

Night of A Thousand Clowns

“As far back as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to be a gangster.” It’s one of the opening lines in the film *Goodfellas*, and it’s a sentiment with which I can sympathize. That’s not to say that I ever actually wanted to be a gangster. I can assure you, without an ounce of hyperbole, that I’m far too much of a coward to entertain such a notion. So it’s not that statement’s romanticized notion of violence masquerading as modern-day swashbuckling that calls to me, but its sense of yearning: a longing to be something...greater.

As far back as I can remember, I’ve always wanted to be a DJ. Not a “two-turntables-and-a-microphone, wicka-wicka-wicka, house music” kind of DJ but a “coming up next hour, your chance to win tickets to see Foghat” kind of DJ. I recognize it’s not the most auspicious of aspirations, but it was mine.

I was approximately eight years old when I realized that the person I heard on the radio talking between songs got paid. It was life-altering, an epiphany, if you will. In that moment I became aware of the fact that not all “jobs” were “work”—a concept that still escapes many adults. But from the instant I had my awakening I knew that I wanted to be a disc-jockey, much to the consternation of my family and teachers. My reading levels were off the charts, and though I was a bit of discipline problem, I was deemed intelligent. But all I wanted to do was sit in a room and play records. I would practice things like “hitting the post”—radio jargon for talking over the intro of a song right up until the split second that the vocals begin. It’s harder than you might think, and in the grand scheme of things, perhaps the singularly most useless talent a human being can possess.

But I can do it.

I tell you all this so the rest of what you’re about to read makes sense. If you don’t understand the power that radio held over me, the strength of my desire to be a DJ, then the rest of this will seem, quite frankly, ludicrous. But that same boyhood desire that held sway over Henry Hill, the same childhood yearning that would one day lead him to traffic in narcotics and

rob and kill: I understand. Not literally, mind you. Don't worry. I haven't killed anyone. But what I have done is chased a dream down the rabbit-hole only to find myself in one of the most surreal, nonsensical evenings of my life. A night of a thousand clowns.

It was the Spring of 1996, and I had weaseled my way into an internship at the local alternative rock station, 106.9 The Buzz. I started by fetching coffee for the station's morning show personalities. This entailed me getting up at 3:30 in the morning so I could be there by 5 a.m., as the show began at 6 a.m. Over the course of several months I was assigned increasingly important tasks until I had become the morning show's de facto (and unpaid) producer. Due to my Horatio Alger-like work ethic, I was made the station's Assistant Promotions Director. Don't let the lofty job title fool you; the position amounted to little more than handing out bumper stickers as people left concerts. While the job didn't pay much, it was just enough to allow me to finally move out of the room at mother's house and into the room in my mother's basement.

But none of that mattered because the job came with something *better* than money: an air-shift. Every Saturday from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m., for four glorious hours, I was a DJ.

Well, OK, truth be told from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. I played a pre-recorded countdown show, so it was more like two glorious hours. And I was only allowed to talk twice an hour from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. So, I guess when you added it all up, it was more like 90 glorious seconds.

Attached to the soundboard that the DJs ran was a cassette deck that turned on every time we hit the microphone button. It enabled us to tape just the portion of our shifts when we spoke. I had been instructed by the station's Program Director that, at the end of each shift, I was to put my tape on his desk for him to hear. He would listen to my air-check on Tuesday and then call me on Wednesday to let me know if I should still show up on Saturday. It was like working for the Dread Pirate Roberts. But my foot was in the door, and I was determined to make the best of it.

No task was too small or mundane for me to tackle, and I quickly developed a reputation for saying yes. It's a good reputation to have. When a busy Program Director needs someone to cover a shift or work a concert, he doesn't have time to call fifteen people to find the one who is willing. So once I developed a reputation for accepting any duty, he was quick to call

me. He knew that, with one phone call, he could assign me whatever that day's task might be and move on to more pressing matters.

It was in the Fall of that same year that he called me into his office.

"You drive a decent car, right?" he asked cryptically.

"Um, yeah, actually I just bought it," I replied.

"What is it?"

"A 1995 Geo Prizm," I answered hesitantly.

"That'll work."

