4 Weird Scenes
Inside the Ore Mines

With Perth closed for business, the boys were obliged to travel farther and farther from home to make a living, in which, on a good day, on the right corners, they might have hauled in as much cash pretending to be homeless. They'd drive hundreds of miles to play pubs, school dances, university gymnasiums—anywhere they could—and if they couldn't find friendly fans with ample floor space to loan them for the night, they'd endure the long haul home. They often did so anyway—on weekdays, they'd arrive back in Perth just in time to drop Jon off at school. "The poor guy, he was falling asleep at his desk all the time," Garry says. "He didn't stand a chance from the start—he was well on his way to failing out."

It didn't bode well for Jon's report card, but the group's travels did provide all of them the kind of Kerouacian education no schoolbook can deliver. Western Australia is rich with natural beauty and resources—it is where some of the nation's award-winning wines are produced, where the famous red-tinted deserts stretch for miles, where there are pristine surf breaks and so much impossibly gorgeous beach that you might find a new one to have to yourself each and every day. It is still high on unspoiled spaces and low on population, but in 1978, it was even more of a raw frontier, one where Easy Rider met The Endless Summer. "We used to play a pub called the
Busselton in Bunbury that was close to a fairly big oil refinery," Andrew says. "This town has a gorgeous coastline, so it drew all of the surfers, but there was also a very rough, industrial working-class population there."

One night, while the Farriss Brothers played, a notorious local biker gang showed up in the pub, causing the surf cats in the audience to ride the new crest right on home. "This very obvious change came over our audience," Jon says. "All of the surf locals, who always came to see us, started looking around the room and then started, sort of, casually leaving. It was getting on my nerves."

The room thinned out and soon it was clear why—a very significant number of "bikes," as they're called, were in the house, all of whom were paying close attention to the band. A few of the scariest of them took chairs from the bar and planted themselves at the foot of the stage. "It was a bit like that scene from Animal House where the white kids walk into the black bar while Otis Day and the Knights are playing," Jon says. "They were all looking at us. I think one said, 'What you made of there, boy? You play country?' They were willing to starve for their art, but they weren't willing to die for it—this was a fight-or-flight situation and luckly the boys knew enough songs to turn the pub into a bikers barbeque. They knew to change the mood of their set without a formal band huddle, and their knowledge of classic rock covers kicked in—of course fear will do that too. "We knew enough Steve Miller Band songs, Elvis, and hard blues stuff to turn it around," Garry says. "It was such a bizarre, almost instant change from one audience to the other, but it turned out to be fun. Once they decided they liked us, they were cheering and really into it. I'm just glad we didn't get it wrong."

The true test of their mettle awaited the young birds inland some two thousand miles north of Perth, amid the most barren landscape on earth. At one of their increasingly rare Perth gigs, they met a man named Bob Matthews, who managed a strip mine in a desert expanse where the average temperature clocked in at around 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit). At the mines, driving trucks (whose tires were approximately fifteen feet high) down steep slopes of loose gravel was considered women's work: the men spent their days in the sun hacking at the earth with picks, shovels, and drills. Mine workers were one part mental patience and two parts outlaw, and to a crew of young band boys, they were altogether insane. The only civilization for hundreds of miles was the mining town—and like any human society on the edge of nowhere, it was utterly Lord of the Flies. It was entirely Australian, and far too Mad Max.

Mr. Matthews offered the boys three thousand dollars, which was a lot at the time (and a fortune to them), to be flown up to Mount Goldsworthy, where they'd stay for a week, and entertain the workers on two consecutive weekends. They would also be able to play another mining colony, Shay Gap, which was a hundred miles farther into the inland abyss. If they chose to drive themselves up, Bob would pay them five thousand dollars. They were young, ambitious, and poor, so the band unanimously decided to drive. It was a stupendously foolish decision, even in retrospect, even if you ask them, even though they survived.

They rented two vans and set out, with Kirk, who has always been the most obsessively organized and budget-minded (he was their uncontested accountant for years) of the group, planning their course. "Kirk had mapped out a very direct way to go, but Tim grabbed the map and discovered that we could cut our travel miles in half if we took a smaller, local highway," Andrew says. "We thought it was a great idea, because the less gas we bought, the more money we made." Halfway into their trek, they realized that they were doomed by the scenic route, as they watched the quality of said highway, number 95, disintegrate until it was but a red dirt track pointed at the horizon. "It was so incredibly rough, just holes and rocks the entire way," Andrew says. "And we were too far to turn back, so we kept on."

