucker'll just have to get used to not blowing up PA's.'

The resistance makes Dog's vocal more impassioned and, pacing up and down the narrow stage, he addresses his audience, both the conscious and the unconscious member, with exasperated pointing and wringing of his hands. 'Fuck yeah, this is how they treat us individuals. They try to keep us quiet, they keep us down, they keep us dumb! This first song's about the treatment I got in a friendly local hospital – oh, on the other side of the world from here...and it's called 'Butcher's Shop'. He clicks a button and a drum-machine slashes in with staccato toms and handclaps. Screwing his mouth into an ugly grimace he half-sings, half-rants:

*It's a butcher's shop, when they take you to the surgery. It's a butcher's shop, and the carcasses are you and me. It's a butcher's shop – it's a butcher's shop! – Wild horses wouldn't drag me back there.'*

He'd told me he could remember back in 1977 when 'Countdown' showed thirty seconds of the Sex Pistols doing 'Anarchy in the UK', and his mouth had dropped at the intensity of the nihilistic attack. He'd been transfixed by the image of the vocalist writhing on the ground like a big bug that the state had just crushed, but was not yet quite dead, still retching out its bilious oaths of rebellion; and then, of course, a nervous Molly Meldrum cut it short, introduced LRB, and Glen Shorrock started crooning 'Reminiscing'. Well, this was Dog's seminal musical moment, as he often told his friends, and he joked later that it became his 'semenal' moment when, some years later, he propositioned his first girlfriend while the punks were on the turntable. She asked what was playing and he replied, 'Never

Mind the Bollocks Here's the Sex Pistol,' and pulled down his trousers. All of these experiences fed into his diabolically bipolar performance: the intense rage, the teenage sensuality – and the abrupt change from cursing bug to crooning M-O-R dickhead. One phrase slugged out by crepitus Rotten, the next lathered up by the emollient Shorrock.

Dog looks around – maybe for something significant to mark his first performance in Europe, and finds a large spanner at the back of the stage. In the lead break he makes out as if he's playing air guitar with it, then waves it round his head like Pete Townshend, then – to add live percussion – whacks it rhythmically into the metallic floor. Grant glances anxiously at the bar, for the previously fidgeting Tony is now perfectly still, as if trying to work out what the hell he's hearing. At least he can't see around corners, still under the impression that the cacophony is all 'musical', and doesn't realise that Dog's now jumping up with the beat and landing heavily onto a table abutting the stage. Grant nods and smiles at Tony through clenched teeth, and simultaneously fans his fingers at Dog and pats the air *down down down*.

This is just the reaction Dog wants, and he carries on loud as he can:

*It's a butcher's shop, any geek in a white coat gets to cut and hack. It's a butcher's shop, the nurses are speeding and the doctors are all on smack. It's a butcher's shop – crooning – its a butcher's shop ...Who, cut me!*

Miming the action, his fingers fly over his skin and a red line appears on his arm. Something glints between his thumb and index finger, pincerd together with firm but delicate pressure. He passes his hand back and forth over his face beneath the stagelight and a red V emerges on his right cheek. It's impossible to ignore what's happening.

The white-haired lady stops babbling, and rises shakily to her feet while pointing at the stage. 'Blut! Mein Gott – blut!' Tony immediately stands up and looks over at us behind the mixing desk. Gesturing flippantly at the woman, Grant screws up his nose, shrugs his shoulders and shakes his head quickly, but Tony doesn't sit down nor change his concerned expression. Grant grabs my arm and yells in my ear, 'Go over to the bar and buy the old bitch a drink. It'll keep Tony busy too...Go!'

'Ein beir bitte,' I say, smiling innocently. I've collared him just as he was leaving the bar. But he spreads the fingers of both hands authoritatively on the counter, glares at me and hammers out the words. 'Vat ist happening op zere?'

'Ah, Vomit Squad's performance is always...passionate...provocative,' but my explanation doesn't register on Tony's face, and suddenly I feel the frustration of the language barrier. Or maybe I've just hit the bullshit barrier. 'Ah, you know,' I trawl for

words, hands paddling the air, 'Passion...drama...*Sturm and Drang!* – yeah, yeah, *Sturm and Drang!*' I breathe out, relieved, saved by my scrappy education. Tony snorts, but I think I've gained some time.

As I walk back, things have settled a bit; the old lady's stopped yelling, but her hand's still half-raised, pointing at the stage, oblivious to all else. I take the opportunity to take a swig of the beer I've bought her, but even when I set it in front of her, she doesn't move. A waste, I think, looking over at the performers. The 'Butcher's Shop' is still powering along, with Smoke providing some lead synth. Dog however, is on his knees, bent over his strange pedals, fumbling and cursing at them. He's always been keen on electronic circuitry, and whenever possible tinkers with his effects pedals to try and produce 'music that no-one's ever heard before'. Suddenly there's a 'popping' sound, and he stands up satisfied, and retrieves the mike to sing the last verse. Then he starts undoing his belt and fly, releasing his shirt.

'Shit, but he told me he wasn't gonna do his nude thing in Europe!' I protest to Grant.

'And you believed him?' He looks back at me, astonished.

The old lady starts to moan disconcertingly as Dog, hopping on one leg, unrolls his tight black jeans. As he does, I'm conscious of a new noise entering the weave of the song; it begins as a long, low, seductive growl, but soon rises to the sonic infrequency of a cat coughing up furballs. Grant grows more and more irritated by it and pulls down each track on the mixer, trying to isolate the frequency, but when nothing happens and the pitch slowly rises, he grows desperate, looking from side to side in utter despair. Surrounded by the cyber-decor of the mixing desk, he resembles a junior ensign in 'Star Trek', stranded at the helm of the Enterprise while it's being overrun by Klingons.

Having exhausted all the channels on the desk, he has a sudden illumination. 'Fuckit, it's not going through the desk, it's his own little amplifier! We've gotta get him to turn it down!' – but the sound has taken on its own inevitability, ascending like a screeching eagle, spiralling beyond reach into the electronic ether. Losing the whine and splutter of a vomitus cat it attains the vocal purity of an impossibly mellifluous castrato. The multifoliate metals and mirrors gather the note into a sonic wave that surges and sings and stings the skin and electrifies the air. The old lady interrupts her moan with further exclamations of 'blut', while the unconscious man, startled awake by the audio apocalypse, covers his head with his arms and yells, 'Don't kill me! Don't kill me!'

At last Tony runs out from behind his bar, and gasps at Dog, snarling at him in his

Y-fronts, the blood trickling from his face and arms, and totally oblivious to the intensity of his noise. Springing forward, in one action Tony slides all of the levels on the mixer to zero. Smoke stops immediately, looks at his hands, presses the keyboard and hearing nothing, peers accusingly at the mixing desk. Dog taps and yells frenetically at the microphone, then looks questioningly at the ceiling; it's the first time he's been conscious of the sound, now soaring alone, uncontrolled, a supreme banshee. For a few seconds we're all just standing there in its thrall, paralysed by it, the way prey are immobilised by a tiger's low growl; and then Grant gets up from the mixing desk, strides over to Dog's amp and flicks the switch. The banshee swallows, splutters and disappears shrieking in a sonic flush. Tony reaches beneath the mixing desk, flicks another switch, and the stage is in darkness.

The gig has ended.