In retrospect, that snippet of conversation should have been a major red flag for me regarding radio. Not only was I, a lowly part-timer, in possession of what was quite possibly the nicest car owned by a station employee, but all it took to achieve such an honor was, of all things, a 1995 Geo Prizm.

"You've heard of Insane Clown Posse, of course," he went on.

"Of course," I lied with mock incredulousness. One of the first things you realize when working at an alternative rock station is that you'd damn well better have heard of *every* band *ever*. In a world of music snobs, God help the person who is unaware of the next indie rock darling. In my short time there I had claimed to have bootlegs of artists I'd never heard of and professed to have seen concerts of bands that, for all I knew, never even existed.

Insane Clown Posse, as I would learn, was from Detroit. They were part of the then-burgeoning movement called "horrorcore," a genre which combined the worst of both rap *and* rock. Their on-stage persona was that of serial-killing clowns complete with creepy-looking clown make-up. Their shocking imagery, combined with hyper-violent lyrics, had already caused their first record label to drop them. Now, on the heels of this controversy, they were coming to town for the first time.

"Well," my boss continued, "I'm going to need you to pick them up at their hotel and take them to a personal appearance."

Now we were talking. This wasn't just getting coffee or making copies. No, this was something actually important. Thus far (outside of my brief, weekly air-shift) the greatest degree of responsibility with which I had been entrusted was loading the t-shirt cannon before station remotes.

My mission (which I had accepted) was to pick up the band from the hotel and deliver them to the local arena. This band wasn't actually playing

the arena, mind you. They were playing a small theater down the street. However, the station was going to be set up in the vacant lot across from the arena in order to promote a professional wrestling pay-per-view event taking place there that night. We had spent the day promoting that ICP (as their fans called them) would be stopping by the Buzz Van to sign autographs. When they were done with the signing I was to take them back to the station for an interview and then straight to the venue where they were performing.

“Oh, and one more thing,” he said. “Since you’re doing an air-shift now and all, you might as well stick around for the concert and do the stage announcements.”

You know that moment in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* where Indy puts the headpiece in the Staff of Ra and sunlight streams through it illuminating the Map Room and revealing The Well of Souls?

Yeah, it was just like that.

Here it was, my big moment. I would be picking up honest-to-God rock stars. Or at least rock star-ish. Then I’d be introducing them on stage. That’s what *real* DJs did. I’d been going to concerts since I was 14—earlier if you counted the shows my mother had taken me to. But for our purposes here I don’t feel I can really count Air Supply or Anne Murray as a “concert.”

The stage announcement is a delicate thing even in the best of circumstances. Never forget: the crowd is there to see the band, not the DJ. Sure, if you’re the morning guy on the only rock station in town, the crowd might collectively humor you for an additional thirty seconds, but suffice it to say: your window of opportunity is brief. Crowds will quickly turn on anyone who forgets the real reason they have gathered. And the lesser-known the DJ, the faster they’ll turn.

I was supposed to pick up ICP from the Holiday Inn Express at 6:00 p.m. I showed up at 5:45 p.m. In a different profession I’d have probably wondered what to wear. But, seeing that this was radio, the attire was a given: jeans and a station t-shirt. You never went to a station event without wearing the Buzz logo.

As I sat in my car waiting for it to be 6:00 p.m., it dawned on me that I had been given no specific instructions on how to pick them up. I didn’t have phone number, a room number or a tour manager’s name. I didn’t even know the band members’ real names. I only knew them by their

“clown-de-plume”—Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope. Which was admittedly difficult to say without giggling.

At 5:59 p.m. I got out of my car and walked into the lobby of the hotel. My lack of guidance quickly resolved itself upon entry. In the lobby, seated on a couch and waiting patiently among an ocean of khaki-clad business travelers, sat two men wearing blue-jeans, gas station style work shirts and (tellingly) clown make-up.

I approached them and, in an attempt to inject some levity, asked with feigned confusion, “Ummm, hey...have you guys seen Insane Clown Posse anywhere?”

They looked at each other, perplexed.

“We’re Insane Clown Posse,” Shaggy 2 Dope replied in a confused fashion, which was decidedly unfeigned.