When the pilgrims were within drops of empty, they were lucky enough to find a gas station (rather a shack with a pump), where they slept until it opened. The three Farriss boys had sleeping bags, so they crashed on the dirt, and enjoyed the impossibly starry sky. "It really was amazing going to sleep out there," Jon says. "Except that I woke up in the morning to the most horrible smell and buzzing all around me. I rolled over, and I was staring at a dead kangaroo. It was so dark out there at night that we didn't even see that we'd gone to sleep directly beside a huge pile of dead kangaroos that they'd cleaned off the road."

The next day didn't prove much better. At one point, along a particularly bumpy stretch, the lead van's back doors flew open and despite fervent headlight blinking and horn honking, they didn't realize that all of the gear had fallen out onto the road, slowly and surely, for nearly a mile. "There weren't cell phones back then and we didn't have walkie-talkies,"
Andrew says, "We just had to wait until they realized what was going on." And later, the extreme band van tour took a potentially lethal turn when one vehicle got a flat tire. "I was nervous because we only had one spare between us, so if we got another flat, we'd be dead," Andrew says. "We were in the middle of the desert where it is so hot that you can very easily die of exposure. There aren't gas stations very often and the only other people out there were truck drivers, who you'd see infrequently." While the tire was being changed, Andrew had the kind of mystical desert experience that made Jim Morrison the rock shaman he was. "We're all sitting there, worried about this little tire, and I look out into the horizon and I think it's a mirage, but I see this man walking toward us, out of the desert," he says. "He was an old Aboriginal man with a long beard and a spear walking in bare feet on this boiling hot sand. He was a hunter following the migratory paths his people had walked for hundreds of years." Andrew was transfixed. "He walked up to us, took us in, kind of nodded and turned at an angle away from the road and walked off into the desert. He was completely comfortable in this environment and I was amazed. I'm sitting there worried about a tire, nervous about where we're going, but what is this? Where is he going?"

They were going to a land that was simple and strange at once, a land with few, non-negotiable laws: 1) don't steal anything, 2) don't touch another man's wife, and 3) don't fight, because there aren't any rules if you do. Goldsworthy was an outpost where the American Wild West met the apocalypse: a giant mess hall, a long row of cell-like workers' quarters, and a shorter row of shacks that housed prostitutes. "Everyone lived in these little air-conditioned boxes, just enough room for a bed and that was it," Garry says. "There was a communal bathroom, and it was full of the biggest spiders I'd ever seen." There were no trees, no brush, no other mammals, just nothing but nothing as far as the eye could see. The workers there were on the run, either from the law, their family, or any number of insane entanglements—the kind only the bottom of a whiskey bottle could make sense of.

A band in town was a luxury; a welcome reprieve, or rather a fresh catalyst to the eating, drinking, fighting, and drug-taking that typically occupied the population's nonworking hours. The bands that made the trip were treated like royalty and were given, upon arrival, a Rastaman-sized bag of reefer. "It was great because we had a lot of time to kill all week," Garry says. "We could smoke pot and rehearse all day—when we weren't eating." The miners' work was incredibly dangerous, so they were paid well and treated well—including a catering setup worthy of Caligula. It was run around the clock, due to the staggered schedules of the camp's workers, which well suited the Pattiwax Brothers' spontaneous munchies. "It really was something out of the Old Testament," Andrew says. "There would be an entire cow on a spit, incredible fresh fish flown in from the coast each day, and just about any type of cuisine you might want."

The first night the band spent in Goldsworthy, they were grateful to have arrived alive and glad to see that they weren't given the typical town greeting. "There was an Irish guy who had arrived there a week before, and our first night, the other workers went around buying this guy drinks until he was completely unconscious," Andrew says. "Then they took him, shaved all of his hair—on his head, his body, everywhere—drove him into the desert and left him there to walk home once he woke up." The Irish are known for their strong stock and this man alone has sent their value up: he overcame deathly heat, flesh-searing sunburn (with a hair complexion, mind you), dermis-wide razor rash, and a hangover to sideline W. C. Fields. And he made it to work the next day.

The band enjoyed the sanctioned time to rehearse and the free meals, but they didn't always follow the rules. Michael, for one, had a hard time digesting the "Don't get with another man's wife" idea. "Michael nearly got himself killed," Kirk recalls. "He was with some guy's wife or girlfriend while this huge guy stood outside pounding on the door. The girl had to crawl through the tiny window above the air conditioner to get away, while the guy was basically breaking the door in." And it wasn't always Mike's fault: the female population of the mining town was horriber than a pack of lager-filled soccer hooligans. "They were just so sexually aggressive," Garry says. "They'd be like, 'You! I've got an hour's break, come on, right now, let's get to it.'"