I looked down at my t-shirt, emblazoned with the radio station’s logo, and then looked back up them.

Then back to my t-shirt.

Then back to them.

“Yeah, um, I was joking. I’m from the station. I’m here to pick you up.”

Clearly we would not be engaging in witty banter.

I ushered them out of the hotel lobby and into the opulent luxury of the Geo Prizm. We drove to the arena in silence, a silence that remained unbroken until we arrived at the venue, when Shaggy 2 Dope finally punctured it with profanity. It was the grandest of all profanities. One which, if said aloud on the radio, would immediately result in heavy fines to the station and termination of its speaker per the orders of the Federal Communications Commission. Therefore, in the spirit of radio and governmental regulation, and with tongue planted firmly in cheek, all future appearances of the F-word will instead be replaced with FCC.

“What the FCC,” said Shaggy 2 Dope.

Truer words had never been spoken. Upon rounding the corner of the venue we discovered the Buzz van broadcasting live with their mast extended a full twenty-five feet in the air. But, more significantly, the van was surrounded by a sea of people. A sea of people dressed in full clown regalia. Hair, make-up, red noses...it looked like the Million Clown March.

What the FCC, indeed.

“So what exactly is the plan here?” he asked.

And it was then I realized that I didn’t really know what the plan was. Clearly Shaggy was becoming nervous. And this was a guy whose job, whose *full-time job*, was dressing up like a clown and carrying a hatchet. When *that* guy becomes nervous, you would be well advised to do likewise.

“I-I d-don’t, I don’t know,” I replied realizing I was starting to sound like Bob Newhart. “Sign autographs or something?”

He laughed. Audibly.

“Um, no. We’re not going out there. Those guys’ll kill us!”

“I thought they were your fans?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

I took another look at their “fans,” adorned in baggy jeans, hockey jerseys, and face-paint that made them look like the bastard love children of Pennywise and John Wayne Gacy. And the fact that that was biologically impossible only served to make them appear all the more terrifying.

So, as much as it pained me, I had to admit that “Yeah, exactly,” was a pretty solid argument. However, that wouldn’t carry any weight with the Program Director. What we had here was a *situation*.

“We’ve been promoting this on-air all day long,” I pleaded.

“We’re not getting out of the car,” he said. “What do you think we are? Crazy?”

“Well, you *are* called *Insane Clown Posse*. So, yeah, I had entertained the notion.”

“What the hell would we even do if we went out there?” Shaggy asked.

“I don’t know. You’re clowns. How about you make balloon animals or something?”

“Look,” Shaggy said, “we thought this tied into the wrestling event. Like we were going into the ring or something. If you wanted us to do an autograph signing we could have totally done that for you. But we set up a special room, we have security, it’s a whole thing. We can’t just walk into a crowd of people. We’re not Third Eye Blind. The juggalos would tear us the shreds.”

“The jug-a-whats?” I asked.

“The juggalos. Our fans. That’s what they call themselves. Look, man. I don’t really get it either,” Shaggy confessed. “All I know is nobody gave a FCC. Then one day we put on this make-up, and suddenly they gave a FCC.”

His explanation of things made sense. And his moment of introspection made me take a certain amount of pity on them.

“OK, how about this. I get us out of here and take you back to the station. The DJ at the station can interview you there. Then I’ll take you to the show.”

Shaggy and Violent J looked at each other, then shrugged their shoulders in unison. We had a deal.

Then, just as we were about to hold hands and sing Kumbayah, we got made. The crowd, seemingly en masse, came to the simultaneous realization that their favorite band was currently residing in the backseat of my Geo Prizm. Now, had cooler heads prevailed, this information would have filled them with sadness—sadness about the band and, more importantly, themselves. But we’re not talking about “cooler heads.” We’re talking about juggalos. There wasn’t a cool a head in the bunch. They didn’t disperse. They descended.

Before we knew what hit us, the car was surrounded, engulfed by juggalos. It was then that I noticed the soda.