After one weekend set, the band was invited to a party at a small home on the outskirts of town where a strict admission policy was in effect. "This woman standing at the door would passionately kiss every man that came into the party," Garry says. "Later on her husband showed up, very drunk,
and caught her kissing some guy, probably thinking that's the only guy she's kissed that night. He went crazy and they started to fight all through the house." They ended up in the kitchen, where Kirk and Garry were busy passing a bong. "A few days earlier we'd shaved Kirk's head because we were bored," Garry says. "So there we were, completely out of it, while these guys thrash each other across the stove and all around us." Apparently Kirk looked far too amused in the way that the cosmically high do, and the cackled drunk took offense, unaware of the fact that Kirk would have reacted the same way to a nearby nuclear explosion. "The guy said, 'Baldy, you're next!'" Garry says. "And I don't even know if Kirk heard him. He was singing along to the radio, which was playing 'Dreadlock Holiday' by 10cc, and he just kept pointing at the guy, singing the chorus, going, 'Oh, no.' He's a bit like that, sort of able to be in situations where he might die, but that fact never occurs to him. It's quite beautiful to watch, actually." Garry, the bong, and Kirk slipped out the back door before it got ugly, thank God, for the sake of the band, all that weed, and all that they had yet to do.

Goldsborough was an intense town, but Shay Gap, a truly Martian aluminimum bauxite operation six hours farther into the interior by van, was even more surreal. A row of shimmering white buildings surrounded by blood-red earth, the air was hot enough to paralyze and the powerful air-conditioning in the buildings akin to an oxygen tank underwater. The egglake colony was as odd and isolated as the space station existence depicted in the late seventies sci-fi series Space 1999. "You'd go outside and the air would just stop you in your tracks," Tim says. "It was like walking into a wall."

The band visited the two outland outposts twice, but they were smart enough to make the second trip by plane. They were grateful for the experience and for the chance to meet people the average human wouldn't believe existed. "There was one guy in Shay Gap who collected spiders," Jon says. "His room was full of them. Australia is home to many very large and very dangerous spiders, and this guy had some of the most venomous ones as pets. He'd always have one or two of them with him, too. I remember I was doing pull-ups on the diving board of the pool in the camp and a piece of fiberglass fell into my eye and I was blinded for a moment. This guy reached his hand out to help me and when I looked at him there on the end of it was a huge wolf spider, as big as his fist. I tried to stay calm, but when he opened his mouth and showed me the pet spider he had in there, I really lost it."

Spider man's freaky fetish was completely logical compared to that of a man we'll call Captain Thong. "There was a guy in Shay Gap who had a thing for thongs," Garry says. "We first saw him at a party, standing near the door, approaching everyone he saw wearing thongs. He'd demand you give him your left thong and because he was a huge man, everyone did. He'd take a huge bite out of it, right by the toe, then give it back and chew on it like it was steak or something. I started to realize that he did it to everyone. You'd walk around town and every pair of thongs you'd see had this chunk missing."

It took eight months for the Farriss Brothers to milk what they could out of Perth; a band identity, a confidence in their musicianship earned through endless practice, and the balls to play to any crowd in any room, anywhere, at any time. After eight months it was also clear that their drummer, Jon Farriss, was going to fail out of high school, so before he did, he dropped out to devote himself to a career in rock and roll. With little else than the primitive but decent lighting system they'd saved enough to purchase with the money they'd earned in the mining towns, the band packed into Andrew's Volkswagen Bug and Kirk's van, putting Garry's van back on the train. They showed up for Sydney, eager to take on the big city. They didn't want to return to rule the early suburbs they used to play—they wanted to conquer the urban heat of it all. They'd left as schoolmates, as unloved adolescents, but they were returning with more miles under their belt than all of the peers they'd left behind. They'd taken a giant leap and they hadn't succeeded—the only music fans that missed them in Perth was their circle of friends. But their exile and isolation cemented their persona, resolve, and ambition in the face of all odds they might encounter. And they'd need it; they weren't like any other band in Perth and never cared, and when they returned to Sydney, they found they were just as different from every act playing the pubs. They were aliens who stayed true to their vision, and as much as they were shunned in the short term, their individuality proved itself essential to their success.

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