Unbeknownst to me at the time was the fact that part of ICP’s on-stage antics included spraying the crowd with Faygo root beer. Faygo was a discount brand of soda that originated in their home town of Detroit. And they went through truckloads of it. As I would later learn, there was almost no point during an ICP show when the two of them *weren’t* soaking the audience with the stuff. Concert venues would actually buy cheap carpet remnants to cover their stage as a form of protection. Just how much soda would they go through during a performance? Two people would carry the carpet in. It wasn’t uncommon for ten people to carry it out.

I didn’t know any of that yet. But I was about to.

As the crowd continued to swarm our car, I turned around and asked Shaggy, “What’s the deal with all the two-liter bottles?”

And with that there was an explosion of carbonation and my car was showered with Faygo root beer. “Drenched” is too subtle of a word to describe the amount of fluid that submerged us. Vision was immediately

reduced to zero as our windows were lacquered in a thick layer of high fructose corn syrup.

I turned on my wipers to clear the glaze but, as I would discover, windshield wipers are less than effective on high fructose corn syrup. The sugary varnish proved too much for the blades. Instead of cleaning the glass they stuttered their way through the sticky concoction, succeeding only in smoothing the veneer. My only achievement was coating the window with an opaque varnish which reduced the surrounding mob to a milky splotch.

In the distance I could just make out the station's broadcast van. It too was consumed by an angry, milky splotch. The van was being rocked from side to side, its mast beginning to sway in precisely the manner in which masts are not meant to sway. The van was in danger of tipping over. I had to get them out of there. The only way to quell the crowd was by removing the agitator.

I took a deep breath, put the car in reverse, leaned on the horn, hit the gas, and hoped for the best. Of course, the horn on a 1995 Geo Prizm wasn't exactly designed to strike fear into the hearts of men. A normal horn might say: "Move it!" A Geo Prizm's honk is more along the lines of: "Excuse me, but if it isn't too much of a bother, I was wondering if perhaps you might consider the possibility of letting me sneak by you at some future point in time. There's no rush. I'll just wait here while you weigh your options, kind sir."

While the horn of a Prizm might not inspire a crowd to disperse, luckily, a moving car does. Even a Prizm.

The horde began to part as we backed toward the street. I felt the car thump as it rolled over the curb. Or a juggalo.

I stopped and listened for screams but heard none.

"OK, then. A curb it is," I thought as I hit the gas.

When my front tires thumped over the same curb, I slammed the car into drive and sped away. Or as close of an approximation to "sped away" as a 1995 Geo Prizm can reasonably be expected to muster.

Once on the road I cut a small ribbon of vision using wiper fluid and headed back to the station. The interview was short and sweet. The band, at my suggestion, spun the story as their "driver" freaking out and fleeing the

scene. They, of course, would have loved to stay and take a Faygo shower with everyone but you know how “drivers” are.

After the interview was complete, I took Shaggy 2 Dope and Violent J to the venue. I dropped them off at the backstage entrance, parked my car, and went around to the front of the building. As I approached the doors, I was comforted by the sight of the Buzz Van. Apparently everyone had survived.

The concert hall was an old dilapidated theater. It had been built in the early 1900s as part of the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit. During its heyday luminaries such as Mae West, Henry Houdini, and Abbott and Costello had graced its stage. Clearly its “heyday” was over. The floor seating had been ripped out to make the area in front of the stage standing-room-only. There was a balcony that ran along the perimeter and was lined with booths that overlooked the room. They were the sort of booths where one could easily imagine Lincoln having been shot. The booth’s traditional theater-style seating had long ago been replaced with wobbly, rusty folding chairs. The entire place reeked of last night’s cigarettes, stale beer, and faded glory. Its former opulence was in rapid decline.

In other words, it was precisely the sort of place where one would expect to see an Insane Clown Posse performance.

I was relieved to learn that my tickets granted me access to one of those aforementioned “Lincoln booths” far away from the throng of juggalos that would soon be herded into the lower level. My booth was closest to the stage and, though it sat twelve, my only other companions were a 13-year old boy and his father. The father wore a shirt and tie, his suit coat draped over his shoulder in that casual but confident air typically only seen in J.C. Penney ads.

“Hi,” he said, with the obvious tone of recognition.

I quickly scanned his face trying to conceal my confusion. He clearly knew me. And I *knew* that I knew him, but seeing him outside of his “natural habitat” was making it difficult for me to place him. Like when you run into your homeroom teacher at the grocery store.

Then it clicked. He was the General Manager of the station. Strike that. Not the station. The *stations*. Plural. I worked for a radio station but there were four stations in our cluster. And this guy ran all of them.

“Hi, sir,” I said. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a juggalo.”

“A what?”

“A, uh...fan,” I said, motioning towards the crowd that had begun filling the floor beneath us.

“Yeah, not really,” he said chuckling and pointing to his son.

While we were talking, I had noticed a murmur coming from the floor. At first it was just your standard crowd chatter hum. But it started to grow louder until I could tell that it was taking the form of a chant.

Then, it grew louder still until I could finally make out what they were saying.

“FCC. The. Buzz.”

Then it got bigger.

“FCC! The! Buzz!”

And bigger.

“FCC! THE! BUZZ!”

Apparently they weren't fans of the radio station. But what had raised their ire? Around what had they coalesced?

It turns out I was asking the wrong question. It wasn't a “what” that had united them. It was a “who.”

Me.

As is the appropriate attire for station events, I was wearing a logo. Or, in this case, a bull's-eye.

Suddenly, it was becoming clear as to why I was being allowed to do the stage announcements.

Just as I wordlessly decided that I would not be introducing the band that night, a woman entered our booth. She was blonde, thin, and had a demeanor of professional purpose. She walked straight to me and handed me a sticker. I immediately recognized it for what it was: a backstage pass.

“Here,” she said, all business. “You'll need this.”

“For what?” I asked, trying to play coy.

“How else are you going to do the stage announcement,” she said, rolling her eyes.

I shot a furtive glance towards the general manager in the hopes he hadn't heard her, but those hopes were quickly dashed.

“Stage announcements,” he interjected. “Wait, you have to get up in front of these animals?”

And just as I thought reason was about to win the day, he threw back his head in uproarious laughter.

“Oh my God,” he said, gasping for air. “That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard in my life!”

A wise man once said that comedy is tragedy from a distance. He had the luxury of space. But I couldn’t walk away. Not in front of the biggest of big wigs. I was going to have to stare down that crowd and hope that the General Manager would at least appreciate my courage. Resigned to my fate, I left the booth with the concert promoter.

Waiting for us in the hallway were two of the largest security guards I had ever seen in my life. They were tasked with escorting me through the chanting morass. Serving as my guides, we sliced our way through the crowd. But they offered little in the way of protection. Epithets were hurled, as were lit cigarettes and a few beers. Ultimately the only thing they could truly prevent was an outright assault. Luckily, the room was so thick with bodies that by the time anyone realized who I was (or rather where I worked), my presence had already been erased by the crowd.

After what felt like an eternity, we made it to the safety of backstage. The decibel level immediately fell as we closed the door behind us. We walked up a small flight of stairs that deposited us directly into the wings. The crowd noise again increased though it was muted by the stage curtains.

“OK,” the concert promoter said. “Here you go.” She handed me three things: a wireless mic, a flyer, and a large device that, after a momentary blank stare, I recognized as the station’s t-shirt cannon. Apparently someone from the promotions department had preceded me.

Concert promoters are a notoriously jaded lot. Attractive female blonde ones, even more so.

“Here’s the deal,” she said, launching into a speech she delivered so often that it like I was being Mirandized. “You have sixty seconds. If you take longer than sixty seconds, the front-of-house will cut your mic. The band will be on five minutes. So don’t say something stupid like *Here they are*—because they aren’t.”

The room was starting to spin. I nodded, trying desperately to absorb what she was saying. Her words were practically a foreign language, an odd collection of clicks and hums.

“Any questions?” she asked, snapping her fingers to regain my focus.

“Um, do you have any tips?”

“Sure,” she said. “Don’t do it.”

“Wait. Is that an option?”

“No.”

“Switch this button on to talk,” she continued, showing me the microphone. “And tell them about this.” She pointed towards the flyer. “Tonight’s show sold out so quickly that they’re coming back in a month. This has all the ticket info.”

With that, she spun me around and pointed me towards the curtains. One security guard shoved the t-shirt cannon in my free hand while the other pushed me on stage.

The house lights went down. The stage lights went up. The curtains parted. The crowd roared!

And then they realized I wasn’t Insane Clown Posse.

Instantly they turned. A wave of rejection washed over me. More beers were thrown. A cigarette lighter whizzed past my head. The crowd’s volume was increasing exponentially.

From the corner of my eye, I saw a juggalo break from the crowd and scale the barricade. He darted past security, pulled himself up, and landed in a crouched position at the foot of the stage. Our eyes locked. For an instant, we both froze. Then he pointed at me, like Babe Ruth calling his shot. The crowd’s thunder reached new heights. He turned to look at the crowd and bask in his fleeting glory. He pumped his fists, encouraging them to scream louder. They obliged.

Then, mimicking a bull, he lowered his head and slid his feet, one at a time across the stage. He was going to charge.

After his third “foot slide” he took off.

But he had telegraphed his move. Half way through his first step, I lowered the t-shirt cannon and fired it directly into his chest. In one fluid motion he lost his balance and stumbled backwards. But he hadn’t made it much further than the foot of the stage. So “backwards” only meant “down” and into the waiting arms of security.

The crowd erupted into a new sound—elation. They loved it.

I raised the mic to my mouth and, over their cheers, screamed, “What up, juggalos?”

As suddenly as the cheering had begun, it stopped. This time it was replaced with silence. For a moment, I was puzzled. Then I remembered that ICP was still an underground phenomenon. I myself had heard the word “juggalo” for the first time only a few hours earlier. It wasn’t a known term outside of their community. They had mistaken me for one of their own.

I screamed, “Do you crazy motherFCCers wanna know about the next time ICP is coming to town?”

The silence ceased abruptly as they resumed cheering. When the noise began to subside, I looked at the flyer in order to tell them about the upcoming show.

But I had lost it. In all the excitement, the flyer, and the information it contained, were gone. For a brief moment I was panic stricken.

I looked to the wings hoping the blonde promoter would help me. All she did was shrug her shoulders.

“Well, do ya?” I stalled. The crowd cheered again. My mind was scrambling.

I looked into the collective face of the crowd, anticipatory but still poised to turn on me. Suddenly I realized that just because they hated the radio station didn’t mean I couldn’t get them to listen.

“Then you have to listen to 106.9 The Buzz tomorrow at 5 p.m. for a major concert announcement.”

The crowd cheered again. I held my hand, the one with the mic, straight out from my chest. I turned the mic sideways and let it drop to the stage. Its clunk echoed from the sound system and reverberated throughout the room.

I slung the t-shirt cannon over my shoulder, victorious, and strutted off stage, leaving the cheering crowd in my wake.

As I passed the promoter, I shot her a wink. “And *that* is how you do a stage announcement.”

I handed the t-shirt cannon to one security guard as the other opened the door that led back onto the concert floor. As they started to follow me, I held up my hand.

“Thanks, fellas,” I smirked. “But I don’t think I’ll be needing you for the trip back.” Then I walked into the arms of my adoring public.

Where I was immediately greeted with a face full of Faygo.

But, hey, it wasn't a beer. And after all, I was now an honorary juggalo, and that's what we did. So I counted it as a win.

When I arrived back at the booth, the general manager greeted me with astonishment.

"That was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen in my life."

"Oh, anyone could've done that," I said with an air of false modesty that we both pretended to believe.

"You know," he continued, "we do a lot of trade with restaurants around town. How about I use some of that trade to take you to lunch next week?"

"Ummm, yeah. That sounds great," I said, realizing the significance of that and trying not to sound overly enthusiastic.

With that, the house lights dimmed as the band prepared to take the stage. We took our seats and waited. The silence gave me a moment to think about everything I'd just been through.

"Hey, I have a question about those trade deals you do," I said.

"Sure. What's your question?"

"Do you do that with a lot of businesses, or just restaurants?"

"Oh, no. We do that with all sorts of places," he replied.

"That's cool," I said. "You ever do any trade with a car wash?"